CliffsNotes on

CONGREVE'S

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

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Notes

including

- *Life and Background of the Author*
- *Introduction to the Play*
- *A Brief Synopsis*
- *List of Characters*
- *Critical Commentaries*
- *Critical Essays*
- *Critical Essays*
- *Essay Topics and Review Questions*
- *Selected Bibliography*

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LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

LIFE OF CONGREVE

William Congreve, 1670-1729, was born in Yorkshire, England. As his father was an officer in the army and the commander of a garrison near Cork in Ireland, Congreve was educated at Kilkenny and then at Trinity College, Dublin, where he was a slightly younger college-mate of Jonathan Swift. In 1691, he was admitted to the Middle Temple in London to study law. It is likely that, like Young Witwoud in *The Way of the World,* his interest in law was only a means to take him to London, the center of all excitement.

By 1692, Congreve was already a recognized member of the literary world. His first play, *The Old Bachelor,* was first acted in January 1693, before he was twenty-three years old, and was triumphantly successful. His other plays, *The Double-Dealer, Love for Love, The Mourning Bride,* and *The Way of the World,* all followed at short intervals. The last of them was presented in March 1700.

For the rest of his life, Congreve wrote no plays. *The Way of the World* was not successful on the stage, and this disappointment may have had something to do with his decision. He engaged in controversy with Jeremy Collier on the morality of the stage, a frustrating experience. He suffered from gout and bad sight. He became an elder statesman of letters at the age of thirty, honored by the nobility, highly respected by younger writers.

In his later years, Congreve conducted an ambiguous romance with Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough. When he died, she erected a tablet to his memory in Westminster Abbey. She also ordered a life-size figure of him and had it seated in his regular place at her table. The feet were swathed in bandages and a doctor "treated" Congreve for gout daily. This rather surprising memento casts its own odd light on the Duchess, perhaps on Congreve, and certainly on the status of the medical profession at the time.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

THE RESTORATION PERIOD

The term *Restoration drama*, usually applied to the plays written during the period from 1660 to 1700 or 1710, is not really satisfactory. Charles II was restored to the English throne in 1660. By 1700, Charles II had died, his brother James had reigned for five years and had been deposed in the "glorious revolution," or "bloodless revolution," of 1688, and William and Mary had reigned for twelve years. Congreve was not born until ten years after the Restoration; *The Way of the World* was first presented when he was thirty. By that time, some of the most obvious and most notorious features of the period no longer existed or existed only in much weaker forms.

The easiest way to grasp the particular tone of the Restoration period is to think of it as a reaction against the Puritanism of Cromwell and the period of the Commonwealth. The dissolute court of Charles II is well known in history and legend. It was the result of a blend of world-weariness, cynicism, and debauchery, dominated by a group of exiles who returned to their country determined to make up for the lean years history had imposed upon them. In general, the people of England welcomed the change. But such a reaction had only a limited life; the court gradually shifted from undisguised dissipation to the pattern of covert intrigues, political and domestic, and the clandestine adulteries that always existed in English courts.

The relations between the court and the theater were more than merely casual. Among Charles II's first acts after he returned to the throne was the reopening of the playhouses that had been closed by the Puritans. He was a patron of the theater, attended frequently, and was fond of "a very merry play." Since, in fact, in the early years of the Restoration the theater depended very greatly on the support of the nobility and its hangers-on, it reflected the taste of the court and its activities. For the courtiers, "tis a pleasant, well-bred, complaisant, fine, frolic, good-natured, pretty age; and if you do not like it leave it to us that do," as one of Wycherley's characters says. Many characters in the comedies were based on well-known figures in the court; many episodes echoed scandals that were known.

By the 1690s, if not earlier, a change in the court's attitudes occurred that inevitably affected the theater. William and Mary did not follow in the footsteps of the queen's uncle, Charles II. The over-reaction to Puritanism had run its course, and respectability was reasserting its importance in the life of the upper and middle classes. A Society for the Reformation of Manners was organized; laws were passed to suppress licentiousness. At the same time, the audience changed. In the 1660s and 1670s, the solid and wealthy middle class had ignored or deliberately avoided the theater; they now became an important part of the audience. This was due to their increased sophistication, but inevitably they imposed their values on the playwrights as well. And the English merchant was not prepared to condone a cynical acceptance of loose behavior.

INFLUENCES ON RESTORATION COMEDY

The nature of the audience is a very important influence on all art forms, theatrical arts especially. But it is only one factor. Attempts to explain--if such a thing is possible--Restoration drama must consider other threads of influence as well. Because the theaters were closed between 1642 and 1660, there was at one time a tendency to treat the Restoration drama as if it had no connections with the main stream of English drama. This was, on the face of it, inaccurate. People had seen Jacobean plays; the plays were there to read; and Jacobean plays formed the bulk of the repertoire of the two theatrical companies after the Restoration. At the same time, the courtiers, returning after varying lengths of time spent in France, had seen French plays. We might, therefore, list the main threads that made up that many-splendored thing, Restoration comedy.

There existed an English tradition of social comedy that treated the love game with lightness, humor, and some ribaldry. Such comedies are associated with Beaumont and Fletcher, among others. The plays included satire of social types: the fops, the pedants, and the vain women. At the same time, the English comic tradition included a different comedy of character types, Ben Jonson's comedy of "humours," which emphasized the way in which people's characters would be strongly bent in one direction. Jonson's plays were also intensely satiric, attacking above all the sins of avarice, lechery, and hypocrisy.

There was a strong French influence which led to elegance of plotting, characterization, and acting. The French emphasis on correctness was probably a salutary antidote to the casual attitude to structure of many Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. However, one characteristic of French comedy, unity of plot, was never adopted; English comedies had plots and subplots, and generally an excess of action.

The third most important influence on the comedy was the patronage of the court. Very often what occurred in the play had to be thought of as a private joke, comprehensible only to those "in the know."

The ways in which these various threads of influence showed themselves varied from dramatist to dramatist. One dramatist, Wycherley, might borrow a plot from Molierè but then add subplots and make the sympathetic characters coarser and their antagonists more crudely vicious to intensify the satire: *Le Misanthrope* is a brilliant French comedy, and *The Plain Dealer* is a brilliant English comedy based on it, but very different indeed. Some comic writers attempted to follow in the footsteps of Ben Jonson, and

Congreve himself professed an occasional dependence on the Jonsonian "humour." Other dramatists, whose works are not generally anthologized, for their plays are not among the best, depended on scandal, bawdry, and the mirroring of their narrow world's activities.

Congreve represents the attitude of the period at its best. The rakehell was no longer a hero; Mirabell is a descendent of the rakehell, but compared with earlier specimens he displays urbanity, grace, and decorum. Congreve's love passages can be graceful and dignified; he treats love with an objective rationalism that is quite apart from the concept of lechery. His comedies are concerned, as comedies have been through the ages, with love and money, frequently complicated by parental opposition. His approach, however, is balanced: Love without money would be a problem, but money without love, the cynic's aim, is not the goal. Likewise, Congreve abhors the sentimental attitude that love will result in the individuals' somehow being submerged in each other; he insists that lovers preserve their integrity as individuals. Love is not metaphysical, not sentimental, not a form of sacrifice. On the other hand, within this context, it is not merely carnal nor a thinly disguised lust; it includes trust, dignity, and mutual respect.

A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

THE PROBLEM OF THE PLOT

Because of its striking characterization and brilliant dialogue, *The Way of the World* is generally considered to be the finest example of Restoration comedy, as well as one of the last. Nevertheless, it was not successful when it was first presented in 1700. Although the English audiences, unlike the French, were accustomed to plots and subplots and to a great deal of action in their plays, they were confused by the amount of activity crammed into a single day. *The Way of the World* had only a single action to which everything was related, but it included a scheme, and a counterplot to frustrate the scheme, and then moves to foil the counterplot. There were too many episodes, events, reversals, and discoveries, most of them huddled in the last acts, and they demanded too much of the audience. If the difficulty was ever overcome in a performance, it was only when actors and director were completely conscious of their problem.

Every play must start, in the traditional phrase, *in medias res;* that is, some events must have occurred before the opening curtain. The devices, called exposition, used to inform the audience or reader of these events could be as obvious as a character addressing the audience directly, or could be an important part of the action, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or in Ibsen's plays, or in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night.* In Restoration drama, exposition was usually straightforward; two characters might meet and gossip, or a man might talk to a servant; but in *The Way of the World,* exposition is highly ingenious and long withheld. In Act I, we are told that Mirabell is in love and that there are obstacles to the courtship, but most of the significant facts are hidden until Act II so that the first part of the play is obscure. Then, just as Mirabell's scheme becomes clear, it loses significance, for Fainall's counterplot becomes the machinery that moves the action forward. It is, therefore, worthwhile to trace the story in chronological order.

A CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY

Before the action of the play begins, the following events are assumed to have taken place.

Mirabell, a young man-about-town, apparently not a man of great wealth, has had an affair with Mrs. Fainall, the widowed daughter of Lady Wishfort. To protect her from scandal in the event of pregnancy, he has helped engineer her marriage to Mr. Fainall, a man whom he feels to be of sufficiently good reputation to constitute a respectable match, but not a man of such virtue that tricking him would be unfair. Fainall, for his part, married the young widow because he coveted her fortune to support his amour

with Mrs. Marwood. In time, the liaison between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall ended (although this is not explicitly stated), and Mirabell found himself in love with Millamant, the niece and ward of Lady Wishfort, and the cousin of his former mistress.

There are, however, financial complications. Half of Millamant's fortune was under her own control, but the other half, 6,000 pounds, was controlled by Lady Wishfort, to be turned over to Millamant if she married a suitor approved by her aunt. Unfortunately, Mirabell had earlier offended Lady Wishfort; she had misinterpreted his flattery as love.

Mirabell, therefore, has contrived an elaborate scheme. He has arranged for a pretended uncle (his valet, Waitwell) to woo and win Lady Wishfort. Then Mirabell intends to reveal the actual status of the successful wooer and obtain her consent to his marriage to Millamant by rescuing her from this misalliance. Waitwell was to marry Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid, before the masquerade so that he might not decide to hold Lady Wishfort to her contract; Mirabell is too much a man of his time to trust anyone in matters of money or love. Millamant is aware of the plot, probably through Foible.

When the play opens, Mirabell is impatiently waiting to hear that Waitwell is married to Foible. During Mirabell's card game with Fainall, it becomes clear that the relations between the two men are strained. There are hints at the fact that Fainall has been twice duped by Mirabell: Mrs. Fainall is Mirabell's former mistress, and Mrs. Marwood, Fainall's mistress, is in love with Mirabell. In the meantime, although Millamant quite clearly intends to have Mirabell, she enjoys teasing him in his state of uncertainty.

Mirabell bids fair to succeed until, unfortunately, Mrs. Marwood overhears Mrs. Fainall and Foible discussing the scheme, as well as Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall's earlier love affair. Since Mrs. Marwood also overhears insulting comments about herself, she is vengeful and informs Fainall of the plot and the fact, which he suspected before, that his wife was once Mirabell's mistress. The two conspirators now have both motive and means for revenge. In the same afternoon, Millamant accepts Mirabell's proposal and rejects Sir Wilfull Witwoud, Lady Wishfort's candidate for her hand.

Fainall now dominates the action. He unmasks Sir Rowland, the false uncle, and blackmails Lady Wishfort with the threat of her daughter's disgrace. He demands that the balance of Millamant's fortune, now forfeit, be turned over to his sole control, as well as the unspent balance of Mrs. Fainall's fortune. In addition, he wants assurance that Lady Wishfort will not marry so that Mrs. Fainall is certain to be the heir.

This move of Fainall's is now countered; Millamant says that she will marry Sir Wilfull to save her own fortune. Fainall insists that he wants control of the rest of his wife's money and immediate management of Lady Wishfort's fortune. When Mirabell brings two servants to prove that Fainall and Mrs. Marwood were themselves guilty of adultery, Fainall ignores the accusation and points out that he will still create a scandal which would blacken the name of Mrs. Fainall unless he gets the money.

At this point, Mirabell triumphantly reveals his most successful ploy. Before Mrs. Fainall married Fainall, she and Mirabell had suspected the man's character, and she had appointed her lover trustee of her fortune. Fainall is left with no claim to make because Mrs. Fainall does not control her own money. He and Mrs. Marwood leave in great anger. Sir Wilfull steps aside as Millamant's suitor; Lady Wishfort forgives the servants and consents to the match of Mirabell and Millamant.

LOOSE ENDS OF THE PLOT

Although there seems to be the usual happy ending to this comedy, *The Way of the World* leaves a number of loose ends that add to the confusion.

It is difficult to see where Mrs. Fainall's future is satisfactorily resolved. At one point in Act V, she says that this is the end of her life with Fainall; that is one comfort. But at the end of the play, it seems that she will continue to live with Fainall in an obviously very awkward domestic situation.

It is not clear that Fainall is completely foiled. He could still demand control of Lady Wishfort's fortune or disgrace her daughter. Mirabell's statement that "his circumstances are such, he [Fainall] must of force comply" is hardly adequate.

Some problems of motivation in the play are not clear. Why didn't Mirabell himself marry Mrs. Fainall when she was a widow? Mirabell is not wealthy, and Mrs. Fainall apparently inherited a considerable fortune from her first husband.

Is the affair between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall at an end? She married Fainall only to forestall scandal if she became pregnant. If it is at an end, why has it ceased? Why should she help Mirabell with his wooing of Millamant? Has he perhaps convinced Mrs. Fainall that he is marrying Millamant for money?

Apparently Mirabell had wanted to marry Millamant the year before, but the match was forestalled by Mrs. Marwood's interference. Fainall suggests that, had they married, Millamant would have lost half her fortune. Why then the elaborate plot now, to save the 6,000 pounds that Mirabell was prepared to sacrifice before?

There no real answers to these questions. They seem to be loose ends that the dramatist never bothered to tie together.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Mirabell
A young man-about-town, in love with Millamant.

Millamant
A young, very charming lady, in love with, and loved by, Mirabell. She is the ward of Lady Wishfort because she is the niece of Lady Wishfort's long-dead husband. She is a first cousin of Mrs. Fainall.

Fainall
A man-about-town. He and Mirabell know each other well, as people do who move in the same circles. However, they do not really like each other. Fainall married his wife for her money.

Mrs. Fainall
Wife of Fainall and daughter of Lady Wishfort. She was a wealthy young widow when she married Fainall. She is Millamant's cousin and was Mirabell's mistress, presumably after her first husband died.

Mrs. Marwood
Fainall's mistress. It does appear, however, that she was, and perhaps still is, in love with Mirabell. This love is not returned.

Young Witwoud
A fop. He came to London from the country to study law but apparently found the life of the fashionable man-about-town more pleasant. He has pretensions to being a wit. He courts Millamant, but not seriously; she is merely the fashionable belle of the moment.

Petulant
A young fop, a friend of Witwoud's. His name is indicative of his character.

Lady Wishfort
A vain woman, fifty-five years old, who still has pretensions to beauty. She is the mother of Mrs. Fainall and the guardian of Millamant. She is herself in love with Mirabell, although she is now spiteful because he offended her vanity.

Sir Wilfull Witwoud
The elder brother of Young Witwoud, he is forty years old and is planning the grand tour of Europe that was usually made by young men to complete their education. He is Lady Wishfort's nephew, a distant, non-blood relative of Millamant's, and Lady Wishfort's choice as a suitor for Millamant's hand.

Waitwell
Mirabell's valet. At the beginning of the play, he has just been married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. He masquerades as Sir Rowland, Mirabell's nonexistent uncle, and woos Lady Wishfort.

Foible
Lady Wishfort's maid, married to Waitwell.

Mincing
Millamant's maid.

Peg
A maid in Lady Wishfort's house.

CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

DEDICATION

Commentary
In this dedication, as in most others of the period, we may ignore the rather fulsome praise of the man to whom it was addressed; that praise is a convention of the time. Some of the comments made in the letter, however, are of interest. Congreve was obviously chagrined at the play's lukewarm reception and attributed it to the coarse taste of the audience. The playgoers were accustomed to plays where "the characters meant to be ridiculed" were "fools so gross" that "instead of moving our mirth, they ought very often to excite our compassion." Congreve's description of his own purpose when creating comic characters is revealing: "to design some characters which should appear ridiculous, not so much through a natural folly . . . as through an affected wit . . . which . . . is also false." This statement has often been considered the basic definition of characterization in the "Comedy of Manners," a genre where "affectation" is the great

fault. Unfortunately, Congreve continues, many people could not distinguish between "a Witwoud and a Truewit."

Not all of the comic characters in *The Way of the World* are "affectations," for Congreve included some that were created as "humours." He is here making the point that he is avoiding the extremes of farce, what we might call slapstick, in this comedy.

PROLOGUE

Commentary
The Prologue was a conventional requirement for all plays. This one was delivered by the sixty-five-year-old Betterton, the grand old man of the Restoration stage. Congreve did not keep the promises he made in this prologue:

> He swears he'll not resent one hissed-off scene,
> Nor, like those peevish wits, his play maintain,
> Who, to assert their sense, your taste arraign.

The dedicatory letter indicates that he did arraign the taste of his audience because it did not approve his play (although his scenes were not hissed).

His statement about what is in his play has more value: "some plot," "some new thought," "some humor too," but "no farce," the absence of which, he adds, ironically, would presumably be a fault. The fact that he describes his play as having no farce indicates that he planned the Wilfull-Witwoud scenes and the Lady Wishfort scenes as less broadly burlesqued than some of his contemporaries might have wished.

The statements that there is no satire because the town is so reformed and that there are surely no knaves or fools in his audience are, of course, ironic.

ACT I

Summary
The curtain rises as Mirabell is defeated by Fainall in a desultory card game at the chocolate-house. The conversation reveals that Mirabell is in love with Millamant but is intensely disliked by Millamant's guardian. Lady Wishfort's dislike seems to have some justification: Mirabell at one time pretended to court her in order to conceal his love for her niece. She is fifty-five years old, and her vanity was offended when she discovered that Mirabell did not love her.

When Fainall leaves for a moment, a servant enters and informs Mirabell that his valet married that day. Mirabell is pleased because his marriage is a necessary prelude to some secret scheme--which is not revealed. Witwoud and Petulant then enter, and we gain the additional information that Witwoud's elder brother is coming to town to court Millamant. Witwoud and Petulant are also both courting Millamant but only because she is the currently reigning belle. There is further talk of an uncle of Mirabell's who is coming to court Lady Wishfort. The men leave for a walk in the park.

Commentary
The summary of this act points up one of the difficulties in the structure of the play. The first act does not seem to move forward. It contains only partial exposition so that the reader has trouble following the play. The relations between Mirabell and Fainall are not made clear. It would be the actors' task to suggest the strain between them. The skilled and, we might say, suspicious reader may glean as much from the lines.

Fainall distrusts Mirabell, with good cause. He suspects the nature of the friendship between Mirabell and his wife before their marriage. He also suspects that his mistress, Mrs. Marwood, loves Mirabell. Mirabell is aware of Fainall's suspicions and, of course, suspects that Mrs. Marwood is Fainall's mistress. When Mirabell says that "for the discovery of this amour, I am indebted to your friend, or your wife's friend, Mrs. Marwood," the actor will put the emphasis on "or your wife's friend" so as to suggest that the innocent comment is barbed. Fainall pointedly replies, "What should provoke her to be your enemy unless she has made you advances which you have slighted? Women do not easily forgive omissions of that nature." The actor must read the lines properly on the stage, and so must the reader.

Other lines also demand careful reading. The talk about Lady Wishfort is not merely casual: She is very important in the subsequent action. The comments about Millamant's character are highly significant. Despite Mirabell's wit and irony, we must realize his sincerity. The speech beginning "I like her with all her faults" is a highly ironic yet thoroughly convincing admission of love. The rather mysterious concern with Waitwell's marriage seems strange until later developments.

Witwoud and Petulant are a pair of the fops and false wits that abounded in Restoration London, or at least in Restoration drama. They have no part in the action of *The Way of the World*; at most, they serve to suggest Millamant's train of suitors. Congreve's deftness of line is such that, over the years, critics have complained about the brilliance of some of Witwoud's speeches--for instance, "a letter as heavy as a panegyric in a funeral sermon" is not a bad line. But we can see that Witwoud lacks the style and the dignity that is so marked in Mirabell, the ideal Restoration gentleman, and he is so self-satisfied that he is unable to distinguish between legitimate raillery and the personal insults directed at him by both Mirabell and Fainall. As Mirabell ironically states: "He has indeed one good quality--he is not exceptious; . . . he will construe an affront into a jest, and call downright rudeness and ill language satire and fire."

Petulant is a clearer case. He comes closer to the kinds of characters one observes in Jonson. The foppishness of both characters can be reinforced by the arts of the costumers and the actor.

ACT II

Summary
In St. James' Park, Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood discuss their favorite subjects, men and how to manipulate them. Beneath their apparent friendliness, they are wary of each other as they talk of Mirabell. Mrs. Fainall suspects, quite correctly, that Mrs. Marwood is in love with him.

After Fainall and Mirabell enter, Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall stroll off and leave Fainall and Mrs. Marwood alone on the stage. We now discover that Mrs. Marwood is Fainall's mistress and that he only married his wife for her fortune so as to finance his amour. However, their love includes neither faith nor trust. Fainall is sensitive to the fact that Mrs. Marwood's seeming enmity of Mirabell covers her attraction for him. The scene ends with mutual recrimination and a reconciliation as they leave the stage when Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall return.

The conversation of Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall supplies new revelations. Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall were lovers; she married Fainall as a cover for her affair with Mirabell. Mirabell, during their stroll, has told her of his scheme to trick Lady Wishfort and marry Millamant. As he does not trust Waitwell, he arranged for a marriage between Waitwell and Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. (The news of this marriage arrived in the first act.) After all, having wooed and won Lady Wishfort, Waitwell might plan on actually marrying her.

Millamant now makes her first entrance, accompanied by Witwoud and her maid, Mincing. She is thoroughly aware of her own charm and her power over Mirabell, and toys with Mirabell's love at the same time that she returns it. She is apparently quite prepared to go along with Mirabell's plot, which Foible has revealed to her, a clear indication that in the end she intends to have Mirabell.

After her exit, Waitwell and Foible appear. Waitwell will woo Lady Wishfort in the guise of Sir Rowland, Mirabell's imaginary uncle. As Sir Rowland, he would be a fine match; in addition, the marriage would serve Lady Wishfort as a way to be revenged on Mirabell for his earlier slight, for presumably Mirabell would be disinherited when Sir Rowland married. All exit, with Waitwell making wry, typically Restoration comments.

Commentary

In this act, the tensions between the characters are exposed. Just as Fainall and Mirabell, presumably friends, engaged in a verbal duel that hid a real one, so Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood now fence. There is good reason for Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood not to trust each other; it *is* true that Mrs. Marwood is the mistress of Mrs. Fainall's husband. By the same token, she *is* in love with Mirabell, Mrs. Fainall's former, and perhaps present, lover.

One can, from a modern point of view, question the nature of the love of Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall. After all, if he had loved her, why had he not married her? She was presumably young, beautiful, wealthy, and available. Interesting also is the affair between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Fainall seems to love Mrs. Marwood after his fashion. That love should include trust does not even occur to him. As he says, does she think that the lover will sleep, though the husband may nod?

The scenes between Mrs. Marwood and Mrs. Fainall and between Mrs. Marwood and Fainall present a real challenge to the actors. Before the audience is given the information that makes it possible to follow the play, the actors must convey the currents of feeling, essentially cynical and unpleasant, which underly the very polished manners and high style of the exchanges of wit.

The act includes important revelations of character. A clue to the character of Mirabell is presented when Mrs. Marwood accuses Mirabell of being proud. Mrs. Fainall reacts strongly: Pride, she says, is the one fault he does not have. We may have some difficulty interpreting the term "proud"; it would appear that he is gracious rather than arrogant.

Fainall describes himself as having "a heart of proof and something of the constitution to bustle through the ways of wedlock and this world." He is, we might translate, a man who can adjust to circumstance. Mirabell describes him as "a man lavish of his morals, an interested and professing friend, a false and designing lover, yet one whose wit and outward behavior have gained a reputation with the town, enough to make that woman stand excused who has suffered herself to be won by his addresses." These observations are ample preparation for Fainall's future actions. His suspicions of others are accurate because he recognizes his own faults in them.

Millamant is a contrast to all others about her. She is surrounded by intrigue, and, together with her fortune, she is the object and the potential prize of much of it. However, she is not herself active in any intrigue. Her banter and wit are usually good-natured and direct. She does not have the cynical opinion of human nature which is so important a part of the attitude of everyone else in the play. She delights in teasing Mirabell, with the justification that she thinks of him as already her property. She is vain but amused at her own vanity. She can play the game of wit and make jokes about pinning up her hair with letters written in poetry--prose, of course, would be completely unacceptable. She is an ingenue of a type that could only have been presented on the Restoration stage, and she is without question the most successful of her kind.

The love story of Mirabell and Millamant differs from what might be expected. In most love plots, the male has to overcome the unwillingness, dislike, or simple reluctance of the other party. In *The Way of the World,* all the problems connected with the love affair are external. There is never any feeling that these two are not in love. Millamant postures, primps, and teases; it is fun to be desired and desirable. But these lovers have no internal conflicts.

ACT III

Summary
At her home, Lady Wishfort is trying to hide the signs of age with cosmetics applied externally and brandy internally. Mrs. Marwood enters and tells her that Foible was talking to Mirabell in the park. While Mrs. Marwood hides in a closet, Lady Wishfort taxes Foible with disloyalty. However, Foible takes advantage of this opportunity to forward Mirabell's plot; she says he stopped her only to insult Lady Wishfort, who therefore determines to accept Sir Rowland, due to arrive that day.

Unfortunately, after Lady Wishfort leaves, Mrs. Fainall enters, and she and Foible discuss Mirabell's scheme; Mrs. Marwood, still hidden, overhears their conversation. They also mention that Mrs. Fainall was Mirabell's mistress at one time, and that Mrs. Marwood is in love with Mirabell, but he finds her unattractive. Mrs. Marwood's anger is reinforced in the next scene when Millamant also accuses her of loving Mirabell and makes biting remarks about her age.

When the guests arrive for dinner, Petulant and young Witwoud, and then Sir Wilfull Witwoud, the elder brother and Millamant's suitor, appear. In a scene that perhaps comes closer to farce than any other in this play, Sir Wilfull does not recognize his foppish brother, and young Witwoud refuses to recognize his country-bumpkin elder brother. Afterward, Mrs. Marwood, left alone with Fainall, describes Mirabell's plot. He is certain now that he has been a cuckold and wants revenge.

Mrs. Marwood then outlines a plan for Fainall. Since Lady Wishfort has control of Millamant's fortune, and since she is very fond of her daughter, Mrs. Fainall, he can insist that Millamant's money be made over to him on threat of making public his wife's transgressions.

Commentary
Lady Wishfort is a stock character of Restoration drama; and, indeed, the older woman, eager to entrap a husband, has always been a figure of fun. But that is not to say she has no individuality. In the last three acts, Congreve devotes more attention to her character development and gives her more lines than any other character. She is eager to be wooed but would not seem to pursue. She would be forward but not too forward. She dare not smile or frown, for the paint might crack. She is concerned about appearances, but "what's integrity to an opportunity?" She is a sanctimonious hypocrite (as her description of her daughter's rearing in Act V makes clear); her private library, to which she directs Mrs. Marwood in the closet, is made up of devotional and anti-theatrical books. Quarles' *Emblems* are didactic poems, each with its moral attached; Prynne's *Histrio-Mastix* is a long attack on the immorality of the theater; Collier's *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* was published in 1698, two years before the production of *The Way of the World.* "Bunyan's Works" hardly need comment.

Lady Wishfort is in every way worth watching--obnoxious, laughable, vulgar, a little disgusting, and sometimes oddly pathetic. She craves friends, but with amazing consistency she invariably puts her trust in people who betray her.

Foible is different from the typical comedy lady's maid, represented, perhaps, by Mincing. She is an alive, mentally agile young woman and knows all the intrigues in the Wishfort household. She is aware of the passages between Marwood and Fainall, and the passages before that between Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell. She is indeed the key to all matters. Foible's comment that Mrs. Marwood "has a month's mind," with all its insulting connotations, is a key phrase in the development of the plot.

Mrs. Marwood's love for Mirabell now turns to hatred; she is the woman scorned. (It is Congreve's famous line in *The Mourning Bride* that hell has "no fury like a woman scorned.")

In the scene between young Witwoud and Sir Wilfull, some of the incidental values of the play are made clear. Witwoud's witticisms are, after all, clever and frequently apropos. Up to this scene, the fact that he has, as Mirabell says in Act I, "some few scraps of other folks' wit" has to be brought out by the actor in his portrayal of the character. However, his treatment of his brother is not that of the Restoration gentleman, who might deplore Sir Wilfull's crudeness but would never try to deny his brother. He does not display the polish that Mirabell would under the same circumstances. Although Sir Wilfull is a stock Restoration country bumpkin, he displays a common sense and a forthright honesty that make him appear far the worthier of the brothers.

The last scene between Marwood and Fainall indicates clearly the direction of the play for the two following acts. The counterplot, opposed to the plot of the hero, is now set up.

ACT IV

Summary
After Lady Wishfort is seen preparing for the visit of Sir Rowland, Millamant and Sir Wilfull are onstage together. Sir Wilfull, somewhat drunk but very shy, is too bashful actually to complete his proposal to Millamant. Overawed by the aloof lady, he is eager to get away and grateful when she dismisses him. It is obvious that he will not succeed, but he is likable in his embarrassment.

Immediately after occurs the scene between Millamant and Mirabell that is often called the proviso scene. They discuss the conditions under which he is prepared to marry her and under which she is prepared to accept him. At the end of the scene, when Mrs. Fainall enters, Millamant admits that she does love him violently. As Mirabell leaves, the company--Sir Wilfull, young Witwoud, and Petulant--come in from dinner. They are all drunk--Sir Wilfull the drunkest of the three. Now the spurious Sir Rowland arrives to woo Lady Wishfort, and his wooing bids fair to be successful when a letter is brought from Mrs. Marwood in which she tells Lady Wishfort of the plot. However, Waitwell and Foible between them manage to convince Lady Wishfort that the letter is actually sent by Mirabell and is designed as a plot against Sir Rowland. Apparently Lady Wishfort is convinced, at least for the moment.

Commentary
Much of Act IV is devoted to variations on the theme of courtship in the Restoration manner. First the comic country squire is portrayed. At the end of the act, the obviously burlesqued Sir Rowland woos Lady Wishfort in a broadly comic manner. Between the two is the proviso scene.

The proviso scene in *The Way of the World* is generally considered the finest in Restoration comedy. The motif was first used by Dryden in *Secret Love.* The scene must be read carefully and, in a performance, must be developed by the actors with some finesse. Under the polished phrases and the verbal fencing, the happy couple are very much in love, as Millamant admits at the end of the scene. The careful student might reread the scene at this point to see what has led up to this admission.

This proviso scene is an emblem of the Restoration comic convention at its civilized best. At no time do the characters descend to any obvious display of emotion, let alone pathos. Even though in love, they conduct the scene with complete decorum. In the Restoration convention, in every exchange between a man and a woman, each is trying to build his or her own ego. All encounters are duels, and to be bested in the game of wits is to lose. The proviso scene is the reconciliation of these seeming irreconcilables. Mirabell will be a husband, Millamant will dwindle into a wife, but they have made a victory of their mutual surrender.

The gentlemen, drunk after dinner, who enter immediately afterward, are at once a comic interlude and a wry commentary. We have seen the Restoration ideal; we now see the gentleman as he actually exists.

The comic scene between Sir Rowland and Lady Wishfort is broad. Sir Rowland is a masquerade. He is the *servant* pretending to be a gentleman. Lady Wishfort plays the salacious widow to the hilt. Inevitably, the scene is a marked contrast to the love duel of the proviso scene.

The drunken comments are also nice counterpoint. Petulant's "if you can love me dear nymph, say it--and that's the conclusion. Pass on, or pass off--" and Sir Wilfull's "A match or no match, cousin with the hard name . . ." are a significant contrast with the mastery of style displayed in the preceding scene.

ACT V

Summary
The scene, as before, is Lady Wishfort's house. Lady Wishfort has discovered Mirabell's plot. Foible tries unsuccessfully to make excuses for herself.

Fainall now makes his demands. As Millamant's fortune of 6,000 pounds was presumably forfeit when she refused to marry a suitor selected for her by Lady Wishfort, he wants the money as his price for not blackening his wife's reputation. He also wants the remainder of Mrs. Fainall's fortune turned over to his sole control. And he insists on Lady Wishfort's not marrying again so that he be sole heir. These terms are very harsh, and Lady Wishfort might not be prepared to go along with them except that Mrs. Marwood, standing by, goads her on by harping on the public disgrace of her daughter, Mrs. Fainall.

When the two maids now reveal that Fainall, in his turn, has been unfaithful to his wife, he refuses to be deterred; he is willing to be the subject of scandal himself, but he will still make public his wife's shame. When Millamant states that she is prepared to marry Sir Wilfull, thus meeting the wishes of her aunt and saving her 6,000 pounds, Fainall suspects a trick, but he can still demand control of the balance of his wife's estate, and now also the control of Lady Wishfort's. At this point, Mirabell presents the evidence which will protect Mrs. Fainall. At the time of her marriage, they had judged Fainall's character correctly, and Mrs. Fainall secretly signed over her fortune to Mirabell's control. There is, therefore, no money which Fainall can successfully obtain.

In great anger, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood leave the stage, vowing dire vengeance. Lady Wishfort, having discovered that Fainall was a villain and that Mrs. Marwood, her friend, was not a true friend, is now prepared to forgive Mirabell; Millamant can now marry him with her aunt's consent. It is on this happy but somewhat indeterminate note that the plays ends.

Commentary
The fifth act is muddled; there is far too much plotting and action. Fainall comes in with his demands. Mirabell and Sir Wilfull Witwoud enter to frustrate part of them. Foible and Mincing disclose the

information that Fainall and Mrs. Marwood have also been guilty of adultery. For the first time, we hear of the deed Mrs. Fainall signed. And, finally, Lady Wishfort forgives everyone.

If one looks at it structurally, it is possible to see that Mirabell's original scheme is here balanced by the counterplot of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. They, in turn, are foiled by Foible and Mincing on the one hand, and by Millamant's presumed willingness to marry Sir Wilfull on the other. But these developments are then countered by Fainall's insistence on the balance of Mrs. Fainall's money. And this move is conclusively countered by Mirabell's producing the deed signed before Mrs. Fainall's marriage, presumably in anticipation of, and protection against, just such a situation.

Lady Wishfort, in this act, becomes almost a sympathetic character. Her faults and her vanities are many, but here we see her trying to protect her daughter, finding that the people whom she trusted have proven completely treacherous. Caught on the one hand by the desire to save those whom she loves, and trapped by the treachery of those she trusted, she is an odd figure in a very unusual situation in Restoration drama.

The ending of the play is not entirely satisfactory. For one thing, one is finally left with the question, "What of Mrs. Fainall?" She will retain her money, but her lover is lost to her, and it is not entirely clear that Fainall and Mrs. Marwood will not find some rather unpleasant revenge.

EPILOGUE

Commentary

Spoken by Mrs. Bracegirdle, who played Millamant, the epilogue only makes conventional points: the essential inadequacy of critics who decry plays without knowledge, and the statement that the characters are fictitious, and no individual is represented; the satire is universal, for

> So poets oft do in one piece expose
> Whole belles assemblees of coquettes and beaux.

CHARACTER ANALYSES

MIRABELL

He is the ideal Restoration beau, a combination of the cynical and the gracious. He has the vices and the virtues of his kind. In his day, he has been a successful woman-chaser. As a cover for an affair, he cynically arranged for the marriage of his mistress to a man presumably his friend. He cynically flattered Lady Wishfort, for whom he feels contemptuous amusement. He devises a plot that would blackmail Lady Wishfort into consenting to her ward's marriage; it would also humiliate her grossly. And he has no faith in his assistants in his plot; before Waitwell can masquerade and woo Lady Wishfort, he makes certain that Waitwell be married, for he "would not tempt [his] servant to betray [him] by trusting him too far." It is easy to see why he would trust very few people; he has only to consider how he would act under similar circumstances. He can anticipate treachery on Waitwell's part. He can distrust Fainall and forestall his villainy to protect Mrs. Fainall's future.

Yet the character is made acceptable even from the point of view of a generation that disapproves. Mirabell handles the situation with dignity and the style of his period. The irony in his comments on other people reveals his common sense; his judgment of Fainall is ruthless, but it is clear-eyed. The comments on young Witwoud are shrewd and accurate, and it is worth observing that he directs little irony against Sir Wilfull Witwoud. On the other hand, his ironic self-criticism leads him to realize that he is indeed in love with Millamant.

In the play, we are most interested in Mirabell as lover. He never loses his control, despite provocation, in his affair with Millamant. He laughs at himself--but his speech indicates the depth of his feeling. He accepts Millamant's mischievous mistreatment with some resentment, but he still manages to remain the polished courtier. Even though he loves her, he does not lose sight of the importance of her money.

His love must be seen within the context of the play. Neither he nor Millamant can sink into any sentimental act or mood. The depth and sincerity of the emotion must be conveyed by the manner which is a necessary part of the ideal gentleman. He is in love--but he is still the completely accomplished gallant.

MILLAMANT

Millamant is generally conceded to be the most charming heroine in Restoration comedy. She is a fitting partner-antagonist to Mirabell. She maintains the same self-control to the very end of the proviso scene. She too loves but shows no sentiment. She is airy, teasing, light, beautiful, tantalizing, and infuriating. Mirabell is aware of her faults--and comes to love them. The reader is aware of her faults and comes to love them too. She is affected, coy, and arch, and we would have her no other way. She can be sweet and charming, but there can be acid and irony in her wit.

Millamant appears significantly in five scenes: her first appearance, her dialogue with Mrs. Marwood, her scene with Sir Wilfull, the proviso scene with Mirabell, and the drunken scene immediately following. The first and fourth are the most important for revealing her character.

Millamant's first appearance is prepared for carefully. When she arrives, trailing her court, Mincing and young Witwoud, she automatically takes the center of the stage as if it is her right, as indeed it is. Her character is outlined in the passage about putting up one's hair: Prose would never do, only poetry, a piece of flippancy in which Mincing immediately abets her. Here she is revealed as the complete belle. She is affectation that is fully conscious of itself, and flippancy that delights in its own irreverence. She is completely sure of her feminine power, and Congreve has given her the lines to justify her assurance. The lines concerning suitors--one makes them, one destroys them, and one makes others--are all flippant. She knows her power and can laugh at herself, just as she can tease Mirabell.

Within the limited world where she operates, she is intelligent. She sees through the forced false wit of young Witwoud's humor and handles him gracefully and efficiently. "Truce with your similitudes" and "Mincing stand between me and his wit" are deft lines which give Witwoud precisely the attention he merits; incidentally, they gracefully dispose of the small deer, for Millamant stalks more worthy game. She is shrewd enough to see through Mrs. Marwood:

> That Mirabell loves me is no more a secret than it is a secret that you discovered it to my aunt, or than the reason why you discovered it is a secret.

Above all, Millamant's character is Millamant in love. She and Mirabell are worthy partners. She, too, will not admit her love to him, for to do so would be to give up one's position of vantage in the game. It is the control of the skillful Restoration wit, which overlays her love, and through which it must operate, that makes the proviso scene so completely successful.

FAINALL

In two speeches, Fainall is characterized by himself and by Mirabell. Fainall describes himself, in our terms, as an opportunist, a man who can veer with the winds of circumstance. Mirabell describes him as a man on the fringes of respectability, a man who is almost acceptable. To these two complementary descriptions we must add another quality noted before--Fainall's intense suspicion. He distrusts his

mistress as naturally as he breathes; he distrusts everything Mirabell says. It is not that he assumes Mirabell is lying, necessarily; rather he looks for snide implications in the words and finds them. In justice to Fainall, it should be noted that the snide implications are there.

The one disreputable act we can attribute to him before the play starts is his marriage. The fact that he married for money can hardly be held against him in his society, but to marry for money to finance a love affair is more difficult to accept. Yet it is hard to see that his part in marrying the rich widow is worse than Mirabell's in arranging for the marriage of his mistress to his friend so as to protect her from scandal should she become pregnant through his, the lover's, attentions.

In each of the items mentioned above, Fainall is a somewhat tarnished version of Mirabell. Mirabell's deftness in handling his world becomes Fainall's "bustling" opportunism. Mirabell's caution in trusting people becomes Fainall's almost pathological suspicion of every word anyone says.

It is in their loves that we can see, glaringly, Fainall's attitude to life as a smirched version of Mirabell's. Possibly against their wills, both are in love. Mirabell moves to a marriage based on mutual respect. Fainall will try to shut his eyes to what he sees and pretend to believe against clear evidence in a love affair hemmed in on all sides by indignity and deceit.

> Come, I ask your pardon--no tears--I was to blame, I could not love you and be easy in my doubts. Pray, forbear--I believe you: I'm convinced I've done you wrong, and any way, every way will make amends. I'll hate my wife, yet more, damn her! I'll part with her, rob her of all she's worth, and we'll retire somewhere--anywhere--to another world.

When Fainall's suspicions about his wife are confirmed, he moves from a kind of generalized unpleasantness to quite specific action. Once his plans are made, he proceeds ruthlessly.

MRS. MARWOOD

Mrs. Marwood is not carefully drawn. The mistress of Fainall, she loves Mirabell. Hypocrisy is a necessary part of the way of their world for everyone, but it is the most significant characteristic of Mrs. Marwood.

We first meet Mrs. Marwood talking to Mrs. Fainall. Both women speak hypocritically, both are engaged in delicate maneuvers designed to gain information but to reveal none, both are suspicious. Mrs. Marwood is hypocritical in her relation with Fainall. She can pretend to be wholeheartedly and unreservedly in love with him, while actually she is disguising her feelings for Mirabell, not with complete success. Her disguised love for Mirabell is an important motivation in the action. It is one--although only one--of the reasons why she encourages Fainall in his plot. When Millamant insults her, taunting her with love for Mirabell and her greater age, she is like the traditional villain of the tragedies of the period, revengeful because her vanity is offended.

But Mrs. Marwood's essential hypocrisy and villainy show up most clearly in her relations with Lady Wishfort. Here she feigns friendship. She tries to spoil Mirabell's plan; as confidante and adviser, she tries to get Lady Wishfort to accede to Fainall's demands. There is, in short, no one on the stage with whom her relations are not based on an important lie.

LADY WISHFORT

Lady Wishfort is a character type with a long tradition in drama--the over-eager, man-seeking widow. Her first offense, and that which initially makes her an object of ridicule, is the breach of taste, for she should know better. She is first described by Mirabell, who points out that her character is defined in the tag-name, *Lady Wish-fort.* She is fifty-five years of age, an age that certainly seemed very old to the

precocious and brilliant thirty-year-old whose play was being produced. She is also the character with most lines in the final acts of the play.

Her vanity is made clear from the first. She misinterpreted Mirabell's flattery, which he describes in the first act. In the third act, the picture of Lady Wishfort at her toilette ridicules the woman who does not accept the fact of her age gracefully. Her indecorous interest in men is a part of her character and important for the action. It is the reason she can misinterpret Mirabell and the reason Mirabell can hope that Waitwell's wooing may be successful.

As a woman who controls considerable wealth, she is accustomed to having her own way; she is abrupt and tyrannical with her maid; she plans her ward's marriage. It is clear she does not like to be crossed and does not expect to be.

Congreve has probed this character further. Her vanity and man-chasing both have a common source; she lives in a world of fantasy. She looks into mirrors constantly but does not see what everyone else sees. In her mind, she can still be a girl of sixteen or a beautiful young woman. She is, therefore, especially susceptible to flattery, for there is no touch of good sense to help her see through it. Because of her susceptibility to flattery, her friends are always ill-chosen. Everyone she trusts betrays her to a greater or lesser degree: apparently her closest friend is Mrs. Marwood; her daughter and ward are both prepared to go along with a plot that would trick her in a most humiliating way; her maid, Foible, on whom she depends, plays a major part in the plot. In her dilemma in the last act, she is bewildered and helpless.

The humourous character is not often shown in situations that display aspects of his character other than his humour. However, Lady Wishfort as mother and guardian has a depth beyond the usual for her type. As a mother, she did not always act wisely:

> She [her daughter] was never suffered to play with a male child . . . nay, her very babies [dolls] were of the feminine gender. Oh, she never looked a man in the face but her own father, or the chaplain, and him we made a shift to put upon her for a woman, by the help of his long garments and his sleek face.

Yet Fainall's demands could prove successful only because she loves her daughter and wants to protect her. Her choice of a husband for her ward might be incongruous, but it is certainly well-intentioned. Sir Wilfull does have sterling qualities, although he is hardly the right choice for Millamant.

The result is that Lady Wishfort, by the end of the play, has gained a certain measure of good will from the audience. She is a complex creation, the butt of the author's satire and actors' ridicule, yet the object of some painful sympathy.

SIR WILFULL WITWOUD

The country bumpkin, as butt of the city wit, is a traditional character type in comedy. Like other characters in the play, Sir Wilfull does not quite conform to type. He is shown as having country manners: he calls for slippers; he drinks too heavily; he is very shy with Millamant, awed by the city lady. However, his intention to tour Europe even though he is well beyond the usual age for the grand tour is an odd characteristic, not observable in the type. He is justifiably angry in his encounter with his brother. His attitude in other matters suggests a sensible person; he certainly does not wish to marry Millamant if she does not choose; he obviously likes Mirabell, presumably a sign of good judgment, and gladly helps to foil Fainall.

YOUNG WITWOUD

Presumably young Witwoud came to London from the country recently to study law. He took to London life enthusiastically but not always wisely. He thinks of himself as a wit, but his judgment is not sound. He serves as a contrast to Mirabell; he is the false picture, the affectation of the Restoration ideal, which Mirabell represents.

Although somewhat forced, his lines are typical Restoration wit:

> Fainall, how does your lady? . . . I beg pardon that I should ask a man of pleasure and the town a question at once so foreign and domestic. . . . A wit should no more be sincere than a woman constant; one argues a decay of parts, as to other of beauty.

He is thus characterized by Mirabell:

> He is a fool with a good memory and some few scraps of other folks' wit. He is one whose conversation can never be approved: yet it is now and then to be endured.

He is also so anxious to appear to understand raillery that he does not realize that he is insulted. He courts Millamant only because she is the current belle; he actually dislikes her because she is so anxious to be a wit herself that she gives him no opportunity to demonstrate his own wittiness.

The most telling attack on him by Congreve is in the scene with Sir Wilfull, for no gentleman would refuse to recognize his own brother.

PETULANT

Petulant is best characterized by his name. Obviously, as young Witwoud is excessively good-natured, not even recognizing an insult, Petulant is ill-natured, too eager to prove himself by ill manners. He too, like young Witwoud, is a pretender to status. He is a liar, says young Witwoud, a poser, and, of course, petulant.

He is an interesting specimen in that he talks of "having a humour" to do something or other--the sure sign that he is affecting the humour, although it may by long use have come to be, by Congreve's distinction, a habit.

WAITWELL

The valet is obviously very clever and himself a wit of some accomplishment:

> Married, knighted, and attended all in one day! 'Tis enough to make any man forget himself. The difficulty will be how to recover my acquaintance and familiarity with my former self, and fall from my transformation to a reformation into Waitwell. Nay, I shan't be quite the same Waitwell neither: for now, I remember me, I'm married and can't be my own man again.
>
> Aye, there's the grief: that's the sad change of life,
> To lose my title, and yet keep my wife.

As Sir Rowland he performs well but must perform as a burlesque of the gentleman. It is one of the conventions of the drama of the time that the servant will try to model himself on his master. He is, therefore, an awkward imitation of Mirabell. Only Lady Wishfort could be taken in by him.

FOIBLE
Foible is obviously a very intelligent young woman and, like all servants, presumably eager to play the go-between. Her loyalties are not clear; although Lady Wishfort's maid, she is prepared to deceive her; her loyalty to Mirabell is based on clear pecuniary interest. In the final analysis, she is like everybody else in the play: Her loyalty is only to herself.

MINCING
A pale attempt to copy her mistress, she can second Millamant's statement that it is impossible to put up one's hair in prose. Worth noting is the fact that even the maids are differentiated.

MRS. FAINALL
Mrs. Fainall has some important functions in the play. She is the mainspring in Fainall's counterplot; when she is made aware of Mirabell's plot, she talks too freely with Foible and is overheard. She helps fill out the gallery of portraits: How would one see the world properly without a woman who was one of the conquests of the hero before he found his true love? The cast mistress, now a sadder but wiser person, is, in fact, a common character in Restoration comedy. (The curious may look at Etherege's famous play, *The Man of Mode*.) She is not as well drawn as the other characters, and it is perhaps easier to see why Mirabell tired of her than why he ever loved her in the first place.

CRITICAL ESSAYS

THEMES
The precise statement of the theme of a work of art is always a little unsatisfactory. The pithy sentence must omit a great deal; it always does violence to the whole work. Nevertheless, it is worth making the effort to determine a theme, or themes, in a play as a guide to study or analysis.

As a point of departure, it is valid to say that the theme of this play is given us by Congreve in the title, *The Way of the World.* All the events and characters of the play can be related to this central theme. The obvious criticism is that the same "theme" can be ascribed to unlimited numbers of other, and quite different, novels and plays. Further, Congreve does not, in this play, seem to take a consistent position. Sometimes he is direct, sometimes ironic; sometimes he deplores, sometimes he approves; at times he is amused; and most of the time his position is a compound of all of these attitudes.

To get a more satisfactory statement we might use a different approach that would give a better sense of the texture of the play. Most Restoration playwrights supplied their plays with alternate titles, or subtitles. Since Congreve did not, we might seek for the different subtitles that are appropriate. Each one would suggest a theme, although not *the* theme. These may put flesh on the bare bones the title gives us.

Love a la Mode
Certainly, the play can be seen as a dramatic presentation of varieties of love in the England of the year 1700. Central is the delicate handling of the love game as played by Mirabell and Millamant. They represent the ideal of the Restoration attitude, intense yet balanced, their love based on mutual esteem with no surrender of individuality. Contrasted with it are Mirabell's earlier and quite ambiguous love affair with Mrs. Fainall; the illicit love of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, presumably passionate, but wholly without mutual trust; the spurious court young Witwoud pays to Millamant; the direct and somewhat coarse approach of Sir Wilfull; and, at the opposite extreme completely, the aging and undignified longings of Lady Wishfort, vain, unrealistic, over-eager, desperate, and a little pathetic.

Love and Money
Such an approach is closely related to that of *love a la mode,* although they are not identical. In the world whose way is presented here, love and money are values to be taken into account at all times. The sincerity of Mirabell's love does not make him lose sight of the importance of Millamant's fortune. Fainall marries for money to support an illicit love; apparently the thought of marrying Mrs. Marwood without adequate money (however "adequate" might be defined) is unthinkable. Money is Lady Wishfort's sole hold over her child and her ward. Even the marriage of the servants is built on a promise of a handsome sum of money. This is the world's way. Love without money is an impossible sentimental dream, although money often corrupts what love there is.

A Gallery of Portraits
Congreve's statements in the dedication, the prologue, and the epilogue suggest that this might be a valid subtitle. Since it is the way of the world to put a premium on youth, Mirabell and Millamant stand at the center, representing all that is to be commended. Mirabell is the beau ideal: polished, poised, rational and balanced, witty and perspicacious without being what we might today call over-intellectual. Millamant is the belle: feminine, beautiful, witty, not prudish, but with a sense of her own worth. She has avoided the messiness and humiliation of sexual intrigue. Opposed to Mirabell are would-be wits, worthy but graceless boors, and deep intriguers. Opposed to Millamant are women who engaged in adultery and an old dowager without decorum. Every character reveals himself in action, and together they produce a gallery of self-portraits.

Jungle of High Intrigue
This subtitle would focus attention on some of the values of London society. Everyone is engaged in intrigue: Mirabell intrigues to gain consent to his marriage from Lady Wishfort, and this involves intrigue within intrigue, for he does not trust Waitwell. Fainall intrigues in turn. Everyone is involved in one or the other of these schemes--Mrs. Fainall, Mrs. Marwood, and the servants. Even Lady Wishfort in her willingness to marry Sir Rowland has a devious purpose--revenge on Mirabell. When Mrs. Fainall married her husband, that was part of an intrigue, as was his marriage to her. And as we see in the play, victory goes to Mirabell, not because of his virtue, but simply because he is the most successful intriguer.

Certainly all these possible subtitles, rather than any one, add up to the ironic commentary on society that is in the title, *The Way of the World.*

STYLE, WIT, AND IRONY

In the most common use of the word, style describes the author's use of language within the shorter rhetorical units, the sentence or at most the paragraph. It includes the choice of words and the rhythmic and musical quality of the sentences. Since it also includes a discussion of the relations of language to thought, fact, and reality, at some point it becomes identical with a discussion of wit and irony.

If irony is included in the discussion, then arbitrary limits must be set because from some points of view, irony pervades *The Way of the World.* The title is ironic; the action is ironic; the relationships of the characters to each other are ironic. This section, however, is concerned only with irony as a function of the speeches of characters, not as a function of plot or theme. It is concerned with that kind of irony that is closely related to style and wit.

Congreve avoids attempting any definition of wit, although, in the dedication, he distinguishes between true wit and false wit, the latter a product of affectation. Another comment of Congreve's on wit also casts some light on his practice. In "Concerning Humour in Comedy," he writes:

> Every person in a comedy may be allowed to speak them [pleasant things]. From a witty man they are expected and even a fool may be permitted to stumble on 'em by chance. . . . I do not think that humourous characters exclude wit; no, but the manner of wit should be adapted to the humour . . . ; a character of a splenetic and peevish humour should have a satirical wit. A jolly and sanguine humour should have a facetious wit.

In practice, all of Congreve's characters speak "pleasant things." There is not a speech that does not have its biting edge of wit, satire, or irony.

Discussions of style and wit in a play are in some ways simple. Certain kinds of problems do not have to be discussed since they do not exist. Unlike novels, plays have no long passages of description which may or may not be well written; there are no elaborate expositions of motives. There is no reason to consider whether the author is inside his creatures' minds or external to them. The characters speak; what they say can be examined. To talk of style or wit in a play is to talk of the different styles and different kinds of wit of the characters.

Congreve wrote so that his characters were sharply differentiated by their speech patterns and their wit. As Congreve used style and wit as one of his ways of characterization, the material in this section may be considered additional data for study of the characters, collected here so that a rather technical subject can be treated in one place.

Mirabell
Mirabell's style is not an easy one. We do not feel that he is spontaneous, for his periods are carefully prepared. The sentences are long, flowing, and syntactically intricate. He indulges in no slang or canting expressions. While he can be acid in his judgment, there is no vituperation in his speech. The objects of his disapproval are so deftly lanced in his gracious phrases that they can scarcely feel the knife.

Mirabell's wit and irony are also intricate. His observations about others are shrewd, including a mixture of distaste, tolerance, and amusement. Considerable irony is also directed at himself. There is a strong element of self-criticism that makes him a most unusual hero.

Any number of speeches might serve to reveal these characteristics; this famous speech from the first act about his feelings toward Millamant will do:

> I'll tell thee, Fainall, she once used me with that insolence, that in revenge I took her to pieces, sifted her and separated her failings: I studied 'em, and got 'em by rote. The catalogue was so large that I was not without hopes one day or other to hate her heartily: to which end I so used myself to think of 'em, that at length, contrary to my design and expectation, they gave me every hour less and less disturbance, till in a few days it became habitual to me to remember 'em without being displeased. They are now grown as familiar to me as my own frailties, and, in all probability, in a little time longer I shall like 'em as well.

The characteristics can be seen: the long smooth passages (one might read aloud from "to which end" to the end of the sentence), the real wit, the clear vision of the object of the speech, and the wry ability to laugh at himself.

Millamant
The ultimate proof of the individuality of Millamant's style is in this--that to read the passage aloud is immediately to sense the manner and mannerisms of the character. She is flippant, delightfully spoiled, spirited. When, in the fourth act, she reveals a depth that we might not have expected, that, too, is in the style. Her speech in her first appearance is abrupt; she moves not so much from one subject to another as from one feeling to another with an ability to turn anything into wit.

> *Mrs. Millamant:* Oh, aye, letters: I had letters. I am persecuted with letters. I hate letters. Nobody knows how to write letters; and yet one has 'em, one does not know why. They serve one to pin up one's hair.
>
> *Witwoud:* Pray, madam, do you pin up your hair with all your letters?
>
> *Mrs. Millamant:* Only with those in verse, Mr. Witwoud; I never pin up my hair with prose. I think I tried once, Mincing.
>
> *Mincing:* O mem, I shall never forget it.

After a series of short, flippant statements, there comes an inspired thought: "They serve one to pin up one's hair." She then pursues the train of thought that this conceit suggests: "Only with those in verse." It is incidentally pleasant that Mincing can pick up her cue and proceed further.

The passage "One makes lovers as fast as one pleases" is similar, as is "Now I think on't, I'm angry. No, now I think on't, I'm pleased; for I believe I gave you some pain!" The style and wit *are* the character of Millamant.

In the proviso scene, more serious in content, the pace changes. There is still a teasing element, but there is less skipping from point to point. Millamant is stating her conditions for marriage:

> Trifles--as liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or wry faces on your part; to wear what I please, and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation upon me to converse with wits that I don't like, because they are your acquaintance; or to be intimate with fools, because they may be your relations. . . . These articles subscribed, if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a wife.

Fainall
Fainall's style and wit must be differentiated from Mirabell's. His sentences are not as long or as contemplative as Mirabell's, and his wit is more direct and somewhat crueler: "The coldness of a losing gamester lessens the pleasure of the winner. I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune than I'd make love to a woman that undervalued the loss of her reputation." Perhaps because of the nature of his part, he is more abrupt in accusation, and his lines may depend on a more obvious parallelism and antithesis: "Could you think, because the nodding husband would not wake, that e'er the watchful lover slept?" And he engages in a more direct attack: "Professed a friendship! Oh, the pious friendships of the female sex!"

Young Witwoud
Since Congreve himself commented that readers and audience could not always distinguish between Witwoud and his true wits, Witwoud's speeches demand especially careful examination.

As Witwoud has no function in the plot of the play, the purpose of his speeches is to characterize him and to provide comedy. The key to his wit is the "similitude." "Truce with your similitudes," says Millamant to him. Each comparison may be clever by itself, amusing, unusual, a little shocking, such as "Friendship without freedom is as dull as love without enjoyment." The lines with which he interrupts Millamant in the second act are each one a comparison, amusing or overburdened. The witticisms are forced; they have been collected and memorized, and at need pulled out of his conjurer's bag of tricks. Irony, if there is any here, is superficial; no one of the witticisms has any particular point. Nor does young Witwoud even realize it should.

Petulant
Petulant's style and wit are included in his name. He has a humour to be angry--that is, he is an example of Jonsonian humour, or, perhaps, he affects a humour.

Lady Wishfort
Lady Wishfort's style, like everything else about her, is of special interest. Her manner is abrupt--a mirror of the arbitrary, petty tyrant she is. Like all Congreve characters, she has, perhaps unconsciously, a fair amount of wit. More than anything else in the play, her verbal attack on others is direct vituperation--"Boudoir Billingsgate," in Meredith's phrase. No unit of thought is longer than a few words. It is clear that she shouts when annoyed or irritated, and she is always in a state of annoyance:

> No, fool. Not the ratafia, fool. Grant me patience! I mean the Spanish paper, idiot; complexion, darling. Paint, paint, paint! dost thou understand that, changeling, dangling thy hands like bobbins before thee? Why does thou not stir, puppet? thou wooden thing upon wires!

The term irony has a different meaning when one is discussing Lady Wishfort. It is true that she does indulge in heavy-handed sarcasm, but the unconscious irony is more important. She responds to the accidental images of words in ironical self-revelation. Foible reports that Mirabell said he would "handle" Lady Wishfort. "Handle me, would he durst!" she cries, "such a foul-mouthed fellow." It is clear what the word "handle" means to her--and the reader may or may not catch the ambiguity of "would he durst." Her speech as she repairs her face while waiting for Sir Rowland is a group of short, flustered comments that constitute her regular manner, an unconsciously ironic description of her hypocrisy:

> In what figure shall I give his heart the first impression? There is a great deal in the first impression. Shall I sit? --No, I won't sit--I'll walk--aye, I'll walk from the door upon his entrance; and then turn full upon him. --No, that will be too sudden. I'll lie--aye, I'll lie down--I'll receive him in my little dressing-room; there's a couch--yes, yes, I'll give the first impression on a couch. --won't lie neither, but loll and lean upon one elbow, with one foot a little dangling off, jogging in a thoughtful way--yes--and then as soon as he appears, start, aye, start and be surprised, and rise to meet him in a pretty disorder--yes--oh, nothing is more alluring than a levee from a couch, in some confusion. --It shows the foot to advantage, and furnishes with blushes, and recomposing airs beyond comparison.

Examples can be multiplied. One might only add Lady Wishfort's remark when she discovers that her daughter's fortune will not be lost: "'Tis plain thou has inherited thy mother's prudence," a highly ambiguous compliment in the light of Mrs. Fainall's unsatisfactory love affair with Mirabell and Lady Wishfort's misjudgment of Mrs. Marwood and Sir Rowland.

NOTES ON PERFORMANCE

Although *The Way of the World* was not at first successful, it gained in reputation over the years. It is a great comedy, marred by structural difficulties; it becomes the business of the director and actors somehow to overcome these flaws and help the audience to follow the play and appreciate its elements of greatness.

In this section, we shall suggest some ways that direction or acting may make the play clearer and more meaningful. This section will not be a complete line by line guide to the acting and direction, but some scenes, some characters, and some devices will be discussed. Throughout, the approach will always be to preserve the dramatist's intent and spirit even if sometimes that means departing from his precise practice.

Staging
One device would be of some assistance to the characters: Lady Wishfort's house should be full of mirrors--wall mirrors, dressing table mirrors, easel mirrors, and hand mirrors. For Lady Wishfort, they are indispensable; for others, useful. Witwoud is overwigged and thinks himself very handsome; Millamant is not without vanity; Sir Rowland would love himself in his borrowed finery; and perhaps Sir Wilfull might with advantage look at himself while in his cups.

Characters
The characters are discussed in other sections, but there are some hints to the acting of the parts that might be worth considering. Mirabell and Millamant are the "young lovers," indispensable ingredient of any comedy. On first reading, the lines of their two important scenes together do not convey the idea that they are lovers; they are fencing in Act II and seem to be approaching marriage in far too businesslike a way in Act IV. Nevertheless, in Act II, the actress must make clear that Millamant does love Mirabell and will have him no matter how much she may tease him; in the proviso scene, the clue is: "Well, if Mirabell should not make a good husband, I am a lost thing, for I find I love him violently." From its beginning, the scene moves toward that line: It must be acted so that the speech is the logical and fitting climax.

Yet, they must not be shown as *naïve* young lovers; they are wise in the ways of their generation. Mirabell is no awkward, bumbling juvenile; Millamant is an ingenue with an important difference: She has wit and considerable wisdom. Daintily feminine and tigerishly female, her claws must show in scenes with the fops and with other women. She is not the sweet helpless creature of circumstance. She has carefully selected her mate, and in the world in which she moves, who is to say that she has not selected the best?

In different ways, Fainall and the fops must be contrasted with Mirabell. Fainall is the machinating villain, but Mirabell is himself a highly competent schemer. In the end, Mirabell is successful. Fainall, therefore, must be more villainous, Mirabell more assured and urbane, the Restoration ideal. In the fifth act, there is real danger that Fainall may play Mirabell off the stage. This is to be avoided, for the balance of the play, already somewhat precarious, can be destroyed.

Young Witwoud and Petulant form a team. Young Witwoud is an unsuccessful caricature of Mirabell, a man who never quite comes off. His bow is not entirely successful; his peruke is somewhat exaggerated, the ribbons on his shoes a little too large. In clothes, manner, and wit, he wishes to be what Mirabell so effortlessly is.

Waitwell is also a variation of Mirabell. Whatever he knows of the art of the gentleman is learned from Mirabell. He is a caricature of the gentleman, with the servant showing through the masquerade. He may engage in obvious imitations of Mirabell's mannerisms.

There is a danger in making Sir Wilfull Witwoud too much the country bumpkin. He is awkward with Millamant; he does drink too much after dinner. But his essential basic good sense must show--for that alone makes his cooperation with Mirabell and Millamant in the last act plausible.

Mrs. Marwood must be contrasted with Millamant in manner and costume. She is the more worldly, more dangerous, but in verbal encounter with Millamant, she comes off second best.

Lady Wishfort is, of course, the prize acting part. The danger lies in treating her as a completely burlesque character. Despite all her faults, she still arouses some sympathy. In the fifth act, she is the pathetic old woman betrayed by child, ward, friends, and servants, all of whom she trusted.

Act-by-Act Comments

The biggest problems, however, for the director and actors of *The Way of the World* are still concerned with the lines and plot of the play. The play should be read a number of times until the links between the parts are clearly apparent. The lines must be understood--if the actors have difficulty determining the meaning of some lines, they must establish a meaning--for it is disastrous to mouth the words, hoping something will emerge. If the actors have established a meaning, they can work with it and establish an interpretation.

Act I

There is almost no action in this act and not even enough exposition to help the audience understand what is occurring; key exposition is withheld to the second act. It becomes the responsibility of the actors, therefore, to create an atmosphere that gives hints to the audience of the strained and twisted relationships that exist between the characters, the causes to be revealed later. Careful reading shows that there are ample opportunities in the lines.

Starting as early as the sixth line of the play, Fainall says, "You are thinking of something else now and play [at cards] too negligently." This appears to be a casual statement, but the logic of the play demands that it be pointed. The audience must be made aware that Mirabell does have something on his mind and that Fainall has a particularly unpleasant kind of sensitivity, a general distrust of others' motives. Mirabell is distracted, and Fainall suspects him.

Let us consider the seemingly innocent passage of arms between Mirabell and Fainall:

> *Fainall:* What, then, my wife was there?
>
> *Mirabell:* Yes, and Mrs. Marwood.

Fainall's question is not guileless; Mirabell's innocent addition, "and Mrs. Marwood," is actually a parry. Fainall implies Mirabell's interest in Mrs. Fainall. Mirabell gracefully reminds his antagonist that he too strays. Mirabell, with somewhat greater acidity, says later on: "I am indebted to your friend, *or your wife's friend,* Mrs. Marwood." "Or your wife's friend" might be accompanied by an ironic bow, or be spoken quizzically. In some way, attention should be directed to it. Fainall's response is more of the same verbal war under a smooth surface, but conversation becomes more snappish. The two men have moved some distance toward quarreling--although it would still not be overt--by the time Fainall retreats: "Fie, fie, friend! If you grow censorious I must leave you." It is important that the scene show underlying tensions and move to a point where it is wise for the men to break off the conversation.

Mirabell's speech about Millamant's faults, discussed earlier, is priceless. It is also a key speech for understanding the play. Mirabell must make the audience see here that under his urbanity, under his irony directed against himself, he is very much in love. At the end of it, Fainall's "Marry her, marry her!" is more than just casual cynicism; he talks as a man whose marriage can never be other than unsatisfactory.

Act II

The opening scene between Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood is further evidence that there is no such thing as mere chat in the play. The scene is a continuation of Act I in that tensions are present, but the audience is still not shown the cause. The women are obviously suspicious of each other; each is probing for the weak spot in the other while trying to reveal as little of herself as possible. It would seem that Mrs. Fainall draws first blood:

> *Mrs. Fainall:* Would thou wert married to Mirabell.
>
> *Mrs. Marwood:* Would I were!
>
> *Mrs. Fainall:* You change color.

The duel continues until Mrs. Marwood's speech: "Methinks you look a little pale--and now you flush again." Mrs. Fainall is saved further embarrassment by the entrance of others. It is obvious that the success of this scene depends on how adequately the women play their parts. Each speech is pointed. This kind of dueling continues in the passage between Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall. It must be clear from their speeches that mutual trust is not an ingredient of their love. Millamant's first entrance must be carefully prepared for, for her appearance must create an elaborate tableau. Here the director may let his imagination loose; the more stylized and the more theatrical the scene, the better.

Act III

There are ample clues to the acting of the role of Lady Wishfort: the style and rhythms of her speeches, the broken thoughts, and her passions that blow now hot, now cold. The actress must concern herself with developing business that matches the lines and the abrupt changes, for Lady Wishfort lives at the ends of her nerves:

> But art thou sure Sir Rowland will not fail to come? Or will he not fail when he does come? Will he be importunate, Foible, and push? For if he should not be importunate, I shall never break decorums. I shall die with confusion if I am forced to advance. Oh, no, I can never advance! I shall swoon if he should expect advances. No, I hope Sir Rowland is better bred than to put a lady to the necessity of breaking her forms. I won't be too coy, neither. I won't give him despair; but a little disdain is not amiss: a little scorn is alluring.

No two people will handle this speech in the same way, but it is possible to count twelve changes of mood while her reactions veer. Since Lady Wishfort's approach to the male of the species is based on fantasies of herself that bear no resemblance to reality, with each change of mood she sees herself in a new fantasy, and she acts each in turn: coy, simpering, clinging, arrogant, the young miss, the gracious lady, and the grand dame. As she poses, she might use her hand mirror as a prop as a Japanese actress uses a fan. It might be an interesting touch to show her going through the same poses in her scene with Sir Rowland in Act IV.

The scene between Mrs. Marwood and Millamant, like all scenes between women in this play, is a duel. It has an additional importance in supplying motivation for Mrs. Marwood's later behavior. The actress must make sure that this is clear to the audience. Mrs. Marwood overhears a great deal that she could use for purposes of mischief, but she must still be angered to the point where she will choose to use the information. Millamant offends her in a way she can't forgive; Millamant gloats, although charmingly, that Mirabell loves her and not Mrs. Marwood, and she gloats also that Marwood is "within a year or two as young; if you could but stay for me, I should overtake you." The scene moves to the point of Marwood's anger: "Your merry note may be changed sooner than you think." Now she is prepared for any villainy.

The scene between the brothers Witwoud is close to the farcical. It is important to see the basic good sense of Sir Wilfull and the basic shallowness of young Witwoud. No polished Restoration gentleman would ever be so gauche as to admit that he was ashamed of an elder brother. He would carry off the situation with what aplomb he could.

Act IV
This act is thematically unified by an almost exclusive concern with variation on the game of love. In three scenes, a man woos a woman. The differences between these proposals or near-proposals are the important things to develop. Sir Wilfull Witwoud is not a fool, but he is awed by the grace and aloofness of Millamant. The scene between Mirabell and Millamant is the most important single scene in the play. The burlesque love scene between Lady Wishfort and the spurious Sir Rowland is quite a different kind of comedy from the scene between Millamant and Sir Wilfull; both are poseurs, and both are very complacent about their success in their roles.

The proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant would have to be played so as to convey a sense of their sincerity under the conventional badinage. The passage might begin with a bow on Mirabell's part, courtly beyond the ordinary, and a deep curtsy on Millamant's, held long enough to make clear that important events are to take place. At the same time, the bow and curtsy are openings of a match between duelists. In a society and in a play where people do *not* manhandle each other, the movements toward and from each other become very important and significant. He might kiss her hand at the end of the scene and take his departure with a repetition of the opening elaborate bow and curtsy. A duel completed, without defeat for either duelist.

Between the proviso scene and the Lady Wishfort-Sir Rowland scene, there is a sort of interlude. All Lady Wishfort's guests come onstage from their session with wine after dinner. This drunken rout, for they are not a dignified group, serves as comic relief after the highly sophisticated wit of the proviso scene. At the same time, the scene constitutes additional commentary on the central subject matter of the act, Restoration love.

Millamant has just completed her part in the proviso scene. At the moment she is a symbol of the ideal of love in the period, unsentimental perhaps, but rational, dignified, and based on mutual esteem. She becomes the beleaguered goddess, buffeted by forces of an unpleasant realism. In a few minutes, Millamant is surrounded by two women, one the loser in the game of love, the other, love's travesty; and three men, one too shallow, one too close to the animal, and the third too much the realist.

At the beginning of the scene, she is alone with Mrs. Fainall, certainly an unsatisfactory support. Since the men, as they enter, are drunk and Lady Wishfort is temperamentally incapable of standing still, they move about her, frenetic, jerky, abrupt, and on the edge of the riotous. They barely avoid physical contact, that is, symbolic attack upon Millamant, who stands alone in the center. Movement about her starts when Petulant answers her question about the cause of the drunken quarrel: "You were the quarrel." Petulant presses his view of love later: "If I shall have my reward [for proclaiming Millamant's beauty], say so; if not, fight for your face the next time yourself." A moment later, he turns contemptuously on young Witwoud and expresses his views of both the cavalier *servente* and the romantic lover: "Carry your mistress's monkey a spider! Go, flea dogs, and read romances!" The last line of his speech is not addressed to young Witwoud--it would make no sense there. Instead it is spit out at Millamant as he walks past her to his exit: "I'll go to bed to my maid."

Lady Wishfort and the drunk Sir Wilfull now enter, and the attack on Millamant proceeds. Wine gives the knight courage to make the proposal he was too bashful for earlier. His address shows an attitude more magnanimous than Petulant's, but he is hardly the glowing lover: "But if you would have me marry my cousin, say the word and I'll do't. Wilfull will do't; that's the word." While Millamant stands frozen with distaste at this noble offer, Lady Wish-fort addresses her directly: "My nephew's a little overtaken, cousin, but 'tis with drinking your health." To this Lady Wishfort, with her usual wisdom and taste, adds (for she still hopes for a match here): "O' my word, you are obliged to him." Sir Wilfull then repeats his offer and makes this speech directly to Millamant: "A match or no match, cousin with the hard name...," and now, having looked at her carefully:

> Aunt, Wilfull will dot. If she has her maidenhead, let her look to't: if she has not, let her keep her own counsel in the meantime, and cry out at the nine months' end.

This attitude on Sir Wilfull's part even includes a left-handed compliment, but it is not likely that Millamant will thank him for it. At this moment Sir Wilfull, Petulant, and Lady Wishfort are visible insults to everything she stands for as an individual and as symbol of the gracious state that love and marriage can mean. Her exit is almost a flight, conducted with whatever shreds of dignity she can muster: "Your pardon, madam, I can stay no longer

As she leaves, the grouping changes, for there is no longer a focal point of attention. Everyone relaxes: Lady Wishfort is again the garrulous old woman, scolding her drunken nephew; Sir Wilfull is merely the harmless, noisy drunkard.

But the ironic commentary has been made. The proviso scene presented a triumphant reconciliation of love and worldliness; now we have seen the way of the world.

Act V

The danger in the presentation of the fifth act has been mentioned: It is too easy for Fainall to dominate the scene to the point where Mirabell appears the typical juvenile, personally inept but a worthy inheritor of the good will of the gods. Mirabell is not such a juvenile; in this play, our hero is victorious only because he is the superior plotter. He understands even better than Fainall the way of the world. In the encounters between the two men in this act, Mirabell must be the more assured: Fainall must somehow look busy, a little over-anxious.

Lady Wishfort is torn between hurt vanity, love of money, love for her daughter, and considerable disillusionment. Everyone on the stage has betrayed or is betraying her--her daughter, her son-in-law, her best friend Mrs. Marwood, and her maid. She is buffeted from all sides. This should be visually evident as she moves or makes gestures of movement toward one person after another.

Let us look at the act, starting with the entrance together of Lady Wishfort and Mrs. Marwood. There are pathetic and ironic gestures accompanying Lady Wishfort's first sentence: "Oh, my dear friend, how can I enumerate the benefits that I have received from your goodness?" When she proceeds by her own kind of logic to the end of the speech--"Let us leave the world, and retire by ourselves and be shepherdesses"--she is firmly rebuffed: "Let us first despatch the affair in hand, madam." When she next moves toward her daughter in a blend of maternal love and maternal reproach, Mrs. Fainall, pretending injured innocence, replies formally and coldly: "I don't understand your ladyship." When Lady Wishfort thinks she sees a glimmer of hope that the accusations are libelous, Mrs. Marwood attacks in a bombardment of long speeches under which Lady Wishfort cowers. On Fainall's entrance, she begs for some time to consider and meets the same stony response. She is pathetically hopeful when Mirabell tells her he has a solution.

It should be noted that the nature of her lines does not change through all this. She is still vain, self-deluded, and comic. She is distracted by talk of a hypothetical marriage (hers): She still feels and barely covers an undignified emotional excitement when Mirabell appears. But throughout, situation, movement, and gestures give ample opportunity to arouse a mixed response of pity and laughter in the audience.

THE REPUTATION OF RESTORATION DRAMA

No works that are part of the history of art or literature stand unencumbered by their past. We do not look at Homer or Shakespeare as if they were written yesterday; their histories are a part of them for the reader. The history of opinion concerning Restoration drama is of special interest; its "immortality" has been a subject for debate to a point where it has overshadowed all esthetic considerations.

The attack on Restoration drama was, to start with, part of the general attack on the theater. The solid citizenry of England always disapproved. Although Shakespeare's theater was "universal" in the sense that the audience came from all economic groups, it was still an iniquitous institution for many Englishmen. Gosson's *School of Abuse,* written in 1579, was primarily an attack on plays; Bishop Prynne (mentioned in Act III of *The Way of the World*) abused the theater in the 1630s and lost his ears for his pains. The grounds of these attacks were many: the playhouses were dens of iniquity; the players were immoral; the hangers-on were profligate; and apprentices were encouraged to play truant. Playwrights attacked religion, or morality, or portrayed indecent events, or used profanity. Clergy were portrayed unsympathetically: vice was approved. Sometimes the plays were attacked on the more philosophical grounds that the entire pretense involved in acting was evil. The Puritans closed the theaters as one of their first acts in office; Charles reopened them as one of *his* first acts in office.

By 1700, the attack was once again in full cry, this time in Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (also mentioned in Act III of *The Way of the World*). The first edition appeared in 1698; others, enlarged and presumably improved, followed. The controversy continued for about thirty years. The point is, however, that the controversy about the morality of Restoration drama never ended, for the matter is still debated. Since the critics and moralists do not always talk of the same thing when they use the term "immorality," it is worthwhile to consider some of its different meanings in relation to the drama.

A play may be considered immoral because it contains immoral language or behavior; because the wicked characters are not punished; or because the attitude of the dramatist is felt to be immoral--he may not sufficiently disapprove what is presumably wicked, or sufficiently approve the good; he may make the evil cause more attractive.

The first two accusations may be answered by the statement that the author may be denouncing that which he describes: He may be disapproving strongly of immoral language or behavior, and the fact that the wicked are not always punished may be his point--and precisely that which he deplores. Such plays are then immoral in one sense, but moral in another. As for the third accusation, one must consider artistic integrity. A work that may seem immoral by any standard may still be what this particular artist should write. On the other hand, an author may write a book where no immoral activities are described, where the wicked are punished, where no approval of vice is shown, and yet the book may be a complete lie. A deliberate falsification of the writer's own view of the world can be considered highly immoral.

The nineteenth century wrote about Restoration comedy with some difficulty. Charles Lamb thought that the world described was a fairyland and that, therefore, the behavior described should offend no one, for it was not the behavior of real people. His essay is itself interesting literature, but his case does not stand up under examination. Macaulay attacked the Restoration dramatists, especially Wycherley, for "making vice attractive." But surely Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* does not make vice attractive. Frequently the attitude of the admirer of Restoration comedy is that he loves the plays despite their immorality, or, partly following Lamb, feels they are amoral; that is, considerations of morality do not apply to them.

It can be argued that the writer in a society cannot be amoral. And it would further appear that the term "morality" can involve so many distinctions that it cannot be usefully discussed. One might say: Let the

reader enjoy the plays, examine the artistry and artisanship, and ignore morality. Or better, let him try to read carefully and to achieve some empathy with the artist in the milieu in which he lived, perhaps thrived, at once an active member and artistic observer. The reader may then begin to have some feeling for the ambiguous and overlapping connotations of a title such as *The Way of the World.*

ESSAY TOPICS AND REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the attitudes of nineteenth-century critics to Restoration comedy.

2. Select any of these statements as a basis of a discussion of *The Way of the World*. You may agree or disagree.
   a. It was a world where elegance was thin cloak to disguise preoccupation with money.
   b. Vanity and selfishness are the bases of all action in *The Way of the World*.
   c. The world described is the world which Congreve knew; the characters approved it, the author accepted it.

3. Discuss one of these statements:
   a. The genius of Millamant is that in her we love all the characteristics that we should normally deplore.
   b. Mirabell shows a world-wisdom that is close to world-weariness.
   c. The fantasy world of Lady Wishfort is the clue to all her behavior.

4. Discuss ideal love, as Congreve saw it, and compare it with the romantic or sentimentalized love typical of the nineteenth century.

5. Discuss the double standard of morality in *The Way of the World*.

6. Compare moral attitudes in this play with Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* or Coward's *Private Lives*.

7. Discuss what you might consider the structural faults in Congreve's handling of the plot and counterplots in this play.

8. Speculate on the possible reasons for the lack of immediate popular success of *The Way of the World* by comparing it with Congreve's plays *The Old Bachelor* and *Love for Love,* both very successful.

9. Discuss humour and affectation in the characters in this play.

10. Using examples other than those used in this volume of Notes, discuss style, wit, and irony in some of the main characters.

11. Consider the characteristics of Congreve's wit, and look for correspondences with wit in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.

12. Compare the wit in this play with that in one of the following:
    a. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*
    b. Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*
    c. Coward's *Design for Living*

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