

## *A Critical Summary of 'The Way of the World'*

### ACT I

(The Scene is a Chocolate-House)

**Mirabell had to leave the party rather early.** Mirabell and Fainall rise from a game of cards. Mirabell is in a grave mood, while Fainall is quite gay. Fainall asks Mirabell if the latter quarrelled with his beloved, Millamant, last night. Mirabell replies that there was no quarrel but that he had to part from Millamant a little too early because her aunt, old Lady Wishfort, was somewhat averse to his presence. Fainall informs Mirabell that last night was one of the cabal nights\* of the women, and that only Witwoud and Petulant were permitted to attend these gatherings.

**Mirabell's false pretence of love to Lady Wishfort.** Mirabell is in love with Millamant and would like to marry her. But Millamant cannot marry of her own free will. She will lose half of her fortune if she does not obtain the consent of her aunt, Lady Wishfort, to her marriage. But Mirabell has already annoyed Lady Wishfort. He falsely pretended love to the aunt, while actually he was in love with the niece. Mirabell's false pretence was revealed to Lady Wishfort by Mrs. Marwood.

**Mirabell's scheme.** Mirabell has prepared a scheme the full significance of which will become clear to us later in the play. Here we only learn that Mirabell has directed his servant, Waitwell, to get married without delay and that Waitwell has complied with the directive. Mirabell tells Fainall that he loves Millamant in spite of all her faults. Fainall suggests that Mirabell should get married to Millamant in order to become as well acquainted with her charms as he is with her faults.

**Sir Wilfull, Witwoud's half brother, in London.** A messenger brings a letter for Witwoud. The letter contains information that Witwoud's half-brother, Sir Wilfull, has arrived in London. Sir Wilfull is Lady Wishfort's nephew. This means that,

\* A cabal-night was a private evening party attended by a small group of women who generally talked of scandals and indulged in social intrigue.



if Mirabell marries Millamant, he will have to treat Sir Wilfull as a cousin. Sir Wilfull, it is learnt, has come to London in order to prepare himself for a journey abroad. Witwoud is not happy to know that Sir Wilfull has come to London. He looks upon Sir Wilfull as a fool and would not like to own him. Talking of his friend Petulant, Witwoud says that his chief fault is that he never speaks the truth and that "he will lie like a chambermaid or a woman of quality's porter."

**Three women to see Petulant.** A coachman comes and says that three women are waiting in the coach outside to meet Petulant. Witwoud remarks that two of these must be "fasting strumpets" and the third a "bawd troubled with wind". Witwoud informs Mirabell and Fainall that Petulant is in the habit of hiring women to come and ask for him at this chocolate-house in order to create an impression that he is very much in demand with the ladies. Petulant enters and, on being told that some women are waiting for him, pretends to be fed up with women's chasing him. But Fainall sees through the pretence and remarks that Petulant has let the women go away in order to be able to brag to Millamant next time that, for her sake, he shuns the company of the whole fair sex.

**Mirabell's uncle.** Mirabell then learns from Petulant and Witwoud that Lady Wishfort, in order to revenge herself upon Mirabell, plans to bring about a matrimonial alliance between her niece and Mirabell's uncle.\* Witwoud says that, if Lady Wishfort succeeds in this plan, Mirabell would lose Millamant. (However, Lady Wishfort is not serious about this plan).

**Teasing ladies.** Mirabell and Fainall prepare for a walk on the Mall. Witwoud and Petulant also decide to go to the Mall in order to tease the ladies with their satirical and vulgar remarks. Mirabell says that they should feel ashamed of themselves for causing embarrassment to the ladies.

**Critical comments. (1) Plot.** So far as the plot is concerned, the following are the main points emerging from our perusal of Act I—

(i) Mirabell found it necessary to withdraw, against his own wishes, from a party at which Millamant was present.

(ii) Millamant will forfeit half of her fortune if she marries a man not approved by her aunt, Lady Wishfort.

(iii) Mirabell is in love with Millamant and would like to marry her. He falsely made love to Lady Wishfort, an old woman of fifty-five, in order to please the aunt as a means of marrying the niece.

(iv) Mirabell's trick was revealed to Lady Wishfort by Mrs.

\* We shall learn later that the uncle is a fictitious person, and that it is Mirabell's servant, Waitwell, who impersonates the uncle.

Marwood. Since then Lady Wishfort has been feeling deeply annoyed with Mirabell. It would also seem that Mrs. Marwood has a secret liking for Mirabell who, however, has shown no interest in her. Mrs. Marwood too has thus a grudge against Mirabell.

(v) Mirabell has some secret plan which involves Waitwell.\*

(vi) Lady Wishfort too has a plan. In order to avenge herself upon Mirabell, she is thinking of bringing about a matrimonial alliance between Millamant and Mirabell's uncle.†

(vii) Witwoud's half-brother, Sir Wilfull Witwoud, has arrived in London from the country.

Thus we see that two intrigues have been set afoot in the opening Act. One is Mirabell's secret plan the full significance of which has not yet been revealed to us. The second is Lady Wishfort's plan to bring about a matrimonial alliance between Millamant and Mirabell's uncle.\*\* In this connection, we should remember that a Restoration comedy of manners was also a comedy of intrigue, the intrigues generally revolving round love-affairs and marriages.

(2) **Characterization.** We meet all the principal characters, with the exception of Millamant and Lady Wishfort, in the opening Act. Enough light is thrown on all the characters for us to form an adequate idea about each of them; and, although we do not actually meet Millamant and Lady Wishfort here, we learn some of the essential facts about them.

Although Mirabell is the hero of the play, he is not without his disagreeable features. His making love to the aunt in order to throw dust into her eyes as to his real purpose, which is to win the niece, is an offence against good manners and decency. Furthermore, he has a secret plan up his sleeve which, as we shall find later, does not do him any credit. He calls this plan "a matter of some sort of mirth", but we certainly cannot approve of it. Even in his pretence of making love to Lady Wishfort, he went too far and stopped short only of going to bed with her. As he himself puts it: "The devil's in it, if an old woman is to be flattered further, unless a man should endeavour downright personally to debauch her; and that my virtue forbade me." There seems no doubt that

\* According to this plan, Waitwell will impersonate Mirabell's uncle and will approach Lady Wishfort as her suitor.

† i.e., Waitwell whose real identity is not known to Lady Wishfort.

\*\* Who Mirabell's uncle is we do not know at this stage. Later we shall learn that this is a fictitious uncle, and that Waitwell, Mirabell's man-servant, is made by Mirabell to impersonate his uncle in pursuance of his secret plan to which a reference has been made above. Thus we find that there is a close inter-connection between Mirabell's secret plan and Lady Wishfort's plan, also kept secret by her but disclosed to Mirabell by Witwoud and Petulant who are in Lady Wishfort's confidence. Lady Wishfort has said that she would bring about a matrimonial alliance between her niece and Mirabell's uncle but inwardly she would herself like to marry this uncle.



he is deeply in love with Millamant, though he describes his passion for her in an off-hand and witty manner. Her follies, he says, "are so natural, or so artful, that they become her." He has become as familiar with her faults as he is with his own frailties and can think of those faults without feeling displeased.

We do not learn much about the real character of Fainall in this Act, except that he can talk wittily. "The coldness of a losing gamester lessens the pleasure of the winner," he says to Mirabell with reference to the game of cards they have been playing. Fainall rightly guesses that Mrs. Marwood is annoyed with Mirabell because he rejected her advances to him.

Witwoud and Petulant are Millamant's followers, that is, her admirers and suitors. However, we are not supposed to take their adoration of Millamant seriously. Witwoud frankly says that Millamant laughs at Petulant and that, so far as he himself is concerned, he admires her for fashion's sake and that he will never break his heart for her.

It is interesting to note how Witwoud makes fun of Petulant behind his back. When pressed to reveal what he thinks to be Petulant's chief fault, he says that Petulant never speaks the truth at all. He gives a satirical description of the manner in which Petulant tries to attract attention by hiring women to come and ask for him. These two friends are in the habit of making ironical and vulgar comments on passing women. They are, too, the favourites of women and are admitted to attend their secret gatherings on their cabal-nights where the women come together like "the coroner's inquest, to sit upon the murdered reputations of the week."

Petulant shows certain mannerisms in his talk. An expression that he frequently employs is: "What-d' ye-call-'ems". Other expressions that he commonly employs are: "Let that pass", "All's one for that". But Petulant is not without wit. When the three women who came to see him have gone away, he says: "Enough, let them trundle. Anger helps complexion, saves paint." Witwoud admires him for being "as quick as a fire in a frosty morning". Petulant takes a woman's blushing "either for a sign of guilt or ill-breeding."

(3) **Wit.** One common characteristic of almost all the principal characters whom we meet here is wit. A few specimens of their wit are given below:

**Fainall** (i) I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune than I'd make love to a woman who under-valued the loss of her reputation.

(ii) Last night was one of their cabal-nights.....where they come together like the coroner's inquest, to sit upon the murdered reputations of the week.

(iii) No matter for that; 'tis for the honour of England that Europe should know we have blockheads of all ages.

(iv) 'Tis better to trade with a little loss, than to be quite eaten up with being over-stocked.

(v) Witwoud grows by the knight, like a medlar grafted on a crab. One will melt in your mouth, and t'other set your teeth on edge; one is all pulp, and the other all core.

**Mirabell.** (i) I did as much as man could, with any reasonable conscience. I proceeded to the very last act of flattery with her ..... and that my virtue forbade me.

(ii) And for a discerning man, somewhat too passionate a lover; for I like her with all her faults; nay, like her for her faults ..... in a little time longer I shall like 'em as well.

(iii) I wonder there is not an act of parliament to save the credit of the nation, and prohibit the exportation of fools.

(iv) He (Witwoud) is a fool with a good memory and some few scraps of other folks' wit.

(v) Have a care of such apologies, Witwoud; for I never knew a fool but he affected to complain, either of the spleen or his memory.

**Witwoud.** Witwoud, it has been said, is not a truemwit, but a would-be wit. But even he has witty moments. He specializes in "similitudes".

(i) He has brought me a letter from the fool my brother, as heavy as a panegyric in a funeral sermon, or a copy of commendatory verses from one poet to another.

(ii) A wit should no more be sincere than a woman constant; one argues a decay of parts, as t'other of beauty.

(iii) He will lie like a chamber-maid, or a woman of quality's porter.

(iv) Aye, aye, friendship without freedom is as dull as love without enjoyment, or wine without toasting.

(v) Oh, rare Petulant; Thou art as quick as a fire in a frosty morning.

Even the maid-servant at the Chocolate-House gives evidence of a talent for witty remarks. When asked the time, she says: "Turned of the last canonical hour, sir." (The canonical hours, when marriages could legally be performed, were from eight in the morning to twelve noon. The maid-servant means that it is past twelve noon.)

## ACT II

(The Scene is St. James's Park)

**Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood pretend a dislike for men.** Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are talking about the inconstancy of men. Both assert that they hate men-folk, but in this



they are both hypocritical because both of them blush at the very mention of Mirabell's name, thus showing that they both have a soft corner for him.

**The distance between Mr. and Mrs. Fainall.** Mr. Fainall and Mirabell arrive. Mrs. Fainall points out that, if she and her husband are seen together in public, people would start some malicious gossip about them. She therefore moves away, taking Mirabell along with her.

**The quarrel between Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall.** Mrs. Marwood is now left alone with Mr. Fainall. She tells him that his wife is in love with Mirabell. But Mr. Fainall replies that they are both (Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood) in love with Mirabell. Mr. Fainall thus accuses not only his own wife of infidelity but also Mrs. Marwood who professes love to him. Mrs. Marwood says that she hates Mirabell and loves only Mr. Fainall. But Mr. Fainall replies that her resentment against Mirabell is due to the latter's neglect of her. Mrs. Marwood accuses Mr. Fainall of ingratitude towards her and threatens to expose the love-affair that has been going on between her and him. Mr. Fainall says that he is in love with her, and that he got married only in order to take possession of his wife's wealth which he would like to spend lavishly on Mrs. Marwood. He also holds Mrs. Marwood guilty of a blunder in having told Lady Wishfort the truth about Mirabell's intentions. Mirabell falsely made love to Lady Wishfort in order to win Millamant as his wife. In other words, he courted the aunt in order to get married to the niece. But Mrs. Marwood revealed Mirabell's real purpose to Lady Wishfort who thereupon became extremely hostile to Mirabell. If Mirabell had succeeded in getting secretly married to Millamant, Lady Wishfort would have deprived her (Millamant) of half her fortune for marrying against her aunt's wishes. That wealth would then have fallen to the share of Lady Wishfort's daughter (Mrs. Fainall), and Mr. Fainall would have become a rich man. Mrs. Marwood is by now almost in tears because of this quarrel with her lover (Mr. Fainall), but the quarrel is composed, and the two are reconciled.

**A confidential talk between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall.** (Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall are having a private talk. Mrs. Fainall asks him why he got her married to Mr. Fainall. He tells her that that was the only way she could have got out of her difficult position. She thought that she had become pregnant as a result of her love-affair with Mirabell, and the only method of saving her reputation was for her to marry somebody, this somebody being Mr. Fainall. Mirabell then takes Mrs. Fainall into confidence regarding his secret plan. He has got his servant, Waitwell, married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. Waitwell will impersonate Mirabell's uncle and offer himself as a suitor to Lady Wishfort who will be only too glad to agree to the match. At the right moment Mirabell will offer to release Lady Wishfort from the grip of a man who is already married. But

he will lay down his condition, namely that Lady Wishfort should give her approval to his marrying Millamant, and Lady Wishfort will have to agree. Mirabell also tells Mrs. Fainall that Lady Wishfort's plan to have Millamant married to Mirabell's uncle is only a cover for her own desire to marry that man, and that this plan was conceived at the suggestion of Foible who acted under Mirabell's instructions.

**Millamant scolds Witwoud.** Millamant now appears on the scene. She is accompanied by Witwoud and Mincing (her maid). Millamant scolds Witwoud for indulging in his favourite trick of using a similitude (or, comparison) every time he opens his lips. She then asks Mirabell if he was annoyed with her last night for her sending him away from the party, and hastens to say that she feels happy if she can cause him some pain. Witwoud and Mrs. Fainall leave, and the two lovers are left alone to talk.

**Witty exchanges between Mirabell and Millamant.** Mirabell deploras the fact that Millamant encourages fools to crowd around her while trying to keep him at a distance. Millamant replies that a conversation with fools is good for her health. She then says that she cannot have him as her husband because they will often disagree. Mirabell remarks that a woman cannot be won with plain dealing and sincerity. Millamant calls him "sententious Mirabell" and says that his love-sick face excites her laughter. Mirabell implores her to listen to him seriously for a moment, and she says that she will not hear him talk about Foible's marriage and the expected success of his plot. As she leaves, Mirabell compares her to a whirlwind and himself to a man who lives in a windmill.

**Foible has learnt the role she is to play.** Waitwell and Foible come and inform Mirabell that his plan is likely to develop in accordance with his wishes. Foible has already spoken to Lady Wishfort regarding Sir Rowland, the supposed uncle of Mirabell. Foible also tells Mirabell that she has taken Millamant in confidence regarding his plan. At this time Mrs. Marwood passes by, and Foible is alarmed because Mrs. Marwood will go and tell Lady Wishfort that she saw Foible speaking intimately to Mirabell (whom Lady Wishfort regards as her enemy). Foible then hurries away, and Waitwell says that it will be difficult for him now to think of himself as a servant when he has already begun to look upon himself as a knight (Sir Rowland). Married as he is, he may never be his own man again, he says.

**Critical Comments.** (1) Plot. As regards the plot, the following points emerge from our reading of Act II :

(i) Both Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are in love with Mirabell. But while Mrs. Fainall was at one time Mirabell's mistress, Mrs. Marwood has had no luck with him.

(ii) Mrs. Marwood nurses a grudge against Mirabell, as he did not reciprocate her love.



(iii) By exposing Mirabell's real intentions to Lady Wishfort, Mrs. Marwood ruined Mr. Fainall's chances of acquiring Millamant's fortune through his wife (who is Lady Wishfort's daughter).

(iv) The relations between Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Fainall are far from cordial. Mr. Fainall is in love with Mrs. Marwood, while Mrs. Fainall has been Mirabell's mistress.

(v) Mrs. Fainall got married to Mr. Fainall at the suggestion of Mirabell, because she thought that she had become pregnant by Mirabell and it was necessary that she should marry somebody in order to protect her good name.

(vi) The purpose of Mirabell's new scheme is now made clear. Through Waitwell (a supposed uncle of Mirabell), Mirabell would acquire a hold over Lady Wishfort whose consent he badly needs in order to marry Millamant. Mirabell has confided his scheme to Mrs. Fainall who is now his ally.

(vii) Foible, who is now married to Waitwell, has taken Millamant in her confidence regarding Mirabell's scheme.

(viii) Mrs. Marwood has detected Foible talking to Mirabell and is likely to go and inform Lady Wishfort about it.

(2) **Characterization.** In this Act we meet Millamant, the heroine of the play. She gives evidence of a sparkling wit. She snubs Witwoud for indulging in too many similitudes. She deplors the fact that people do not know the art of writing letters. She uses letters (only those written in verse) to pin up her hair. She teases Mirabell, saying that she loves to give pain because the capacity to give pain gives her a sense of power. She will not have Mirabell as a husband because she will find it dull to act always by his advice and tedious to be told by him of her faults. She calls him "sententious Mirabell" and urges him not to look grave like Solomon at the dividing of the child in an old tapestry hanging.

Mrs. Marwood, we find, is a vicious woman. She would like to keep Mr. Fainall in his grip, while trying to settle scores with Mirabell who rejected her advances. At the first sign of Mr. Fainall's breaking loose from her, she threatens to reveal his secret love-affair with her to his wife.

Fainall shows himself as a worldly-wise man. He is after his wife's wealth. That is one reason why he has been tolerating his wife's preference for Mirabell's company. The other reason is that, while his wife is busy with Mirabell, he can have his pleasure in Mrs. Marwood's arms. But he has sense enough to understand that Mrs. Marwood has taken him as her lover after having been rejected by Mirabell. However, he apologizes to her at once when he finds that she may do some damage to him.

Mrs. Fainall frankly shows her dislike for her husband. She is still in love with Mirabell though now she is more of an ally for him than a mistress. She co-operates with Mirabell in his scheme

against her mother, Lady Wishfort, and even joins him in making fun of her mother: "I believe my lady will do anything to get a husband." She would also co-operate with Mirabell in the latter's effort to win Millamant as his wife with her fortune intact.

Mirabell is seen actively pursuing his plan. He knows how to handle Waitwell and Foible. He can keep them in good humour by making jokes with them and by bribing them.

Witwoud shows his talent for "similitudes" which are, however, irritating to Millamant. "Like moths about a candle", "as a favourite in disgrace", "as a physician of a good air", "like a screen before a great fire"—indeed, Witwoud is never at a loss for a similitude. After he has been snubbed by Millamant, he takes his revenge when she herself employs a similitude. He says to her: "Madam, truce with your similitudes".

(3) **Wit.** Wit in conversation continues to be the keynote of the play even in this Act. Some more examples of the wit of various characters are given below:

**Mirabell.** (i) Yes, I think the good lady (Wishfort) would marry anything that resembled a man, though 'twere no more than what a butler could pinch out of a napkin.

(ii) An old woman's appetite is depraved like that of a girl. 'Tis the green sickness of a second childhood.

(iii) Here she (Millamant) comes, i'faith, full sail, with her fan spread and her streamers out, and a shoal of fools for tenders.

(iv) For beauty is the lover's gift; 'tis he bestows your charms, your glass is all a cheat.

(v) A fellow that lives in a windmill has not a more whimsical dwelling than the heart of a man that is lodged in a woman. There is no point in the compass to which they cannot turn, and by which they are not turned; and by one as well as another for motion, not method, is their occupation.

**Millamant.** (i) One's cruelty is one's power; and when one parts with one's cruelty, one parts with one's power, and when one has parted with that, I fancy one's old and ugly.

(ii) Beauty the lover's gift! Lord, what is a lover, that it can give? Why, one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases; and then, if one pleases, one makes more.

(iii) One no more owes one's beauty to a lover than one's wit to an echo.

**Witwoud.** (i) Pray, madam, do you pin up your hair with all your letters? I find I must keep copies.

(ii) Why, you make no more of making of lovers, madam, than of making so many card-matches.

(iii) But I know a lady that loves talking so incessantly, she



won't give an echo fair play; she has that everlasting rotation of tongue, that an echo must wait till she dies, before it can catch her last words.

### ACT III

(The Scene is a Room in Lady Wishfort's House)

**Lady Wishfort fussy about her make-up.** Lady Wishfort is at her dressing-table. She is making a liberal use of paint and powder to beautify herself for the anticipated visit of Sir Rowland. She is scolding her maid, Peg, for her inefficiency and addresses her as "puppet" and "thou wooden thing upon wires".

**Mrs. Marwood tells Lady Wishfort about Foible's meeting with Mirabell.** Mrs. Marwood arrives and she informs Lady Wishfort that she has seen Foible talking to Mirabell in the park. The information has a disturbing effect on Lady Wishfort who thinks that Foible might have revealed to Mirabell her plan to secure Sir Rowland (the supposed uncle of Mirabell) as her husband.

**Foible's false report to Lady Wishfort.** Foible now comes and gives her an imaginary account of how Sir Rowland went into raptures over Lady Wishfort's picture and kissed it repeatedly. Lady Wishfort asks what Foible was doing in the park with Mirabell. Foible quickly invents an explanation. She says that she could not help entering into a discussion with Mirabell because the latter spoke in disgraceful terms about Lady Wishfort. Lady Wishfort feels enraged to hear the insulting language Mirabell is reported to have used about her and threatens to teach him a lesson. It is a great comfort to her to think of Sir Rowland's expected visit and she asks Foible if Sir Rowland will "importune"\* her in order to save her from the embarrassment of having to violate "decorums."\*\*

**Mrs. Fainall in Mirabell's confidence.** Mrs. Fainall comes to Lady Wishfort's house and speaks to Foible. (Mrs. Fainall is Lady Wishfort's daughter). Mrs. Fainall tells Foible that she has been taken by Mirabell into his confidence as regards his plot against Lady Wishfort. Foible tells her how she was able to defend herself against Mrs. Marwood's exposing to Lady Wishfort her meeting with Mirabell in the park.

**Sir Wilfull is expected.** Mrs. Marwood has overheard some of Foible's disparaging remarks about her and, in a soliloquy, gives vent to her rage. Lady Wishfort comes and tells Mrs. Marwood that she is expecting her nephew, Sir Wilfull, to arrive any moment. Mrs. Marwood casually suggests that Sir Wilfull would be a fit match for Millamant.

**Mrs. Marwood's suggestion to Millamant.** Millamant tells Mrs. Marwood that she is fed up with the company of Petulant and Witwoud. Mrs. Marwood suggests that Millamant should get rid of suitors like Petulant and Witwoud by openly declaring that she has decided to marry Mirabell.\* Millamant rebukes Mrs. Marwood for having disclosed the secret of her love-affair with Mirabell to her aunt, Lady Wishfort.

**The arrival of Sir Wilfull.** Petulant and Witwoud now join Millamant and Mrs. Marwood, and there is an exchange of witty remarks between the two men. Millamant leaves, and Sir Wilfull arrives. Sir Wilfull, being a resident of the countryside, appears somewhat boorish to Petulant and Witwoud; and Petulant, trying to make fun of him, is snubbed by him. Sir Wilfull is Witwoud's half-brother, but Witwoud gives no sign of recognizing him. When, after a few moments, Sir Wilfull realizes that Witwoud is there, right beside him, and has yet not greeted him, he gets furious and rebukes Witwoud in strong terms. Witwoud tamely explains that it is not the fashion in the city for people to recognize their relations from the country. Mrs. Marwood asks Sir Wilfull if he intends to travel abroad. Sir Wilfull replies that he does intend to go abroad but only after he has picked up some French which would be needed for purposes of conversation in foreign lands.

**Lady Wishfort greets her nephew.** Lady Wishfort enters and greets her nephew, Sir Wilfull. Sir Wilfull tells her that his half-brother, Witwoud, had refused to recognize him on the ground that it would have been against city manners. Lady Wishfort explains that Witwoud is a rallier, a wit, and that a wit is a person who makes fun of his best friends.

**Sir Wilfull wishes to take off his boots.** Dinner is announced, and Sir Wilfull asks for a pair of slippers so that he can take off his boots. Lady Wishfort tells him that boots are not to be taken off in a drawing-room and apologizes to the others for her nephew's want of breeding.

**Mrs. Marwood's schemes, and Mr. Fainall's acceptance of them.** Mrs. Marwood tells Mr. Fainall she overheard Foible speaking to Mrs. Fainall. Mr. Fainall is outraged to learn that his wife has been "cuckolding"† him and that Foible is playing the role of a match-maker,\*\* She then suggests a device by which Mr. Fainall

\* If Millamant marries Mirabell under the present circumstances, it will be against Lady Wishfort's wishes. Millamant would, in that case, forfeit half of her fortune which depends on Lady Wishfort's pleasure. That fortune would then go to Lady Wishfort's daughter, Mrs. Fainall, with the consequence that it would belong to Mr. Fainall and thus, indirectly, to Mrs. Marwood.

† has been cuckolding him—has been unfaithful to him (by carrying on a love-affair with Mirabell).

\*\* match-maker—Foible is acting as a go-between in order to bring about a matrimonial alliance between Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland. But we know the real purpose of Foible. And Mrs. Marwood has also come to know it (by overhearing Foible's talk with Mrs. Fainall) and will now tell it to Fainall.

\* importune her—court her; urge her to accept his suit.

\*\* to violate decorums—Lady Wishfort means that, if Sir Rowland does not make advances to her, it will be necessary for her to take the initiative. If a lady takes the initiative, it will mean a violation of the established or accepted code.



can still acquire Millamant's fortune. She will write an anonymous letter revealing to Lady Wishfort the fact that Sir Rowland is an impostor. Let Mr. Fainall at that psychological moment threaten to divorce his wife (Lady Wishfort's daughter) on the ground of her infidelity. Lady Wishfort will be so distracted by both rage and grief that she will agree to any terms and conditions. Mr. Fainall agrees to this strategy to force Lady Wishfort to sacrifice her niece's fortune which, in this way, will come into his hands as a price for his not divorcing an unfaithful wife. Mr. Fainall also reveals that he has already acquired the best part of his wife's existing estate by means of a trick.

**Critical comments. (1) Plot.** The following developments are to be noted in Act III :

(i) Mrs. Marwood, as was to be expected, reports Foible's meeting with Mirabell in the park to Lady Wishfort.

(ii) Foible tells Lady Wishfort that Sir Rowland adores her and will visit her as a suitor.

(iii) Mrs. Fainall and Foible exchange confidences, and Foible speaks disparagingly to Mrs. Fainall about Mrs. Marwood.

(iv) Mrs. Marwood overhears the disparaging remarks of Foible and gets enraged.

(v) Millamant is fed up with the company of Petulant and Witwoud. But Mrs. Marwood is even more exasperating to her.

(vi) Sir Wilfull, nephew to Lady Wishfort, arrives from the country on a visit. Witwoud, his half-brother, pretends not to recognize him.

(vii) Mrs. Marwood suggests to her lover, Mr. Fainall, a plan by which he can acquire Millamant's share of the wealth. Mr. Fainall is to threaten Lady Wishfort's daughter with divorce, while Mrs. Marwood will anonymously write a letter to Lady Wishfort informing her about Sir Rowland's imposture.

The plot has become even more complicated in Act III.

(2) **Characterization.** Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall show themselves to be utterly unscrupulous. They would go to any length to attain their objective (namely, Millamant's wealth which is more or less at Lady Wishfort's disposal). Mr. Fainall would not mind his wife continuing as a mistress to Mirabell, while Mrs. Marwood would be content as a mistress to Mr. Fainall, provided Millamant's fortune comes into Mr. Fainall's hands. Mr. Fainall's acquisitiveness is seen also in already having acquired the larger part of his wife's estate. Thus we find both Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall painted in dark colours.

We meet Lady Wishfort for the first time in this Act. We feel amused to find this old lady of fifty-five, getting ready to receive a suitor. She is very fastidious about her make-up and her appearance,

and feels enraged to hear that anybody should refer to her as a superannuated woman. She is aware of the danger which she faces as a result of Mirabell's hostility towards her and therefore easily believes the story Foible has invented about Mirabell's insulting comments on her. Lady Wishfort amuses us also by her anxiety as to the manner in which Sir Rowland will deal with her. Will he be "importunate" and will he thus enable her to "save decorums"? Lady Wishfort is a cordial person and greets all her visitors with due courtesy and warmth. She welcomes her nephew, Sir Wilfull and offers him a drink as he may be feeling tired after her journey. She treats Mrs. Marwood with special consideration and values her advice greatly. But she shows a sharp tongue when provoked or annoyed.

The mutual relations of Petulant and Witwoud are further revealed to us in this Act. They are fond of entering into discussions with each other, partly agreeing with each other but mostly disagreeing, and even quarrelling. It is interesting to find Witwoud refusing to acknowledge his own half-brother Sir Wilfull just because the latter is not a townsman and lives in the country. Both Petulant and Witwoud appear here in a most unfavourable light. Witwoud encourages Petulant to make fun of Sir Wilfull who, however, proves more than a match for both of them. Sir Wilfull rebukes Witwoud for having turned into a fop over the years, and he snubs Petulant when Petulant observes that Sir Wilfull will go on a voyage if the wind "serves". "Serve or not serve", says Sir Wilfull in irritation to Petulant, "I shan't ask licence of you, sir; nor the weathercock your companion."

As for Mirabell, he hardly appears in this Act. But Foible makes the following comment on him while talking to Mrs. Fainall : "O dear madam, Mr. Mirabell is such a sweet, winning gentleman."

(3) **Wit.** Every character here, as in the preceeding two Acts, shows a talent for making witty remarks. Here are specimens of their wit :

**Fainall.** (i) Marriage is honourable; and if so, wherefore should cuckoldom be a discredit, being derived from so honourable a root ?

(ii) Let husbands be jealous; but let the lover still believe. Or if he doubt, let it be only to endear his pleasure, and prepare the joy that follows, when he proves his mistress true.

**Lady Wishfort.** Although she is a funny character and although we feel much amused by her vanity and affectation, yet she is not without the gift of wit :

(i) A tatterdemalion! I hope to see him hung with tatters, like a Long Lane pent-house or a gibbet thief. A slander-mouthed railer! I warrant the spendthrift prodigal's in debt as much as the million lottery, or the whole court upon a birthday. 'Til spoil his credit with his tailor.



(Lady Wishfort makes the above speech with reference to Mirabell who is reported to have spoken about her in insulting words).

(i) He (Mirabell) has put me out of all patience. I shall never recompose my features to receive Sir Rowland with any economy of face. This wretch has fretted me that I am absolutely decayed.

(She says this to describe the effect of Mirabell's insulting remarks on her face and skin).

(ii) Let me see the glass. Cracks, sayest thou? Why I am arrantly flayed; I look like an old peeled wall. I should repair me, Foible, before Sir Rowland comes, or I shall never keep up to my picture.

(iii) Oh, he's a rallier, nephew. My cousin's a wit, and your great wits always rally their best friends to choose. When you have been abroad, nephew, you'll understand raillery better.

(Lady Wishfort thus explains Witwoud's character to her nephew, Sir Wilfull).

**Millamant.** (i) .....but fools never wear out—they are such drap-de-Berry things without one could give 'em to one's chambermaid after a day or two!

(ii) I'll take my death, I think you are handsomer—and within a year or two as young. If you could but stay for me, I should overtake you—but that cannot be. Well, that thought makes me melancholy.

(In this speech Millamant pokes fun at Mrs. Marwood's age and appearance).

**Mrs. Marwood.** (i) O man, man! woman, woman! The devil's an ass; if I were a painter, I would draw him like an idiot, a driveller with a b.b and bells. Man should have his head and horns, and woman the rest of him.

(ii) For a fool's visit is always a disguise, and never admitted by a woman of wit, but to blind her affair with a lover of sense.

**Sir Wilfull.** (i) Oons, this fellow knows less than a starling; I don't think a' knows his own name.

(ii) If you are not satisfied with the information of my boots, sir, if you will step to the stable, you may inquire further of my horse, sir.

(iii) The fashion's a fool; and you're a fop, dear brother. By'r Lady, I conjectured you were a fop, since you began to change the style of your letters and write in a scrap of paper, gilt round the edges, no broader than a subpoena.

## ACT IV

(The Scene is the same—a Room in Lady Wishfort's House)

**Lady Wishfort awaiting Sir Rowland.** Lady Wishfort has completed her preparations for the reception of Sir Rowland. She is yet undecided in what posture she should receive him. Ultimately she decides to lean upon one elbow on her couch, "with one foot a little dangling off". She would start and look surprised when he comes.

**Sir Wilfull is drunk.** Sir Wilfull had been tutored by Lady Wishfort to pay court to Millamant in order to win her as his wife. But Fainall has got him drunk, so that he meets Millamant in a tipsy condition and makes a complete ass of himself. Millamant recites Suckling's verses which he does not understand. He goes back to his drinking without much delay, and Mirabell enters.

**Mirabell and Millamant.** Mirabell and Millamant discuss their conditions of marriage. Millamant wants to be courted by Mirabell till the very time of marriage and even afterwards. She does not want him to take her for granted or to have "the saucy look of an assured man" on his face. After marriage she would like to keep lying in bed till late in the morning in order to be alone with her thoughts. She would not like to be called by those words of endearment which are in common use such as "my dear", "my love", and "my sweetheart". She would not like to go to the theatre or on a social visit in his company. She would be free to receive and pay visits at her will; she would write and receive letters without being questioned by him; she would be under no obligation to entertain persons whom she does not like; she would expect him to knock at the door before he enters her room.

Mirabell now lays down his own terms for the marriage. He would not allow Millamant to have a confidante; he would not let her wear masks or oiled skins for the night; he would not want her to squeeze herself in tight dresses when she becomes pregnant; he would not permit her to drink anything stronger than tea, chocolate, and coffee; and so on. The terms are agreed to with much fuss and impatience, and Millamant permits Mirabell to kiss—just her hand.

**Lady Wishfort rebukes Sir Wilfull.** Petulant and Witwoud are both drunk and, as usual, indulge in mutual verbal attacks upon each other. Sir Wilfull, who is drunk too, receives a snub from Lady Wishfort for having missed the opportunity to court and woo Millamant, but Sir Wilfull goes on talking in a tipsy manner.

**Sir Rowland arrives.** Waitwell, disguised as Sir Rowland, now arrives. Lady Wishfort apologizes to him for not having received him in any elaborate, formal style. Waitwell speaks to her like a true gallant, saying that any delay in their marriage would break his heart. He speaks in very harsh terms about his nephew (Mirabell), and Lady Wishfort offers to help him in any scheme



of revenge that he may wish to pursue against that man. She tells him how that "perfidious wretch" (*i.e.*, Mirabell) shed tears for her, swore oaths of loyalty, knelt, pleaded his love, and so on. Waitwell says that he will kill Mirabell for being his rival in love. But Lady Wishfort would like him to starve the fellow gradually, "inch by inch".

**The anonymous letter.** A letter\* is now handed over to Lady Wishfort by a messenger. Lady Wishfort opens it and reads that "he who pretends to be Sir Rowland is a cheat and a rascal". Lady Wishfort is shocked but Waitwell, prompted by Foible, tells her that this letter has been written by Mirabell to cause mischief. Lady Wishfort remembers that Mirabell had come to her house in the afternoon to meet Millamant. Waitwell says that Mirabell does not have now a long time to live. But Lady Wishfort urges Waitwell not to challenge Mirabell to a fight, because he himself may be killed or, if he kills Mirabell, he may be sentenced to hanging. She says that she will go and interrogate Millamant in this matter (of the letter). Waitwell says that he will go and bring his black box which contains all the documents pertaining to his whole estate. Lady Wishfort feels glad that Sir Rowland (*i.e.*, Waitwell) will bring the box and deliver it into her hands. Waitwell says that he will also bring a marriage contract for her to sign.

**Critical comments. (1) Plot.** The following are the developments in this Act as regards the plot of the drama :

(i) Lady Wishfort puts the finishing touches to her preparations for the reception of Sir Rowland. (There is comic irony here, because we know the real identity of Sir Rowland but Lady Wishfort does not).

(ii) Sir Wilfull is prevented by his drunkenness from paying court to Millamant. He was induced to join a drink party by Mr. Fainall.

(iii) The love-affair of Mirabell and Millamant reaches its climax in the "proviso" scene. In this scene, which is justly famous, the two lovers lay down the conditions on which they would get married. It has been said that here Congreve achieved the finest of all the proviso scenes in Restoration comedy. There is plenty of humour in this scene.

(iv) A meeting takes place between Waitwell (disguised as Sir Rowland) and Lady Wishfort. The whole of this scene is fraught with comic irony. There is comic irony in both the situation and the dialogue. The audience knows, as some of the characters do, that Sir Rowland is no other than Mirabell's servant, Waitwell; but Lady Wishfort does not know the reality and is duped into believing the visitor to be a real knight who is desperately anxious to marry her.

(2) **Characterization.** Lady Wishfort again appears here as a comic character. She amuses us by considering the various postures in which she can receive Sir Rowland: "Shall I sit? No, I won't sit. I'll walk—aye, I'll walk from the door upon the entrance; and then turn full upon him.—No, that will be too sudden. I'll lie—aye, I'll lie down.....". She amuses us also by the condescending manner in which she treats Sir Rowland. She is inwardly most anxious to grab him as a husband, but outwardly she behaves as if she were wishing to marry him only for his sake, to save his life. She disowns any sensual motive in wanting to marry him, using choice words to do so: "Sir Rowland, you must not attribute my yielding to any sinister appetite, or indigestion of widowhood; nor impute my complacency to any lethargy of continence. I hope you do not think me prone to any iteration of nuptials. If you think the least scruple of carnality was an ingredient—" Her anxiety about the black box (which is supposed to contain the documents relating to Sir Rowland's property) adds to the fun of the situation.

But Lady Wishfort is not wholly comic. She also excites our pity. This happens when we find the deception being carried too far and when we imagine the shock that is in store for her. She becomes truly pathetic when the letter containing the real fact about Sir Rowland is handed over to her.

Lady Wishfort is genuinely and justly annoyed with her nephew, Sir Wilfull, for getting drunk when he should have been wooing Millamant. She rebukes him in no uncertain terms: "As I'm a person, I'm ashamed of you—foh! how you stink of wine! D'ye think my niece will endure such a borachio! You're an absolute borachio\*. She shows not only a sharp tongue but a real talent for denunciation: "Travel, quotha! aye, travel, travel, get thee gone, get thee but far enough, to the Saracens, or the Tartars, or the Turks, for thou art not fit to live in a Christian Commonwealth, thou beastly pagan," she says to Sir Wilfull. It is for her capacity to use effective and severe words of criticism and condemnation, to scold (her nephew, her maids, Mirabell), that her language has been called "boudoir Billingsgate" †.

In this Act both Millamant and Mirabell rise to heights of witty eloquence. In the "proviso" scene they engage in a battle of wits, in which Millamant eventually has the better of her lover-adversary. Both wish to enjoy perfect individual freedom after marriage and would not tolerate curbs or restrictions of any kind. The restraints which Mirabell seeks to impose on Millamant are such as she, even if left to herself, would observe of her own accord as any decent woman of good breeding would do.

\* *Borachio*—drunkard.

† *Boudoir Billingsgate*—"*Billingsgate*" is the language of abuse which means an aristocratic lady's chamber apartment.

\* This, as we know, is a letter written by Mrs. Marwood to inform Lady Wishfort that Sir Rowland is an impostor.



In spite of the wordy duel between them, there can be no doubt that they are madly in love with each other. Millamant thus expresses her passion to Mrs. Fainall: "Well, if Mirabell should not make a good husband, I am a lost thing—for I find I love him violently."

The manner in which Millamant gets rid of Sir Wilfull shows an excellent combination of tact and bluntness. One of her memorable utterances is that she loathes the country but that she hates the town too.

The three drinking men—Sir Wilfull, Petulant, and Witwoud—all add to the comedy of the play. Witwoud, speaking to Mrs. Fainall, says: "I have laughed like ten Christenings; I am tipsy with laughing. If I had stayed any longer I should have burst." Petulant, speaking to Millamant, says, "If you are not handsome, what then, if I have a humour to prove it? If I shall have my reward, say so; if not, fight for your face the next time yourself. I'll go sleep." But Sir Wilfull excels them both in drunken talk. Speaking to his aunt he says, "God's heart; an you grutch me your liquor, make a bill. Give me more drink, and take my purse. But if you would have me marry my cousin; say the word, and I'll do it. Wilfull will do't, Wilfull will do't; that's my crest. My motto I have forgot."

Both Waitwell and Foible acquit themselves well in their roles in this Act. Waitwell plays Sir Rowland to perfection and Foible does some quick thinking to suggest to Waitwell that he should attribute the anonymous letter to Mirabell's hostility.

(3) **Wit.** There is an abundance of witty conversation in this Act too. The highest point of wit is reached, of course, in the proviso scene where the speeches of both Millamant and Mirabell are the high water-mark of the play. Millamant hates all *shows* of love; she does not believe in keeping up *appearances*; and she would not like to observe those *forms* which are customarily observed by husbands and wives for the *forms'* sake. She therefore, says:

"And d'ye hear, I won't be called names after I'm married; positively I won't be called names, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar—I shall never bear that.—Good Mirabell, don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks, nor go to Hyde Park together the first Sunday in a new chariot, to provoke eyes and whispers; and then never to be seen together again; as if we were proud of one another the first week, and ashamed of one another ever after."

There is exquisite irony in this, and Millamant amusingly brings out the hypocrisy of husbands and wives, and the breakdown of the marriage relationship.

Mirabell too has a gift of satire. He ridicules the manner in

which women strive to look normal when their bellies and hips have become swollen with pregnancy:

"I denounce ~~ag~~ all strait-lacing, squeezing for a shape, till you mould my boy's head like a sugar loaf, and instead of a man-child, make me the father to a crooked billet."

He mocks also at the superficiality of women's conversations among themselves:

"As likewise to genuine and authorize tea-table talk—such as mending of fashions, spoiling reputations, railing at absent friends, and so forth....."

The exchange of witticisms between Witwoud and Petulant is noteworthy also:

**Petulant.** Witwoud, you are an annihilator of sense.

**Witwoud.** Thou art a retailer of phrases, and dost deal in remnants of remnants, like a maker of pincushions; thou art in truth (metaphysically speaking) a speaker of shorthand.

**Petulant.** Thou art (without a figure) just one half of an ass, and Baldwin yonder, thy half brother, is the rest. And thus they go on for another half a page.

Lady Wishfort is no wit, but one of the wittiest speeches in this scene comes from her when she is scolding her nephew, Sir Wilfull, for his drunkenness. This is how she describes the stinking smell that he is giving out and his plans for travel abroad:

"Smells! he would poison a tallow chandler and his family. Beastly creature, I know what to do with him! Travel, quotha! aye, travel, travel, get thee gone, get thee but far enough, to the Saracens, or the Tartars, or the Turks, for thou art not fit to live in a Christian Common wealth, thou beastly pagan!"

But Sir Wilfull can be witty also. In reply to the above reprimand he says:

"Turks, no! no Turks, aunt, your Truks are infidels, and believe not in the grape. Your Mahometan, your Mussalman, is a dry stinkard. No offence, aunt....." and he sings:

To drink is a Christian diversion  
Unknown to the Turk and the Persian :.....  
And a fig for your sultan and sophy.

Nor are the servants devoid of wit. Waitwell proves himself an excellent impostor and when he has to utter a threat against Mirabell, this is how he expresses himself:

"In three weeks he shall be barefoot; in a month out of knees with begging an alms. He shall starve upward and upward, till he has nothing living but his head, and then go out in a stink like a candle's end upon a save-all.

When Waitwell privately asks Foible for some wine to maintain his spirits in his difficult and tiring role, he is thus scolded by her:



"What a washy rogue art thou, to pant thus for a quarter of an hour's lying and swearing to a fine lady!"

### Act V

(The Scene is the same—a Room in Lady Wishfort's House)

**Lady Wishfort rebukes Foible severely.** Lady Wishfort has come to know from Mrs. Marwood that Sir Rowland is an impostor and that Foible is an accomplice of Mirabell. She therefore rebukes Foible in extremely harsh language and asks her to get out of the house. Foible does her best to appease Lady Wishfort and makes all sorts of excuses to defend herself.

**Foible tells Mrs. Fainall about the secret love-affair of Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall.** Foible, on being asked by Mrs. Fainall why she is feeling so unhappy, explains how Mrs. Marwood had overheard their talk and revealed everything to Lady Wishfort. Mrs. Fainall says that Mrs. Marwood has even disclosed her (Mrs. Fainall's) past love-affair with Mirabell. Foible thereupon tells Mrs. Fainall about Mrs. Marwood's secret love-affair with Mr. Fainall. Foible says that she and Mincing had seen with their own eyes Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall making love to each other. Mrs. Fainall feels that this discovery might help her.

**Lady Wishfort, ready to sacrifice anything.** Lady Wishfort offers profuse thanks to Mrs. Marwood for having first told her about Mirabell's false pretence of love to her, and then disclosed to her Sir Rowland's real identity. Seeing her daughter (Mrs. Fainall), Lady Wishfort scolds her for having carried on a love-affair with Mirabell, but Mrs. Fainall asserts that she has no reason to feel afraid of anything or anybody and that Mrs. Marwood is a mischief-maker. When Lady Wishfort asks Mrs. Marwood if she can prove her allegation against Mrs. Fainall, Mrs. Marwood replies that, if things are proved, Lady Wishfort's fair name will be dragged into mud. Lady Wishfort thereupon offers to sacrifice all her property and her wealth in order to preserve her fair name, and seeks Mrs. Marwood's assistance in the matter.

**Mr. Fainall's terms.** Mr. Fainall lays down extremely difficult conditions for keeping silent about his wife's love-affair with Mirabell. If these conditions are not agreed to by Lady Wishfort, he would, he says, divorce his wife. Lady Wishfort is horrified by these conditions, but she is even more horrified by the thought of the social disgrace that will result from the threatened divorce. The conditions are:

(i) Lady Wishfort will not marry again, and her estate, after her death, will pass to Mr. Fainall.

(ii) Mrs. Fainall will settle on her husband the remainder of her fortune, a large part of which has already been acquired by him through a trick.

(iii) As Millamant is determined to marry Mirabell (of whom

### A CRITICAL SUMMARY

Lady Wishfort does not approve), she forfeits the amount of six thousand pounds which Lady Wishfort holds in trust on Millamant's behalf. This amount, says Mr. Fainall, has now to pass to Lady Wishfort's daughter, Mrs. Fainall, who must hand it over to him.

**Millamant offers to marry Sir Wilfull.** Millamant now appears on the scene, in the company of Sir Wilfull. She tells her aunt that, as desired by her, she is willing to marry Sir Wilfull and give up Mirabell of whom she did not approve. Mirabell comes and offers his apologies to Lady Wishfort for his past misconduct. He says that for her satisfaction he has even renounced his claim to marry Millamant. This means that Millamant will not forfeit her fortune of six thousand pounds. The development is a great blow to Mr. Fainall but he still insists on the remaining conditions. Mirabell says that he will rescue Lady Wishfort from her predicament, and Lady Wishfort feels thankful for the offer.

**The evidence of Foible and Mincing.** Foible and Mincing are now summoned by Mirabell. Mr. Fainall says that, if his love-affair with Mrs. Warwood is about to be exposed, it does not matter because "it is but the way of the world." Foible and Mincing testify that they had seen Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall together in an upper room. Mr. Fainall, however, dismisses this evidence and says that his position remains the same even if the accusation against him were true.

**Waitwell, Petulant and Witwoud now come forward.** As previously arranged by Mirabell, Waitwell now appears on the scene, carrying a black box. Petulant and Witwoud also join the gathering. Mirabell takes out a document from the black box and shows it to Mr. Fainall. This document is a legal deed whereby Mrs. Fainall, before getting married to Mr. Fainall, had transferred her entire property and estate to Mirabell to be kept in trust by him. In other words, Mrs. Fainall had (at Mirabell's advice) taken adequate precautions against any possible betrayal by her husband. This also means that the agreement by which Mrs. Fainall had made over a large chunk of her fortune to her husband stands invalidated, because it was signed after the transaction referred to above. The whole plan of Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood is in this way frustrated. Echoing Mr. Fainall's words, Mirabell says that it is the way of the world, of the widows\* of the world. Both Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood now make an angry exit, uttering threats to their enemies (Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall respectively).

**The union of Mirabell and Millamant.** Lady Wishfort, as promised by her, forgives Waitwell and Foible. But what is she to do about Mirabell's desire to marry Millamant? Care has already

\* Mrs. Fainall was a widow when she married Mr. Fainall. But before marrying him she took the necessary precaution against her second husband's betrayal. Therefore Mirabell describes her action as "the way of the widows of the world."



been taken about that. Sir Wilfull proves that he is a real sport. It is disclosed that Sir Wilfull had offered his help to the lovers and that it is far from his thoughts to marry Millamant or to marry at all. Lady Wishfort gladly gives Millamant to Mirabell as his would-be bride. Mirabell restores the legal deed to Mrs Fainall, thus making her the true owner of her estate. As for what action Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood will take, it is left to fortune to decide, though Mirabell promises to do his best to prevent a divorce (between Mr. and Mrs. Fainall).

**Critical comments. (1) Plot.** The following developments in this final Act are to be noted :

(i) Lady Wishfort has come to know from Mrs. Marwood the imposture of Waitwell and Foible's complicity. She is terribly annoyed with Mirabell and she gives a severe rebuke to Foible.

(ii) Mrs. Fainall comes to know from Foible about the secret love-affair going on between her husband and Mrs. Marwood. This information strengthens her position vis-a-vis both of them.

(iii) Lady Wishfort is inclined to believe that the allegation of a love-affair between her daughter (Mrs. Fainall) and Mirabell is false, but there is no proof of her daughter's innocence.

(iv) Mr. Fainall threatens to divorce his wife unless Lady Wishfort agrees to certain condition which would virtually mean his coming into a possession of Lady Wishfort's property, Mrs. Fainall's estate, and Millamant's fortune.

(v) Mr. Fainall, who has the co-operation and support of Mrs. Marwood, is frustrated in his knavish scheme by Mirabell's intervention. Mirabell is helped by Sir Wilfull, Petulant, Witwoud, Foible, Mincing, and, of course, Mrs. Fainall.

(vi) Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood make an angry exit. Lady Wishfort forgives all the culprits who had conspired against her, and she readily agrees to the marriage of Millamant with Mirabell.

(2) **Characterization.** In this act we see Lady Wishfort's effective use of what has been called her "boudoir Billingsgate" "Out of my house, out of my house, thou viper! thou serpent," she says to Foible, "Thou bosom traitress that I raised from nothing ..... While you were catering for Mirabell, I have been broker for you? What, have you made a passive bawd of me? This exceeds all precedent! I'll couple you! Yes, I'll baste you together, you and your Philander....." All this has, of course, a comic effect. Lady Wishfort amuses us also by her account of how she brought up her daughter, keeping her away from the company of all males and making even the chaplain wear feminine clothes when he came to the house. When Mr. Fainall lays down as one of his conditions that Lady Wishfort will not get married again, she feels alarmed and asks if she will not be allowed to marry for reasons of health or if some emergency arises. This is partly comic but partly pathetic too. Another noteworthy point is that Lady Wishfort has not

been able to cast off her passion for Mirabell in spite of everything. "Oh, he has witchcraft in his eyes and tongue!" She says to herself on seeing Mirabell, "His appearance rakes the embers which have so long lain smothered in my breast." This is again partly comic and partly pathetic.

It must be admitted that, in spite of the important roles of Mirabell, Mr. Fainall, Mrs. Marwood and others, Lady Wishfort dominates this Act.

**Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall** prove ruthless in their villainous scheming. Mr. Fainall has no scruples at all in his efforts to acquire the wealth of Lady Wishfort, Millamant, and his own wife, while Mrs. Marwood actively supports him and tries to frighten Lady Wishfort by describing in detail the scandal that will ensue if Mr. Fainall carries his threat of divorce into effect.

**Millamant's** role in this Act is more or less passive, but Mirabell plays his trump card and proves to be the saviour by producing a legal proof of his trusteeship of Mrs. Fainall's estate and by foiling Mr. Fainall's nefarious plan. Petulant and Witwoud serve as witnesses to the legal document.

**Sir Wilfull** rises greatly in our estimation by the co-operation he extends to the two lovers (Mirabell and Millamant). He readily lends his services to Mirabell even though in doing so he has to throw dust into his aunt's eyes for the occasion.

**Foible** shows plenty of guts in the face of a difficult situation. She puts up a brave defence of herself when scolded by Lady Wishfort and she fearlessly testifies against Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood when required to do so. She is shrewd enough to know that Mrs. Marwood had sworn her and Mincing to secrecy not on a copy of the Bible but on a book of verses.

(3) **Wit.** This Act is written in a comparatively serious key. There is plenty of comedy here too, but of deliberate wit there is much less. Here are some of the witty observations made here :

**Mrs. Marwood.** (i) "Prove it, madam? What, and have your name prostituted in a public court.....and fidgets off and on his cushion as if he had swallowed cantharides, or sat upon cow-itch."

(ii) "Nay, this is nothing; if it would end here, 'twere well. But it must, after this, be consigned by the short-hand writers to the public press; .....nay, you must hear nothing else for some days."

**Fainall.** (i) "Oh, if you are prescribed marriage, you shall be considered; I will only reserve to myself the power to choose for you. If your physic be wholesome, it matters not who is your apothecary."

(ii) (To Lady Wishfort) "Indeed? Are you provided of a guard, with your single beefeater there?" (To Sir Wilfull) "you may draw your fox if you please, sir, and make a bear garden flourish somewhere else, for here it will not avail." (To Lady Wishfort) "This, my Lady Wishfort, must be subscribed, or your darling daughter's turned adrift,



like a leaky hulk, to sink or swim, as she and the current of this lewd town can agree."

(iii) "If it must all come out, why let 'em know it; 'tis but the way of the world."

**Sir Wilfull.** A man from the country though he is, Sir Wilfull is not without his share of wit. He makes one of the wittiest remarks in the play when, speaking to Mirabell, he makes fun of his aunt's excessive use of paint and powder on her face: "Look up, man, I'll stand by you; God's blood an she do frown, she can't kill you; besides—harkee, she dare not frown desperately, because her face is none of her own. 'Sheart, an she should, her forehead would wrinkle like the coat of a cream cheese."

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