WILLIAM CONGREVE

The Way of the World

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

William Congreve was born in 1670, ten years after Charles II stepped ashore in England and became at last, in the eyes of the world, Monarch of England. England rejoiced then, relieved to be freed from the stifling pressures of a Puritan Government, and welcomed Charles with open arms: 'The King...was received by General Monk with all imaginable love and respect at his entrance upon the land of Dover ... The shouting and joy expressed by all is past imagination.'[1] Monarchy was thus restored in England and the years that followed were henceforth to be known as the Restoration age. It is an age that stretches from 1660, through the reigns of Charles II and his brother James II, beyond the Glorious Revolution of 1688, to the end of the reigns of William and Mary (1689–1702). Congreve grew to years of maturity during this period and became a true representative of its spirit.

On 2 September 1642, the Puritan Government had passed an ordinance abolishing all play-houses and drama had languished in the years that followed. One of the first things that Charles II did, in 1660, was to re-open the theatres, and he issued a patent to Thomas Killigrew and Sir William D'Avenant empowering them to 'erect' two companies of players, which subsequently came to be known as the King's Company and the Duke's Company. Restoration Drama did not, however, pick up from where the earlier drama had left off. Too much had happened in between. The sudden release from Puritan morality resulted in a wild abandon, sending many to the opposite extreme; Charles II, lately returned

[1] Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, 25 May 1660.

from France, set the pace and the Court became notorious for its licentious and gay living. But the spirit of the Commonwealth did not die. Side by side with the Court revellers, there grew, nurtured by the Puritan values of life, a sturdy body of middle class opinion which continued to disapprove of the theatre, stayed away from it, and opposed it as a source of immoral amusement. At the same time the rabble, which had formerly filled the pits of Elizabethan play-houses, found the new one-shilling entrance fee too expensive. With these two sections of society largely eliminated, the audience was primarily formed by the aristocratic élite of the King and his courtiers. This leisured and affluent community lived a life of sophisticated elegance, and London, the rapidly developing capital and the hub of England's political, social and cultural life, became the centre round which all that was worthwhile revolved. To Harriet, in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, 'there's music in the worst cry in London', and Millamant thinks that 'Rustik' is 'ruder than Gothick' (IV.i.111). Restoration Comedy, therefore, catering to a sophisticated, urbanized community, inevitably lost something of the grassroots universality of Elizabethan drama.

It would be wrong, however, to draw any sudden conclusions from this. Underneath the gay, social fabric of Restoration society deep changes were taking place. The sixteenth century had been an age of wonder and excitement, rather than awareness of the real significance of the cultural ferment that was shaking Europe, and the Elizabethan, for all his totality of view, tended to direct his eyes upwards to visions of grandeur rather than to the actualities of existence. It was not till the middle of the seventeenth century that the true meaning of the Renaissance was finally established—its new philosophy that 'called all in doubt', its spirit of enquiry, its science and its scepticism. When Charles II returned to England, the last traces of the Middle Ages had gone and the new intellectual

impulse that had begun with Copernicus and Galileo, and had been strengthened with the empirical philosophy of Francis Bacon, developed into a fundamentally different attitude to life. 'The seventeenth century...is particularly notable for its many geniuses in the related fields of mathematics, physics and astronomy, who by a vast co-operative effort added stone to stone in this new philosophical structure, until Newton completed it.'[1] Newton published his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1687, but already, in 1651, Thomas Hobbes had affirmed in *Leviathan* the material nature of the universe:

> The universe, that is, the whole mass of things as they are, is corporeal, that is to say, body, and hath the dimensions of magnitude, namely length, breadth and depth, ... and because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently, nowhere.[2]

The new age thus turned its gaze from heaven to earth, from implicit faith in the supernatural to rational analysis of empirical facts, from the *why* to the *how* of existence, from the glorification of God to the assessment of man. Philosophy had demonstrated the mathematical orderliness of the universe, it was now time to see how well man fitted into it.

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
> The proper study of Mankind is Man.[3]

What was the impact of all this on literature? Dryden, the great spokesman of his age, writes: 'A man should be learned

[1] Bredvold, *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden*, University of Michigan (1959), pp. 51–2.

[2] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. xlvi, ed. A.R. Waller, p. 497.

[3] Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll. 1–2.

in several sciences, and should have a reasonable, philosophical, and in some measure, a mathematical head, to be a complete and excellent poet.'[1] The emphasis is on a rational and objective, as opposed to an emotional, approach to life and the writers of this period turned to prose as the most natural medium of expression. Prose itself changed its nature and the rhetorical, luxuriant prose of the Commonwealth was gradually replaced by a simpler, more direct language. Hobbes in his *Leviathan* forbids counsellors to use '*obscure, confused and ambiguous Expressions, also all metaphoricall Speeches, tending to the stirring up of Passion.*'[2] and The Royal Society for Improving Natural Knowledge, which was given the royal charter in 1662, strengthened this belief.

If the rational faculty had become the instrument of the mind, and simple prose its medium of expression, the subject matter for contemplation was man's material existence or his immediate environment—in other words, the social milieu in which he lives. Thus society becomes the major concern of the seventeenth century writer; in its well-being lay the well-being of man. The seventeenth century and the eighteenth century writer is acutely conscious of his responsibility towards society—he is the guardian of its morality, the upholder of its values. He is 'committed', and his task is to establish order in human society and teach men and women to live together in a civilized manner. No longer concerned with flights into metaphysics, he has now to bring 'Philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses.'[3]

A term that becomes significant in this context is 'decorum'. 'Decorum', in its real significance, goes deep. It is the con-

[1] Dryden, 'Notes and Observations on the Empress of Morocco' (1674), *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Walter Scott (1808), p. 411.
[2] *Leviathan*, ch. xxv, op. cit., p. 185.
[3] Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 10 (Monday, 12 March 1710–11).

gruity of substance and form, the correct behaviour as revealing the correct man; in the corporate social sense it is the adjustment of human beings to each other, the observance of the norms, rules, proprieties of conduct, that every member of a community must subscribe to if his community is to survive.

The spirit of rational enquiry and criticism found its voice in satire, and notable examples are Butler's *Hudibras*, Rochester's *Satire against Mankind*, Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* and *Mac Flecknoe*, and Defoe's *The True-Born Englishman*. Quite appropriately, two diarists wrote at this period—Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn. But in many ways the age is best expressed in its comedies. There were the tragedies of Dryden and Otway and Lee; but the satirical bent of the age and the emphasis on social values find a natural expression in the comic spirit that aims at the reconcilement of self and society, and the establishment of a balanced way of life.

I. Restoration Comedy

Restoration Comedy proper includes the plays of Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve,[1] and the comedies of Dryden. Dryden, the eldest, was born in 1631. *The Wild Gallant* appeared in 1663, followed by *Sir Martin Mar-All* (1667), *The Assignation or Love in a Nunnery* (1672) and *Marriage-à-la-Mode* (1672). His last comedy, *Amphitryon*, was produced in 1690. Sir George Etherege (1634?–91) is the next in the line, with *The Comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub* (1664), *She Wou'd if She Cou'd* (1668), and his last and best comedy, *The Man of Mode or Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676). 'Manly' Wycherley won fame with *The Country Wife* (1675), but before this had come *Love in a Wood or St. James's Park* (1671) and *The Gentleman*

[1] i.e. Congreve's plays excluding *The Mourning Bride*.

Dancing-Master (1672). His last comedy is *The Plain Dealer* (1676). Congreve (1670–1729) is the greatest of them all. His first play *The Old Batchelour* was produced in 1693 and it won instant acclaim. This was followed by *The Double Dealer* in the same year, and *Love for Love* (1695). Congreve experimented with tragedy in *The Mourning Bride* in 1697 and at the turn of the century came *The Way of the World* (1700), Congreve's last play and masterpiece and the finest flower of Restoration Comedy. Two other dramatists may be mentioned—Sir John Vanbrugh and George Farquhar. Vanbrugh was actually six years older than Congreve but in his plays the comedy has already become broader, and the sophisticated brilliance of the earlier dramatists interjected with farce and simple laughter. His masterpiece is *The Provok'd Wife*. With Farquhar's *The Beaux Stratagem* (1706), full of the bustle and gaiety of the road, and characters like Cherry, the innkeeper's daughter, we are already on the way to Goldsmith.

When we read the plays of Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve, our first impression is that we have left ordinary people behind us and entered the closed and charmed world of the fashionable *beau-monde*. The setting is always London; elegant ladies and handsome gentlemen live a life of languid luxury and pass the day making witty conversation with each other. The ladies sometimes go for walks in the fashionable St James's Park, and sooner or later they are joined by their male admirers. The men, when they are not accompanying the ladies, sit in chocolate-houses and drink and play cards. In this world of infinite leisure there are two major preoccupations—sex and marriage. Men are always ready to have affairs, and ladies, married or otherwise are equally ready to give them indulgence. Marriage becomes a subject for consideration when both partners are unattached, and only when, perhaps even more important, this legal union is sufficiently strengthened by the wealth that is inherited in the process. Husbands and wives usually lead independent lives, and their indifference towards each other is a by-word in conversation. Mrs Squeamish in *The Country Wife* complains that the men of quality 'use us with the same indifferency and ill-breeding as if we were all married to 'em.'

Rural England, what little of it is seen, does not present a very impressive picture. Sir Willfull in *The Way of the World* shocks everyone by starting to take his boots off in Lady Wishfort's parlour and by getting revoltingly drunk soon after. As for the country girls, their problem is certainly not that of modesty and innocence; Sue in *Love for Love* and Margery Pinchwife in *The Country Wife* are both famished for sex, and are only too eager to learn the ways of the world and acquire lovers.

Whatever one's private emotions are, the social game insists that a perfect facade must be maintained. Husbands and wives may hate each other, but in company Fainall greets Mrs Fainall with 'My Dear', and she replies 'My Soul'. Women may eye each other with suspicion and distrust, but in public they always affect a friendship that they do not feel. Love affairs abound, but they are always discreetly hidden, and Margery Pinchwife soon learns that she will have to 'tell more lies'.

It is easy to understand why Restoration Comedy came to be described as 'Artificial Comedy'. People had forgotten to be natural and the only norm they followed was that of 'Manners', or the observance of social proprieties. The aristocratic Court society of the seventeenth century, of course, delighted in these plays. They even thought that they recognized themselves in some of the characters and Rochester was generally considered to be Etherege's model for Dorimant in *The Man of Mode*. But the larger body of public opinion, represented by the middle class, became more and more shocked by this shameless flaunting of immoral living. In March 1698, the inevitable

happened—Jeremy Collier published his *Short View on the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. Within a few weeks defenders of the stage brought out their replies. An anonymous pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Stage*, began the counter-attack and it was soon followed by John Dennis's *The Usefulness of the Stage*, and John Vanbrugh's *A Short Vindication of the Relapse and the Provok'd Wife, by the Author*. In July the same year came Congreve's *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations*. He begins by reversing Collier's images of dirt back to Collier himself. Collier is 'The evil Spirit', who has 'blackened the Thoughts with his own Smut' and '. . . for his *Foot-pads* which he calls us in his Preface, and for his *Buffoons* . . . I will only call him Mr. Collier.' But the damage had been done. In November Collier published another pamphlet, *A Defence of the Short View*, and victory was undoubtedly his. The impact of Collier's attack on the English audience of the time cannot be overstressed and, though *The Way of the World* appeared two years later, the fate of Restoration Comedy was sealed. Unable to face the storm of public opinion the plays dwindled away and, within a few years, the wave of sentimentalism that inundated England, and the lachrymose literature that came with it, swept them out of sight.

II. Restoration Comedy: Its Critics

The stigma of immorality thus came to be fixed firmly on Restoration Comedy. A hundred years later, Lamb begins his essay, 'On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century': 'The artificial Comedy, or Comedy of manners, is extinct on our stage . . . The times cannot bear them . . . The business of their dramatic characters will not stand the moral test.' The moral opprobrium has not yet fully gone and, even today, admirers

tend to adopt a defensive attitude and their critical appreciations invariably take the form of apologias. Dorimants and Horners are, indeed, hard to explain away. Horner in *The Country Wife* has circulated the rumour around town that a recent operation in France has made him impotent and, suspicious husbands thus taken care of, he sets out to enjoy himself with the wives. Volpone also had practised a monstrous trick on his neighbours but in the last act of *Volpone* (1606) Jonson had exposed and morally condemned him. *The Country Wife* ends with Horner triumphing over all. Dorimant in *The Man of Mode* has not the crudity of Horner, but he is not much better.

What briefs have the advocates of Restoration Comedy offered to their readers? The first voice against the general condemnation of these plays is Lamb's.[1] His argument is interesting but it does not really offer a solution to the moral deadlock. Lamb contends that Restoration Comedy takes us away from our familiar surroundings into a world of make-believe where the rules of moral conduct do not, and should not, apply. It is not, therefore, immoral, it is 'unmoral'. 'They have got out of Christendom into the land—what shall I call it?—of cuckoldry—the Utopia of gallantry.' From time to time we need a holiday from the reality that presses on us everywhere, and Restoration Comedy gives us that temporary respite, so that when we *do* return to the rigours of reality, we are the fresher for the change. 'I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of strict conscience . . . I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it.'

Lamb's plea, attractive as it is, evades the real moral issue by dismissing it as irrelevant. In plain terms, his suggestion is that Restoration Comedy is 'escapist' in nature. But can great

[1] op. cit.

literature be justified by such an argument? If 'high seriousness' is to be totally eliminated, what is left may be entertainment, it can be nothing more. By implication, then, Lamb *does* pass a moral judgement on the plays. Because he *cannot* defend them morally, he *refuses* to do so. Even more damaging is his remark that the characters do not move our emotions, for this would imply that the plays are brittle and heartless. 'I used to wonder at the strange power which his *Way of the World* in particular possesses of interesting you all along in the pursuits of characters for whom you absolutely care nothing—for you neither hate nor love his personages.' Lamb's essay is of great significance for it established beyond doubt that we *do* find delight in the plays. But the arguments with which he sought to remove our moral dissatisfaction transferred Restoration Comedy to a world beyond real life and made it more artificial than ever.

Later nineteenth century writers continued to be dubious in their appraisal of Restoration Comedy, though some admitted the superiority of Congreve. Macaulay writes in *The Comic Dramatists of the Restoration* that on the moral front Congreve's 'guilt was so clear that no address or eloquence could obtain an acquittal'. For Thackeray, in *The English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century* (1853), the seventeenth century Comic Muse is 'that godless, reckless Jezebel. . .a disreputable, daring, laughing, painted French baggage. . .the jade was indefensible.' Like Lamb, he refuses to judge it by the ordinary norms of morality: 'It has. . .a sort of moral of its own quite unlike life.' Like Lamb also, he sees no emotional depth in it: 'Ah! it's a weary feast, that banquet of wit where no love is. It palls soon.'

Not until Bonamy Dobrée published *Restoration Comedy* in 1924 was a serious re-appraisal made. Dobrée, too, speaks of the brilliance of style but he does much more; he attacks the charge of 'impurity' with arguments that have far greater validity then Lamb's. To begin with, he dismisses the term

'artificial' as inapplicable; on the contrary, Restoration Comedy is an accurate mirror of seventeenth century society and, as such, is intensely realistic. More than that, he relates the plays to the scientific spirit of rational enquiry that dominated the seventeenth century attitude to life. It was an age when the old values had collapsed and the new philosophy of materialism had still to be translated satisfactorily in terms of daily living. The process of change brought with it its own problems and affected one of the most primary of social institutions—marriage. Men wanted to retain freedom for themselves, but they would not grant it to their wives. Women were equally determined to retain their individuality and, if adjustment was not possible at home, they made up for it elsewhere. At the same time, the institution of marriage was indispensable to both and had to be protected at all costs. Out of this tension emerged the emphasis on respectability which supplied the framework that preserved the forms of marriage. Out of this tension arose also what Dobrée calls the 'sex-antagonism', so evident in the relationship of men and women to each other in the plays. The Restoration dramatists, he continues, felt that an objective appraisal was necessary, and this led to an analysis of sex-relations from which the emotion of love was kept out as far as possible. In no other period has 'sex' as distinct from 'love' been handled with such freedom, but the explanation is not, Dobrée insists, an irresponsible licentiousness.

Dobrée's essay at once gave a seriousness and depth to Restoration Comedy which earlier critics had refused to grant. But he limits its terms of reference. The dramatists were profoundly concerned with the society in which they lived but they did not explore the fundamental issues of human existence. 'It gave a brilliant picture of its time rather than a new insight into man.' In the ultimate analysis he regrets that he cannot grant to Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve the universality of vision that raises the plays of Molière and Jonson to the

highest levels of great art.

With Dobrée criticism of Restoration Comedy reached its maturity and a host of critics came forward to explore its deeper significance. But in 1937 everything was turned topsy-turvy when L.C. Knights published 'Restoration Comedy: The Reality and the Myth',[1] and flung a challenge at all admirers of Congreve. L.C. Knights refuses to see anything worthwhile in Restoration Comedy, and ends his essay with the remark: 'The criticism that defenders of Restoration comedy need to answer is not that the comedies are "immoral", but that they are trivial, gross and dull.'

His first objection to Restoration Comedy is that it does not mirror its age in an adequate manner, 'it has no significant relation with the best thought of the time'. It is, therefore, 'artificial' even by contemporary standards. With one blow he thus strikes at the first premise of Dobrée's argument. He then goes on to attack the characterization. Miss Lynch[2] had argued that by the late seventeenth century the fixed modes of social behaviour had caused a fracture between the society and the individual. This was perceived by Etherege and his successors and revealed through their characters. L.C. Knights cynically suggests that Miss Lynch may herself be aware of this fracture, but there is absolutely no indication in the plays that the characters themselves had either the values or the depth or the sensitivity to be capable of such awareness. They are superficial, and all that Dorimant really expresses is his physical stamina. 'The "real" values simply are not there.'

Finally, L.C. Knights turns to the question of the relationship between the men and women. He sees in the plays, not a full-blooded frank attitude to sex, but unhealthy indulgence

[1] *Scrutiny*, VI (1937), reprinted in L.C. Knights's *Explorations*, Chatto and Windus (1946).

[2] K.M. Lynch, *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy*, University of Michigan Publication, Language and Literature, vol. iii (1926).

in the titillation that leads to it. 'The pleasure of the chase' has, therefore, to be extended indefinitely and more and more fresh stimuli needed for the continued gratification of jaded appetites. This implies an initial state of boredom which ultimately stems from a triviality of interests, and Restoration Comedy, instead of trying to 'rationalize sex' as Dobrée would have it, merely reflects the triviality and boredom of its times.

L.C. Knights's essay created a storm in literary circles. But, oddly enough, he himself has shown towards the beginning of his essay how the challenge may be taken up. Criticizing the moral approach of the earlier critics, he writes: '"Morals" are in the long run, decidedly relevant—but only in the long run: literary criticism has prior claim.' If literary criticism is to be, as it *should* be, the yardstick of measurement, it would be worthwhile to reverse for a moment the entire approach, and begin, not by analysing the comedies themselves, but by asking the primary question, What is Comedy?

III. WHAT IS COMEDY?

According to Plato,[1] laughter is a kind of malicious pleasure derived from a feeling of superiority; according to Aristotle,[2] the source of the ridiculous lies in incongruity. The two theories are inter-related, because incongruity, which implies a contrast between the normal and the abnormal, or the commonplace and the exaggerated, is associated in the mind of the spectator with the fact that he identifies himself with the superior world of normality. At its most unintellectual level, laughter is

[1] *Philebus*, 48–50.

[2] *Poetics*, ch. v, Tr. Ingram Bywater, Clarendon Press (1920): 'The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others.'

arousèd at the sight of physical incongruity—a fat man, a large nose, etc. We are further amused when the fat man slips on a banana skin—his humiliation fills us with the 'sudden glory' that Hobbes speaks of.[1] Laughter caused by physical abnormality is on the level of slapstick or farce, the lowest species of comedy, because it is not sustained by any serious motive. The Comedy of Intrigue adds a complicated plot and almost invariably a love-motif, thus retaining the interest of the audience through its five acts, but it is still without serious content.

In its higher levels, however, comedy ceases to be something that merely amuses, and the awareness of incongruity leads on to a serious assessment of life. Like tragedy, it springs from a realization of the incongruity inherent in human existence—the contradiction between man's limitless aspirations and his limited environment. This contradiction could result either in an adjustment between the two, or in a conflict, in which man, as the physically weaker force, is destroyed. If our sympathies are with the individual who refuses to compromise, we mourn over his death, but rejoice over his indestructible spirit. This is tragedy. If, however, we feel that the environmental or social framework cannot be disregarded, we disapprove of the individual who cannot or will not fit into it. He is an eccentric, or an abnormal, and we laugh at him. This is comedy.

Comedy implies a social attitude to life. It does not preclude sympathy with the individual, but however great the sympathy, the social pattern is always given greater significance. The moral concern of the comic philosopher is the preservation

[1] *Leviathan*, ch. vi: '*Sudden glory* is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, which pleaseth them, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, in comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.' (op cit., p. 34.)

of society, even if it means the expulsion of the individual (cf. Molière's *The Misanthrope*), for without society mankind cannot survive. To achieve his end the comic philosopher may resort to laughter for it renders ridiculous, and therefore impotent, all those who do not conform to the social pattern. But laughter is not his only instrument, and it is never his aim, and those who employ laughter for its own sake become, in turn, the objects of ridicule.

This is the basis of all great comedy, but the treatment changes from age to age. The classical comedies of Plautus and Terence were concerned primarily with the exposure of social aberrants and they were satirical in tone. The dramatists were intellectual and rational in approach and, though love often formed an element in the actual plot construction, emotion was excluded from their plays.

The Romantic comedies of Shakespeare take us to another world where emotion and imagination play a far greater role. But in essence they also reveal the social bias. As against Hamlet, Lear and Othello, who are idealists unable to compromise, we have Portia, Beatrice and Rosalind, capable of deep emotion, but at the same time, sensible realists who know how to adjust to their environment.

IV. Comedy of Humours and Restoration Comedy

The comic mode of Plautus and Terence was taken up by Ben Jonson in his Comedy of Humours, and Restoration Comedy, often called the comedy of 'wit', continues in the same tradition. But in immediate aim and treatment there is a great difference between the two. Jonson's 'humour' originates in the medieval physiological theory that the human body comprises four chief fluids or 'humours', and that an imbalance in the proportion and distribution of the fluids results in a corres-

ponding imbalance in the mental condition and disposition of the individual. The theory of humours thus becomes connected with the study of human behaviour. If a person has an excess of any one humour, this will exaggerate certain emotional and behavioural tendencies within him and will make him an eccentric, an abnormal, in other words, a misfit in society. He thus becomes fit subject for comedy.

Jonson's plays deal with people in whom a dominant trait has disturbed the equipoise of their minds. In a sense he is an individualist, because he is primarily concerned with character, and his comedy of humours explores the moral and emotional recesses of human nature. His concern is the preservation of certain basic values of society, and in *Volpone* he even removes the distraction of the immediate environmental background and lifts his characters out of London to an imaginary setting in Venice. *The Alchemist* and *Epicoene* are set in London, but Morose, Face and Subtle could, in fact, belong to any age and any country.

Jonson had belonged to an individualistic age, but the Restoration dramatists lived in a more sophisticated one in which conformity had become the rule rather than the exception, and this gave rise to problems of a different nature. As social behaviour becomes more and more fixed there is, inevitably, a proportionate increase of lip-service to it, and a breed of human beings who affect, but do not observe, the social norms comes into existence. They form a formidable group, for they create a powerful body of opinion which is no longer concerned with social values but is vitally concerned with preserving the facade of these values. They create so strong a pressure towards conformity that we find it is no longer the individual who is threatening the existence of society, but society itself, or rather its degraded form, that threatens to destroy the individualism in man. Restoration Comedy thus becomes more concerned with the aberrations of the group

than with the aberrations of the individual, and this accounts for the fact that it belongs unmistakably to the age in which it was written, in a way that Jonson's plays never did. It emphasizes the immediate and actual social framework, and it has been called the Comedy of Manners because it deals with the manners of the age. But manners in the sense that 'manners makyth man' mean something far deeper than mere outward politeness. They are the means by which men can establish genuine communication without infringing on each other's rights and feelings, and they arise out of consideration and respect for other people. The task of the dramatist is to distinguish between false manners and true manners, to separate pseudo-intelligence from intelligence, to distinguish a 'Witwoud' from a 'Truewit'. He is fighting to preserve the sanity of the intellect, and the moral bludgeon that Jonson wielded is replaced by the sharper instrument of wit.

Wit expresses itself in the use of irony, innuendo, epigram, word-play, etc. These rhetorical devices almost invariably present statements that have dual significance, and the juxtaposition of the apparent and hidden meanings supplies the incongruity which is the source of comic laughter. Simile and metaphor are also employed for the same purpose. Although their obvious function is to bring out the similarity between two objects, wit sometimes draws together two images on a flimsy point of likeness that serves only to heighten the incongruity of the association. Thus when Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* says that the Franklin's beard is as white as the daisy, the simile throws into prominent and grotesque contrast age (symbolized by the white beard) and youth (symbolized by the daisy). Alternatively, as with the Metaphysical poets, the reverse may happen—a startling and unsuspected similarity is revealed between two totally disparate objects. It may be noted that since the full significance of the statement is rarely evident on the surface, the reader has to employ his

own intellect for the pleasurable act of discovery; the hidden meaning is thus revealed in a dramatic manner, and this gives added emphasis to it. Wit, therefore, provides pleasure on several levels, but it is essentially an exercise of the intellect and its appeal is always to the intellect. It is the most effective weapon with which a sophisticated society can be made aware of its own shortcomings. As used by the seventeenth century dramatists, however, the term does not mean mere brilliance in conversation, or even cleverness. 'Wit' means also intelligence, the intelligence to perceive and understand. Congreve's Truewit possesses all the external accomplishments of wit—the polish, the sophistication, the ability to play with words. But with him they are the outward expression of an inner quality. Witwouds, on the other hand, are witty for the sake of being witty. They pretend they represent society at its best but, in fact, are social aberrants and subject for comic laughter.

Wycherley, in *The Dancing-Master,* is also concerned with Witwouds, and the two gulls of the play are Mr Paris, 'a vain coxcomb...newly returned from France', and Mr James Formal or Don Diego, 'much affected with the habits and customs of Spain'. Sir Fopling Flutter in Etherege's *The Man of Mode* is a superior version of Mr Paris, and Vanbrugh gives us Sir Novelty Fashion in *The Relapse*. But in Congreve's world, Witwouds are not the only danger. There are some who are as intelligent as Truewit, but they are egoists who deliberately use their wit to exploit and destroy those around them. They are the Maskwells (*The Double Dealer*) and the Fainalls (*The Way of the World*) of society.

The affected wit, however, is the main butt of ridicule because 'at the same time that it is affected [it] is also false'.[1] The falsehood of affectation is but one step removed from the

[1] *The Way of the World,* Epistle Dedicatory, ll. 30–1.

deceit of hypocrisy, and through Horner in *The Country Wife* Wycherley mercilessly strips the hypocritical facade off the face of society, and shows it to be what it is. Again, in the mock-dedicatory epistle to *The Plain Dealer,* he tells My Lady B: 'And whatsoever your amorous misfortunes have been, none can charge you with that heinous, and worst of women's crimes, hypocrisy.' Restoration dramatists may or may not be concerned with the immorality of their society, but they are deeply concerned with the falsehood that hides it. In this, significantly, they are one with Chaucer, for it is the hypocrisy of the Summoner, not the sexual promiscuity of the Wife of Bath that angers the earlier poet. Affectation and hypocrisy are, moreover, the opposite of honesty, sincerity and integrity of character, and so these latter become, by implication, the values that the dramatists believe in and uphold.

What happens, then, to the old accusation against Restoration Comedy that it is artificial? Dobrée had defended the plays by arguing that they come 'as close to real life as possible'. They do far more than that. The very theme of Restoration Comedy, the ethical sub-stratum on which it rests, is anti-artificial, for it deals with the exposure of pretence, insincerity and hypocrisy; and these are not failings that pertain only to the small fashionable society of seventeenth century England, they are inherent in the very nature of man as a social being. Dobrée had regretted that the plays do not give us a new insight into man, and L.C. Knights had said that Restoration Comedy was an inadequate picture of a limited culture. But the immediate area within which the dramatists operate is not really relevant. It is the larger implications that matter, and there is no doubt that the moral implications in Restoration Comedy extend to include the whole of mankind.

The creative artist does not, however, only protect and preserve what already exists, he also builds upon it. Comedy has been described as an attempt to reconcile two apparently

irreconcilable forces—the individual and society, and the real test of the comic dramatist is to assess these forces and to show how the perfect balance may be attained. He who succeeds is the ideal Truewit of his age. The task is not an easy one because he cannot, after all, make the world perfect, but has to take it for what it is, with its imperfections and contradictions, and at the same time survive as an individual. Escape can be no solution either, for it is only the defeated who escape. Alceste in Molière's *The Misanthrope* refuses to accept the reality of his environment and cries out against the illogicality and the unfairness of the world he lives in: 'I have justice on my side, yet I lose my cause.' But he is powerless against it and, in the end, it is not society that is dismissed but he, frustrated in his defeat, that leaves the stage.

Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve reveal in their plays a deep awareness of this contradiction, but they do not all react in the same way. Wycherley is only too conscious of the fact that society is not what it should be, and he rails at a world where truth, honour and intelligence have no value, and only their opposites are cherished. Doomed to live in the world that he despises and knowing that he himself is a part of it, he turns upon it, and attacks it with a viciousness that is quite different from the suave approach of Etherege and Congreve. Wycherley is aware of the fracture between self and society, but he offers no solution to the problems, and it is this frustration, possibly, that makes him create a man like Horner to perform the act of exposure. There is much that is objectionable in Horner, but he is not a destructive agent, for he operates only where there is nothing left to destroy. Nor is he the product of a cynic's mind; a cynic denies the existence of values, and this Wycherley does not do, otherwise there would have been no Alithea in the play.

In *The Man of Mode* Etherege presents the reverse side of the problem—an all-engulfing individualism that endangers the very foundations of social living. In Dorimant we see Hobbesian egoism developed to an almost inhuman level. He thinks of no one but himself, and is solely concerned with the gratification—not of his senses—but of his ego. He likes to feel that he controls his environment and that people around him are puppets that move at his bidding. Mrs Loveit is helpless in his power and Belinda, his second mistress, becomes an automaton in his hands, unquestioningly doing everything that he asks her to do. There is no limit to what his ego craves. He callously casts off Mrs Loveit when he tires of her, and then attempts to humiliate her in public only to satisfy himself that he still has power over her.

Then one day he sees Harriet and in her he meets his match. She is a worthy opponent of Dorimant's, as intelligent, as egoistical, as unbending as he is. They are attracted towards each other, but when they meet it is as much on a war-footing as on terms of love, and we can see the undercurrent of hostility beneath their growing passion for each other. Ultimately Harriet wins, but the ending is left inconclusive. Dorimant is permitted only to hope, and even when Harriet invites him—strictly on parole—to visit her in the country, she paints its dismalness and taunts him with: 'Does not this stagger your resolution?'

Dobrée has referred to the sex-antagonism in Restoration Comedy. That the plays reveal an obsession with sex is something no one will deny; nor can all of it be given a profound meaning. The seventeenth century was, after all, an age of moral laxity when sexual promiscuity was taken for granted, and much that seems unpalatable to us was treated with indulgence, and accepted as a joke. The dramatists shared this attitude, and this accounts for the 'smuttiness' of the plays.

But this does not explain the whole of it. Dobrée suggests that in an experimental age the dramatists were experimenting with new ways of living, particularly in the sphere of marriage.

There is a much deeper significance involved. Social adjustment, which is the theme of comedy, is ultimately a question of human relationships and the central human relationship that lies at the core of all societies is that which exists between a man and a woman. When the relationship becomes institutionalized in marriage, the permanence of the social union puts the greatest of strains on the individuals concerned, and it is here that the ultimate test of social adjustment lies.

The struggle for mastery between man and woman is not a new theme in literature. It runs, like a thread, through *The Canterbury Tales,* as pilgrim after pilgrim gives his view on the problem of 'maistrie' and 'soveraynte e' in marriage. When the Restoration dramatists take up the theme they give it a contemporary colouring, but they never lose sight of its deeper significance. The sex antagonism in the plays is not, therefore, a matter of sex alone. It symbolizes the hostility that every individual who values his liberty will feel when there is threat of dominance from another individual. It stems from, as Freudians in a later age have called it, the primary ego-insecurity that lies at the root of all human behaviour. And since, in most societies, the male tends to dominate the female, the fear of the loss of individualism is the greatest among women. Is it any wonder that they hesitate, and wish to prolong the pleasures of the chase? Is it any wonder that the predatory male seeks more and more fields to conquer, to give himself repeated assurances of his superiority?

Etherege faces the problem in *The Man of Mode,* but it remains unsolved, for like Wycherley, he does not know the answer. Where both Wycherley and Etherege failed, Congreve, in *The Way of the World* succeeds, and so becomes the ideal Truewit of his age. *The Way of the World* may, therefore, take its place among the world's great comedies.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

I

In his letter to the Earl of Montagu which forms the dedicatory preface to the first edition of *The Way of the World* (1700), Congreve expresses gratitude to his Lordship for 'admitting me into your Conversation... .in your Retirement last Summer from the Town; for it was immediately after, that this Comedy was written.' Congreve, therefore, started writing the play in the autumn of 1699. *The Way of the World* was first performed in 1700 but it did not meet with the resounding success of his first play, *The Old Batchelour.* According to tradition it was a failure, but Dryden speaks of it as a moderate success, and Congreve himself writes in the preface: 'That it succeeded on the stage, was almost beyond my Expectation.' He adds, however, 'but little of it was prepar'd for the general Taste which seems now to be predominant in the Pallats of our Audience.' We can, therefore, presume that the play was reasonably well-received but was not expected to be, and was not, a box-office success.

Four texts of the play were published in Congreve's lifetime by his friend Jacob Tonson. The first and second editions, referred to as Quarto 1 (Q1) and Quarto 2 (Q2) appeared in 1700 and 1706. No major changes are evident in Q2. In 1710, Tonson published *The Works of Mr. William Congreve* (W1). A reprint of this issue, incorrectly referred to as the 'second' edition, was followed by the real second edition of *The Works* (W2) in 1719–20.

The most significant change made by Congreve in the later editions (W1 and W2) lies in the arrangement of the scenes. In the 1700 and 1706 editions the scene changes only when the setting is changed. As each Act has one setting—Act I is in a chocolate-house, Act II in St James's Park, and Acts III, IV

and V are in a room in Lady Wishfort's house—the two Quarto editions have only one scene to each Act. In W1 (1710), however, a new scene begins every time a character enters or leaves the stage, and at the head of each scene are entered, in capitals, the names of all the characters present. By this reckoning, Acts I and II have 9 scenes, Act III has 18 scenes, Act IV has 15 scenes and Act V, 14. Although it may appear confusing to the modern reader, there is no doubt that Congreve himself was responsible for these changes. In 1728, when Tonson's nephew planned to bring out another edition of Congreve, Tonson advised him to follow the 1710 edition: 'He [Congreve] took a great deal of care in the 8° edition I printed. I beleive that wil be the best coppy for you to follow.'[1]

Significantly enough, this change was in the tradition of Ben Jonson and contemporary French dramatists, and both were, in this as in much else, strict followers of classical rules and precepts. It is obvious that Congreve wished to re-model his play more closely to classical patterns. The same reason probably made him append the note *The Time Equal to that of Presentation* beneath the *Personae Dramatis*; it was his discreet way of indicating that he was following the classical rules of time, place (the entire play is set in London) and action.

This text is based on Tonson's second edition, the quarto of 1706 (Q2). Suggested emendations have been mentioned in the textual notes.

II

The classical bent of Congreve's mind is clearly indicated from the above textual comment on *The Way of the World*. In the preface, Congreve describes Terence as 'the most correct writer in the World' and acknowledges his debt to him. It is

[1] John C. Hodges, *William Congreve: Letters and Documents*, Macmillan (1964), Letter no. 100, p. 148.

significant also that the epigraph on the title-page is taken from Horace's Second Satire in *Satires I*. 'Civilised' Rome bore a natural affinity to the ethos of the Restoration period, and Congreve himself, as seen through the eyes of his contemporaries, seemed to present the picture of the perfect gentleman that Cicero had in mind when he wrote *De Officis*, a treatise 'on Duties', in 44 B.C.

Another important influence on Congreve was Molière, nearly fifty years his senior, and the great master of comedy in the seventeenth century. But we must look nearer home to find the immediate inspiration behind his works. Congreve looked up to Dryden as an elder counsellor and guide and won his patronage at the very outset of his literary career. Dryden saw him as the rising genius of the age and his commendation of Congreve in his prefatory verses to *The Double Dealer* is worth recalling:

> Great *Johnson* did by strength of Judgement please:
> Yet doubling *Fletcher's* Force, he wants his Ease.
> . . . .
> But both to *Congreve* justly shall submit,
> One match'd in Judgment, both o'er-match'd in Wit.
> In Him all Beauties of this Age we see;
> *Etherege* his *Courtship*, *Southern's* Purity;
> The Satire, Wit and Strength of Manly *Witcherley*.

Through Dryden, Congreve was led back to Ben Jonson, and Congreve owes his greatest debt to him. His deep interest in Jonson is evident in his writings, and particularly in his famous letter to Dennis[1] where he defines Humour and affirms its essentially English nature. If any direct model for *The Way of the World* is to be sought, it is undoubtedly Jonson's *Epicoene or The Silent Woman* (1609), for the character of Truewit in Jonson's play inspired Congreve to make his dis-

[1] ibid., *Letters and Documents*, Letter no. 110, pp. 176–85.

tinction between Truewits and Witwouds and led him to create Witwoud in his own play.

Direct parallels of *The Way of the World* may be found in many of the works of Congreve's contemporaries and immediate predecessors. Some of the more striking instances of these borrowings or parallels have been mentioned in the textual notes, but for an appreciation of *The Way of the World* an exhaustive survey is not necessary.

III

The theme is established straightaway by the title, and the phrase 'the way of the world', or its variations, is repeated several times in the course of the play. Fainall first uses it—'the Ways of Wedlock and this World' (II.i. 222). He repeats the phrase in the third Act—'all in the Way of the World' (l. 636) and in the last Act—''tis but the Way of the World' (l. 489), and finally Mirabell picks it and mockingly throws it back at him: ''tis the Way of the World, Sir; of the Widows of the World' (ll. 572–3).

Congreve thus makes it clear that his play is concerned with the problem of social living. The world provides man's terms of reference and since he has no way to live except within the way of the world his task is, firstly, to maintain the health of society by protecting it from disruptive forces and, secondly, to ensure that his own personality is not destroyed in the process. In this play the double challenge is met with, and answered, by Mirabell and Millamant.

People who endanger the well-being of society fall primarily into two categories—the sub-intellectuals or fools who, by pretending to be what they are not, spread the germ of affectation and artificiality, and the anti-socials, who exploit their environment and leave destruction in their wake. The fools in the play are Petulant and Witwoud, each outbidding the other in affectation. Mirabell has no patience with them and warns

Millamant not to indulge in their company (II.i. 447–9). Millamant also knows their worthlessness and does not hesitate to put them in their place (II.i. 347–8).

The serious business of the play is, however, concerned with the other category of human beings. In Fainall and Mrs Marwood we see a pair of unscrupulous lovers who are out to get what they can. They eavesdrop, dissemble, threaten, blackmail, and use every means in their power to gain their objectives. They expose Waitwell and confront Lady Wishfort with the threat that they will publicly expose her daughter's former misconduct if she does not part with the wealth of her daughter and her niece. It is difficult to decide who is the more despicable of the two—Mrs Marwood, with her pretence of friendship, pouring poison into Lady Wishfort's ears, or Fainall, whose bestial ferocity makes Lady Wishfort cry out: 'This is most inhumanly savage.'

If such predatory creatures were allowed freedom of movement, the world would become a dangerous place to live in. Duke Senior in *As You Like It* and Prospero in *The Tempest* had both retired from the world when they found they could not cope with its evils. But Congreve knows that all escape routes are closed and that Arcadia does not exist in real life, and the countryside is represented, not by idyllic scenes of pastoral charm, but by Sir Willfull Witwoud, gross, uncouth, 'ruder than Gothick'.

At the same time it is not possible to eliminate these undesirable characters altogether. There are too many Fainalls and Marwoods in the world for them all to be destroyed. To Shelley's romantic mind it had seemed an easy task to overthrow all the evils of society and create a new Hellas on earth, but the realists of the seventeenth century know that if a *modus vivendi* is to be found it will have to cater for the continued existence of such people.

The simplicist would suggest that they can be reformed by

virtuous examples of innocence and goodness of heart, but to hope that evil may be turned into good is to indulge in mere wishful thinking. Congreve, brought up on Hobbes's *Leviathan*, was aware that the egotistical instinct that drives man forward is too ingrained a part of human nature, and that as long as society lasts there will always be men and women whose perverted ego will seek self-aggrandizement at the cost of others. There are examples of goodness in *The Way of the World*, but Mrs Fainall's selfless generosity in promoting the love of Mirabell and Millamant brings forth from Mrs Marwood only a contemptuous 'I shall not prove another Pattern of Generosity' (III.i. 243–4). They have no pity either. Lady Wishfort, whatever her other faults, genuinely loves her daughter but her agony over her daughter's threatened loss of reputation leaves both Mrs Marwood and Fainall untouched.

A modern organized society has, however, two institutions whereby effective control can be exercised over every individual within it. One is the institution of wealth and the other is the institution of law. Money is power, the power to control. But since in the genteel society of the seventeenth century one did not work for one's living, money could only mean inherited wealth, and all the central characters of the play become vitally interested in acquiring it and the power that goes with it. The plot of *The Way of the World* is thus built, as Paul and Miriam Mueschke have described it, upon a 'legacy conflict'.[1] The three people who possess this wealth are Lady Wishfort, her daughter Mrs Fainall, and her niece Millamant; but control of this money rests entirely in Lady Wishfort and from the first scene we are aware of her presence presiding over the lives of the others. But though money is power, it becomes an *effective* instrument of power only if it is carefully

[1] Paul and Miriam Mueschke, *A New View of Congreve's Way of the World*, University of Michigan (1958).

protected and judiciously handled. A fool and his money are soon parted; Lady Wishfort misuses her power and ends up by becoming a helpless pawn in the hands of more clever personalities.

There is still the remedy of law left. The civilized society of the seventeenth century might indulge in many anti-social activities but its legal system held the community together, and was the one powerful deterrent that none dared ignore. Lady Wishfort's control over the fortunes of her daughter and of Millamant was a legal control, and all the plots and counter-plots revolve round the problem of the *legal* extraction of her wealth. Her *legal* consent to the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant is necessary if Millamant is to claim the 'moiety' of her fortune. A *legal* document has to have Lady Wishfort's signature on it before Fainall and Mrs Marwood can wrest anything out of her. And in the end a *legal* document is triumphantly produced by Mirabell to overthrow Fainall and bring all his scheming plans to naught. The 'black box' acquires a symbolic significance in the play; it represents *law in action*—the one force that can keep the Fainalls and Marwoods at bay.

Mirabell uses legal methods, but he also has to rely on his own shrewdness, practical foresight and worldly wisdom. Congreve has no idealistic illusions about life. If we live in the world, we have to accept the ways of the world and use the weapons of the world to protect ourselves. They are the only weapons that people like Fainall recognize, and such people must be met on their own terms, defeated on their own terms and defeated by their own arguments. But Congreve does not allow us to forget that Fainall, even with the sting taken out of him, will continue to live. The play ends, not to the tune of wedding bells, but with Mirabell handing over to Mrs Fainall the 'Deed of Trust' and advising her: 'it may be a means, well manag'd, to make you live easily together'. It is a sobering

thought that Mrs Fainall will have to live with her husband for the rest of her days.

Mirabell is the cohesive force that keeps society together, but the aberrants—both the fools and the villains—are factors of disintegration. There is no unity among them. Witwoud and Petulant form a pair, but they are constantly falling out with each other. More interesting is the disharmony between Fainall and Mrs Marwood, revealed in the passionate scene that takes place in St James's Park. Fainall is Mrs Marwood's lover but he has not hesitated to exploit her and rob her of her wealth. Mrs Marwood is Fainall's mistress, but when he accuses her of her secret love for Mirabell she attacks him, in the fury of guilty passion with: 'I hate you, and shall forever' (II.i. 225).

Mirabell, on the other hand, draws people towards himself. At the beginning of the play he and Millamant form a central unit and Mrs Fainall, though a former mistress, is his staunch supporter in whom he can safely entrust all his plans. He has a devoted servant in Waitwell and he has won the loyalty of Foible, Waitwell's bride. Towards the end of the play he and Sir Willfull have become 'sworn Brothers and Fellow Travellers', Petulant and Witwoud stand as witnesses to his legal document and even Lady Wishfort, his 'evil genius', has been won over to his side.

It is interesting that Mirabell and Millamant, however difficult their circumstances, never acknowledge defeat. They are the true realists of the play and they represent the real way of the world. But Fainall, lacking positive values, has no staying power and when the ways of the world become too much for him he unrealistically talks of escape to 'another world': '[We] will retire somewhere, any where to another World' (II.i. 254–5). Another instance of escapism is seen in Lady Wishfort. She has wrapped herself in self-delusion and when circumstances bear in on her she turns, with grotesque

incongruity, to thoughts of a false pastoralism: 'I would retire to Desarts and Solitudes, and feed harmless sheep by Groves and purling Streams. Dear Marwood, let us leave the World, and retire by our selves and be Shepherdesses' (V.i. 139–42).

Of the two challenges that are faced by the Truewit of his age, only one has been discussed so far—society can, as Mirabell has shown, be protected from the destructive forces within it. The second challenge is much bigger—can the individual, while sustaining society, retain his own identity? The problem had been faced by Etherege in *The Man of Mode* where the unyielding characters of Dorimant and Harriet had faced each other with the hostility of a love that does not know how to surrender. Etherege found no satisfactory solution to the problem; Congreve analyses it from all angles and ultimately, through the characters of Mirabell and Millamant, shows how the conflict can be resolved.

The play revolves round the problem of marriage-relationships and Congreve gives an early indication of this in the quotations from Horace affixed to the title page: 'It is worth your while to listen, you who do not wish things to go well for adulterers' and 'she who is detected fears for her dowry....' Significantly, the oft-repeated phrase 'the way of the world' is always used in the context of marriage and at the end of the play Congreve emphasizes the moral 'That Marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind'.

The story presents many pairs of lovers but at no point does it show the first stages of love. Mrs Fainall's amour with Mirabell is a thing of the past, and what we see is its aftertaste which is not very palatable. Fainall has already been married for some time; even his extra-marital affair has begun to show the effects of satiety and towards the end he and Mrs Marwood cling to each other more as joint conspirators than as lovers. Mirabell and Millamant are, from the beginning, acknowledged to be in love with each other and the play

only puts the seal of betrothal on their love. Only in Lady Wishfort do we see any of the anticipatory titillation of the sex-game as she rehearses to herself the various poses in which she will receive Sir Rowland. But her character is grossly exaggerated and the affair itself is a deliberately mocking travesty of love.

It is obvious, therefore, that Congreve in this play is concerned, not with the drama of falling in love, but with the more fundamental question of working out a permanent and satisfactory relationship between people who are already in love or have been in love. In other words it is a play about human adjustment and human responsibilities. One of the lessons that is driven home is that it is not possible to evade the consequences of one's actions and much of what happens towards the end of the play is shown to be a direct result of earlier acts of folly or wrong-doing. Mrs Fainall's past affair with Mirabell brings near disaster on her, and her husband's adulterous liaison with Mrs Marwood comes back full circle upon him. At the same time, Mirabell's responsible action of safeguarding his former mistress's wealth helps to save the situation.

With the need for responsibility is coupled the need for true adjustment. Fainall and Mrs Fainall are an example of a husband and wife who have failed to adjust; Fainall and Mrs Marwood are a pair of lovers who lack faith in each other. Against these ill-assorted couples, in whom we see the unpleasant consequences of incompatibility, is placed the ideal pair of lovers, Mirabell and Millamant.

The love of Mirabell and Millamant bears no relationship to the rest of the story. It pursues an independent course unconcerned with the general wrangle over property and wealth. The lovers are, it is true, directly involved in all the plots and counter-plots and Mirabell himself is the master-mind behind most of them, but all this is irrelevant so far as their personal

relationship is concerned. This is their private drama, for before their love can be sealed with marriage they must come to terms with each other on the basis of mutual honesty and reciprocal trust. The great moment when this takes place is in Act IV, the famous bargaining scene in which Congreve reaches the high mark of his art. There is nothing like its brilliance, its depth of emotion and profundity in the entire range of Restoration Comedy.

Millamant loves Mirabell but, like Harriet in *The Man of Mode*, she knows that admission will mean surrender and surrender may mean loss of identity. The fear that marriage may convert Mirabell into a complacent husband, and reduce her to a mere wife, guides her in all she says and does. She eludes Mirabell to a degree that leaves him in a daze: 'To think of a Whirlwind...were a Case of more steady Contemplation' (II.i. 499–500). She laughs at him when he is serious; she takes shelter behind 'a Herd of Fools' to avoid his presence; and when he dares to suggest that beauty is a lover's gift she replies, with superb arrogance: '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' (II.i. 412–15). This is no coquetry, no feminine vanity. Millamant is fighting—fighting to gain time, fighting for herself and for the rights of every woman, fighting for the survival of the individual.

And so we come to the bargaining scene. Millamant has at last agreed to meet Mirabell, and though she tells him: 'I'll fly and be followed to the last Moment, though I am on the very verge of Matrimony', here the chase ends. This is no time for emotion, but the depth of their love for each other reveals itself by its very absence and it is only when Mirabell leaves the room that Millamant relaxes and admits: 'if Mirabell shou'd not make a good Husband, I am a lost thing;—for I

find I love him violently' (IV.i. 323–4). But first they must come to terms. They face each other not as lovers but as rational human beings, because it is only on the basis of reason, unclouded by emotion, that the firm foundations of marriage can be built. Congreve deliberately makes them use legal language, because in a society upheld by its legal system, the personal equation of marriage must also be worked out in terms of a contract. Millamant bargains—she bargains for her privileges, for her liberty, for her right to privacy, for her freedom to meet whom she pleases. 'These Articles subscrib'd', she will agree to marry Mirabell.

If Millamant does not wish, by degrees, to 'dwindle into a Wife', Mirabell also knows that a marriage where the partners do not respect each other's liberty is no marriage, and he is equally determined not to 'be beyond Measure enlarg'd into a Husband'. But he also has his provisos. Using the same legalistic jargon, he lists his articles of contract so that he may be protected from the tyranny of the weaker sex.

The scene is brilliant in its artificiality, for no real man and woman have ever used such language on the eve of their betrothal. Congreve deliberately makes it so to stylize and distance the effect, for Mirabell and Millamant represent, at this moment, not merely themselves but all humanity. But the artificiality is more than a literary device. The mutual give and take, on the basis of which human relationships can survive, involves self-control, intellectual discrimination and the sense of decorum. Primitive naturalism does not lead to civilized social living and Congreve reveals the great human paradox that art and nature must unite to create the artifice that is life.

IV

Mirabell possesses all the external characteristics of the urbane gentleman. He has the wit, the polish and grace that the sophisticated society of his age demands and in his battle of

wits with Fainall in Act I his rejoinders demolish, with effortless ease, Fainall's clever remarks. He takes up the very words that Fainall uses and with a brilliant dexterity tosses them around to give them a different meaning (ll. 98–104; 161–4). Mirabell's wit dazzles, but it does not hurt. When towards the end of Act I, Witwoud and Petulant decide to 'be severe' with the ladies, in other words be witty at their expense, Mirabell rebukes them and tells them that putting 'another out of countenance' is something to be ashamed of. Mirabell's wit is subservient to his moral sense and he is never witty merely for the sake of being witty. The intrinsic seriousness of his nature is revealed in his obvious distaste for frivolous and irresponsible conversation; even Millamant is not spared and he lectures her seriously, advising her to avoid 'the Conversation of Fools'. Millamant may laughingly tease him by calling him 'Sententious Mirabell', but it is this seriousness and ethical sense that distinguishes him from the rest of the characters. His shrewd judgement, foresight and practical wisdom are evident in the care with which he has arranged for the legal protection of Mrs Fainall's wealth, and his quick-wittedness enables him to meet all the reversals that come his way. Twice Mrs Marwood upsets his plans, but he never loses his suavity and poise. His sense of decorum guides not only his behaviour with those around him, on a more serious level it also controls his love for Millamant. Passion does not overrule his judgement and in a significant speech to Fainall he describes how, as 'a discerning Lover', he has taken her 'to pieces, sifted her and separated her Failings... study'd 'em, and got 'em by Rote' (I.i. 163–79). His love will stand the test of time, for he has learnt to love Millamant, not *despite* her faults, but *with* her faults, even *for* her faults.

On one point, however, Mirabell disturbs our moral sense. How can we account for his former relationship with Mrs Fainall? Congreve has done much to allay the unpleasantness

of the situation. Mirabell had looked after her wealth and protected her reputation even to the extent of arranging a marriage when there was fear of pregnancy. The affair, moreover, began and ended with mutual consent and there had obviously been no question of marriage because Mrs Fainall does not once accuse him of betraying her or letting her down. She is in fact, on the best of terms with him and remains his friend and ally throughout.

But Mrs Fainall's life has been ruined. Married to a man she hates and despises, she has nothing to look forward to, and however extenuating the circumstances, Mirabell must be held ultimately responsible for her loss of happiness. We have to accept the fact, therefore, that admirable as Mirabell is, he is not perfect. But perhaps Congreve knew what he was doing. A Mirabell untouched by the ways of the world would have struck an alien note in the play. Congreve's realistic assessment of life does not allow for perfection either in man or in society, and had there been no blemish in Mirabell he might have become an ideal character, but would have ceased to be a man of his world.

Millamant's sparkling gaiety delights all who come near her, for her wit is never directed at anyone, it is the natural exuberance of her personality. She is supremely confident of Mirabell's love for her and she accepts the adulation of men as her natural due—but with such lack of affectation that no one can take offence. She does not quite possess the urbane poise of Mirabell and, in a sense, is much more forthright. Instead of sparring with her wit, if anything displeases her, she openly states what is in her mind. She coolly snubs Witwoud when his wit begins to irritate (II.i. 347–52) and when Mrs Marwood makes unpleasant insinuations she derides her to her face (III.i. 325–46).

But Millamant's gaiety is also a front behind which she hides herself. Mirabell had described her faults as 'so natural, or so artful' (I.i. 165-6) because he knew that her sophistication sustained her naturalness, it was the 'art' which concealed and protected her emotions and her deeper self. However charming in company, she must have her 'faithful Solitude' and her 'darling Contemplation' (IV.i. 189-90), and when the moment of her surrender to Mirabell draws near, she withdraws into herself and communes with her thoughts (IV.i. 51–108). It is incredible that L.C. Knights[1] should have described her life as consisting merely of 'visiting, writing and receiving letters, tea-parties and small talk', for nothing could be further from the truth.

The great struggle within her mind has already been discussed at length. She does not let anyone know what she is going through, but though she maintains her exquisite facade to the world we can sense a tenseness in everything she does or says. Her restless impatience makes her break one fan (III.i. 289) and nearly break another (III.i. 335). Her speeches are often irresolute and she continually breaks off in the middle of a sentence or interjects it with staccato ejaculatory phrases (II.i. 465–8; III.i. 357–64; IV.i. 295–7; etc.). But in all her agitation her love for Mirabell is held secretly within herself for it is too precious to be exposed to public view. She does not let even Mirabell know how deeply she loves him and only once in the entire play does the restraint over her emotions give way, when she confesses to Mrs Fainall: 'I love him violently' (IV.i. 324). Millamant is undoubtedly one of the great heroines of literature.

Mrs Fainall, despite her past indiscretion with Mirabell, is a good woman. She is generous, she bears no malice towards anyone and, though denied happiness herself, is able to find genuine pleasure in the happiness of Mirabell and Millamant. But there is nothing outstanding in her personality and beside

[1] op. cit., *Restoration Comedy: The Reality and the Myth.*

Millamant she pales into insignificance. She acts as a foil to her more brilliant cousin and her unhappy life almost makes her into a sacrificial offering at the altar of society. It is Congreve's way of telling us that if the well-being of the society has to be preserved, a price will have to be paid.

Fainall is not a Truewit, but he is not a Witwoud either. He is clever, but unfortunately his cleverness has been warped and stunted by his perverted ego. When, in the opening scene of the play, he and Mirabell converse, they seem at first to be evenly matched in their wit and it is hard to tell the difference between the two. But as the conversation proceeds, Fainall's cynicism is made more and more apparent. His epigrammatic remarks have an unpleasant flavour about them: 'I'd no more play with a Man that slighted his ill Fortune, than I'd make Love to a Woman who undervalu'd the loss of her Reputation' (I.i. 9–12), and Mirabell's ironic rejoinder: 'You have a Taste extreamly delicate, and are for refining on your Pleasures' (ll. 13–14) does not show approval of the sentiment and at once indicates Mirabell's own moral superiority. Fainall has no illusions about love and marriage and when Mirabell speaks of his love for Millamant, he cynically advises him to marry, for marriage will cure him of love (I.i. 180–2). His rapacious egoism feeds on everything it finds but as he has no moral values it is only material advantages that he seeks. He has already run through Mrs Marwood's wealth and he boasts that he married only 'to make lawful Prize of a rich Widow's Wealth' (II.i. 213-14). There is not an ounce of common humanity in him. His wife is to him an old and worthless animal (III.i. 716–17); she is a 'leaky Hulk' which he will set adrift to sink or swim (V.i. 443–56), and again in Act V, when Lady Wishfort almost collapses under the threat of his blackmail, he finds sadistic pleasure in terrorizing the old lady. Fainall is a creature of the earth and his transformation into a beast is indicated in the animal imagery which is scattered

through his speeches. He has the budding antlers of a Satyr (III.i. 638), he is 'a Stag' (III.i. 640), a 'Snail' (III.i. 642), his wife has played 'the Jade' with him (III.i. 685), he will turn his wife to grass (III.i. 716–17), he will 'herd no more' with husbands (III.i. 728).

But animals cannot rule over men, and intelligence unsupported by human values leaves no lasting impression on life. Whenever he is faced with a situation that is beyond his power to control, his poise and self-confidence snap and he gives way. He retreats ignominiously from the room when Mirabell's wit becomes too much for him (I.i. 105-6). Mrs Marwood's fury and passion in St James's Park catch him unawares and his state of mental confusion is apparent in his attempts at pacifying her with melodramatic suggestions of escape into another world and—incongruously—of marriage (II.i 254–5). The discovery of his wife's infidelity makes him storm and rage, but his mind ceases to function and he helplessly asks Mrs Marwood: 'How do we proceed?' (III.i. 705–6). And at the end, when all is lost, using the last resort of the animal at bay, he attacks; he turns upon his wife and attempts to assault her with a sword. Fainall's cleverness remains mere cleverness; he lacks the maturity of wisdom and ultimately the wise are left to govern the world.

In some ways Mrs Marwood is a much more complex character than her partner in crime. She lacks his ferocity and his wit, but within a narrower circuit she has more cunning and more practical sense and that particular brand of viciousness that is often associated with the female of the species. Her nature is imperfectly concealed by the social mask she wears and when in St James's Park the brittle surface of her sophistication cracks, we are shocked at the revelation of the violent passions underneath: 'I care not—Let me go—break my Hands, do—I'd leave 'em to get loose' (II.i. 233–4). She reminds us of Lady Touchwood in *The Double Dealer* and

through these two characters Congreve shows us the dangers of 'high Passions, Anger, Hate/Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord' that, 'usurping over sovran Reason claimd/Superior sway'.[1]

Mrs Marwood is Fainall's mistress, but she loves Mirabell, and this secret unfulfilled love is the motivating force behind all her actions. She has already thwarted the match between Mirabell and Millamant by undeceiving the credulous aunt once. She trusts no woman where Mirabell is concerned and tries to sound Mrs Fainall on this point. Her jealousy keeps her alert and she is quick to notice, and report to Lady Wishfort Mirabell's whispered conversation with Foible in St James's Park. But all her machinations are in vain. Mirabell has no time for her, and when she overhears Foible's remark: 'Mr Mirabell can't abide her' (III.i. 220), her rejected love turns inevitably to thoughts of revenge.

> Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd,
> Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd.[2]

She is now out to destroy, even if she herself is destroyed in the process: 'let the Mine be sprung first, and then I care not if I'm discover'd' (III.i. 714-15). Emotion had befuddled Fainall's brain, but the venom of jealousy sharpens her mind and she carefully works out the details of her plot. Unlike Fainall, she does not think in terms of escape and, with ruthless commonsense, she brings Lady Wishfort down to earth: 'Let us first dispatch the Affair in hand, Madam, we shall have Leisure to think of Retirement afterwards' (V.i. 143–5). But the Marwoods have no place in the civilized world and when she is eventually defeated she leaves the stage in a storm of impotent rage: 'Yes, it shall have Vent—and to your Confusion, or I'll perish in the Attempt' (V.i. 585–6).

[1] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk IX, ll. 1123–31.
[2] Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*, III. i. 457–8.

Witwoud and Petulant do not really deserve to be discussed separately and were it not for the fact that Congreve himself in his dedicatory epistle warns us of 'the affected Wit', they could be passed over. By themselves they are not of very great consequence, but the formidable number of Witwouds and Petulants in the world makes them a matter for concern, for their affectation breeds artificiality and robs a sophisticated society of its naturalness. Affected fools and hypocrites are the main target of Wycherley's attacks but Congreve is, on the whole, more lenient. At the end of the play they are even made to come over to the side of the angels and, though they themselves have not the wit to understand what is happening, they help in the final overthrow of Fainall.

Witwoud has an inflated opinion of his own intellect, but he is really 'a Fool with a good Memory, and some few Scraps of other Folks Wit' (I.i. 232–4). He imposes his forced witticisms on all and sundry and boosts his own ego by ridiculing the uneducated Petulant to the extent of suggesting that Petulant cannot even sign his own name (V.i. 541–2). Petulant has no pretence to learning but his affectation is to contradict everyone, particularly Witwoud, and to be rude and surly, even to Millamant (IV.i. 374–8). When Sir Willfull arrives they think they have found a new object of ridicule, and temporarily join hands to 'smoke him' (III.i. 489), only to be outsmoked themselves. The most fitting comment on them is, to modify a remark made by Witwoud himself: 'I gad [they] understand nothing of the matter' (V.i. 608).

Sir Willfull, with his rustic uncouthness provides much of the laughter in *The Way of the World*. The refined town-bred society of Congreve's times looked down upon the country, and Congreve shares the urban snobbery of his day. Sir Willfull's manners—or lack of manners—render him ridiculous. Millamant has nothing but contempt for him, and he makes a buffoon of himself in her presence (IV.i. 93–154). But though

Sir Willfull is shown to be a boor, Congreve does not, in the process, lose his sense of values. Sir Willfull may lack social finesse but he has not, like his brother, sacrificed the integrity of his nature. His commonsense and rugged honesty expose the hollow sham of Witwoud's personality, and his open-hearted generosity is indicated in his ready offer to help Mirabell and Millamant out of their trouble. He has courage too; he defies Fainall's 'Instrument' by drawing his sword (V.i. 436–8), and physically holds him down when he attempts to attack his wife (V.i. 578–9).

Lady Wishfort evades classification and is in a category all by herself. Her role in the play is central—she controls everyone's fortunes. But though she possesses money, she lacks beauty and youth, and in her illusory search for the one, she loses her hold over the other. She is by no means a stupid person; her vivid and richly metaphorical language reveals an energetic and imaginative mind, and her description of Foible's former way of living brings London to life before our eyes (V.i. 1–21). But her self-deception and her refusal to accept both the reality of her age and the decay of her charms have robbed her of her intelligence and made her vulnerable. As Sir Willfull says: 'She dare not frown desperately because her Face is none of her own' (V.i. 372–3). But she is determined not to admit her own weakness, and her frustrated lust for power makes the full blast of her tyranny fall on poor Peg, the one person, probably, over whom she can claim superiority in looks and in intelligence (III.i. 1–41). Her secret but unacknowledged envy of Millamant's beauty and poise leads her to the incredible statement that her portrait makes her more beautiful than her niece: 'You see that Picture has a sort of a—Ha Foible?—A Swimmingness in the Eyes—Yes, I'll look so—My Niece affects it; but she wants Features' (III.i. 170–3). But she does not really believe what she says, and the exaggerated affectation of her behaviour shows that she is

play-acting, not to the world, but to herself. Her yearning for a lover is as much a need to reassure herself that she is not totally 'decayed' as it is the actual physical hunger for sex, but her total lack of self-confidence betrays itself in her confusion as to how she should meet Sir Rowland. She has lost all sense of proportion, and decorum, for her, has become merely a show of respectability behind which anything can be hidden. The scene with Sir Rowland thus becomes a parody of all love-scenes, and her insistence that she is not making 'a Prostitution of Decorums' is a pathetically transparent cloak that serves only to emphasize her longing for 'the Iteration of Nuptials'.

Lady Wishfort has two weaknesses—her genuine love for her daughter, and her fascination for Mirabell. She never quite succeeds in freeing herself from his hypnotic charm and even while she tells Sir Rowland of the hours that 'the perfidious Wretch' has died away at her feet, we feel that she is reliving the pleasure that she had felt at the time. When Millamant assures her that Mirabell will go away for ever, there is both relief and regret in her 'Shall I never see him again?' (V.i. 353), and when the penitent himself appears before her, she confesses to herself that she is still under his spell (V.i. 419–22). Her character has been so exaggerated that she is almost turned into a caricature. She is the butt of Congreve's humour, but had she not been so grotesquely comical, she could almost have become tragic.

V

The grouping of the characters and the movement of the plot show a symmetry of construction which parallels the balanced and antithetical style. Mirabell and Millamant, the ideal pair of lovers are balanced by Fainall and Mrs Marwood, the adulterous pair of lovers. Above them is Lady Wishfort, pursuing illusory dreams of wedded bliss and between them is

Mrs Fainall, living in the disillusioned reality of an unhappy marriage. Lady Wishfort with her legal control over everyone's wealth is the occasion for all the confusion and disharmony of events and at the same time, antithetically, she is the central link that binds all the characters together—including Sir Willfull and therefore his half-brother Witwoud and so, by extension, Petulant—in the ramifications of family relationships.

Act I gives us the exposition. It introduces practically all the male characters, informs us about the others and supplies us with necessary background information. The opening scene between Fainall and Mirabell, which is echoed and parallelled by a similar duel of words between Mrs Fainall and Mrs Marwood at the beginning of Act II, apprises the audience straightaway of certain events that have taken place. One of the first things established in the conversation is Mirabell's love for Millamant, implied in Fainall's remark: 'Confess, Millamant and you quarrell'd last Night' (I.i. 19–20). We then hear of the practical obstacle to their marriage—half of Millamant's fortune is controlled by her aunt, Lady Wishfort, whose prior consent to the marriage is necessary if the money is to be claimed. This constitutes the main problem of the play, and everything converges towards it. Mirabell has already attempted one trick on Lady Wishfort, and failed. His sham addresses to the aunt to conceal his love for the niece were deliberately exposed by Mrs Marwood to Lady Wishfort, who is now in a highly incensed state against Mirabell.

Against this background, the story begins. The elaborate structure of the actual plot is built upon one central action—Mirabell's second trick, by which his servant Waitwell will pose as his fictitious uncle, Sir Rowland, to win the hand of Lady Wishfort. Hints are given, early in Act I, that something is afoot, that it is not yet 'ripe for Discovery' (ll. 141–2), that it is connected with the secret appointment of Mirabell

with Waitwell at one o'clock by Rosamond's Pond, and with the fact that Waitwell has been hurriedly married to Foible, who is Lady Wishfort's maid. By Act II everything is explained. Mirabell discusses the plan with Mrs Fainall, who immediately guesses its implications—when Lady Wishfort becomes contracted to Sir Rowland, Mirabell will step in to expose the imposture and in gratitude she will consent to his marriage with Millamant. This is clear enough. The apparent confusion as to details arises from Petulant's information supplied in Act I that Mirabell has an uncle newly arrived in London who stands between him and his estate and who is interested in Millamant. But again, Mirabell's conversation with Mrs Fainall clarifies the situation—Mirabell himself has indirectly caused Lady Wishfort to circulate the rumour so that she can the better conceal her affair with Sir Rowland. By the end of Act II Waitwell leaves the stage to get into his Sir Rowland disguise and the plan is well on its way to success.

The reversal comes through Fainall and Mrs Marwood. Again it is the important Act II that explains the setting of the subsidiary plot. Fainall has married Lady Wishfort's daughter, who was formerly Mirabell's mistress, and the marriage is one of convenience to avoid a possible scandal. Husband and wife hate each other and Fainall at present is engaged in an affair with Mrs Marwood. Mrs Marwood's name is already familiar to us. She had exposed Mirabell's first trick, and enough indication is given for us to guess that she secretly loves Mirabell and is jealously watching his every move.

With Act III, which is structurally the centre of the play, Lady Wishfort enters the scene and the complications begin. The main action is thus set in motion and the rapid alteration of reversals and recoveries keeps the audience continually on the alert and helps to build up the dramatic tempo of the play. Mrs Marwood arrives in haste to voice to Lady Wishfort her suspicion that Mirabell is up to some mischief because she

has seen him privately talking to Foible. This is the first reversal. Foible, now Waitwell's wife and a conspirator on Mirabell's side, quickly saves the situation by inventing a fictitious conversation with Mirabell which further incenses Lady Wishfort against him but which definitely allays suspicions as to the real truth. But the relief is short-lived. Foible, left alone in the room, and Mrs Fainall, who comes in at this moment, discuss the entire plot and even make a passing reference to Mrs Fainall's earlier affair with Mirabell. Mrs Marwood, hidden in the closet, overhears everything and now the fat is really in the fire. At this point, with superb dramatic sense, Congreve holds back the movement of the plot and throws in the distraction of Sir Willfull and his buffoonery. Our suspense and apprehension over the inevitable disclosure are sustained through the rest of this Act and practically the whole of the next one. Not till the very end of Act IV does Mrs Marwood play her trump-card. In the meantime, lest we forget, or rather to heighten our sense of impending danger, Mrs Marwood and Fainall meet at the end of Act III and discuss the details of their plan of counter-attack.

The main action thus remains in suspended animation, but the stage is by no means left empty. We have been expecting Sir Willfull, Lady Wishfort's nephew and Witwoud's half-brother—his arrival had already been announced at the beginning of the play (I.i. 193–5). But it is not only the antics of Sir Willfull that fill Act IV. While the plots and counter-plots around Lady Wishfort have kept the main action going, on a different level altogether the love of Mirabell and Millamant has been moving forward to its moment of exquisite consummation. Millamant's superb entry in the middle of Act II: 'Here she comes Ifaith full Sail, with her Fan spread and her Streamers out' (II.i. 333–4), will not be easily forgotten. In the scene which had followed, the relationship of the lovers had been clearly established and their acknowledged

love for each other revealed, as also Millamant's elusiveness and desire to prolong the 'chase' and delay her moment of capitulation.

In Act IV they meet again, and Millamant surrenders to her love. This is the great moment of the play. Congreve boldly places this proposal scene between two others and, in the parallelism and contrast thus achieved, his mastery over his dramatic art is superbly revealed. At the beginning of the Act, Sir Willfull, locked in a room with Millamant attempts with obvious embarrassment and much against his will, to mumble a few words about the proposed match between himself and Millamant. He retreats with haste and relief when Millamant shows him the way out. Towards the end of the Act, Waitwell, as Sir Rowland, enacts his grotesque courtship of Lady Wishfort and shortly before that the drunken triumvirate of Witwoud, Petulant and Sir Willfull reels across the stage. Framed in this setting, like a lily blossoming in a bed of weeds, rests the bargaining scene between Mirabell and Millamant. In no other way could Congreve have conveyed to us the poetry of the moment and the infinite superiority of Mirabell and Millamant to the rest of the world. But they also belong to this world, and the descent to commonalty is achieved with remarkable skill. Mrs Fainall comes in to warn Mirabell that Lady Wishfort is on her way and Millamant, with great naturalness, slips back to the level of ordinary life and converses with Witwoud.

We return to the main action in Sir Rowland's courtship scene. Mrs Marwood's anonymous letter to Lady Wishfort discloses Sir Rowland's imposture, but Foible and Waitwell quickly think up an explanation and it seems that catastrophe may be averted. On this note of suspense the curtain falls on Act IV.

The tempo of Act III has by now been picked up and the momentum rapidly increases, leading to the grand climax of

the end. Waitwell and Foible's ruse has failed and Act V begins with Lady Wishfort turning Foible out of the house. Fainall and Mrs Marwood are now totally in the ascendant and they bear down upon Lady Wishfort demanding, with threat and blackmail, the fortunes of both Millamant and Mrs Fainall. Mirabell has not, however, been idle, and the first hint of recovery appears in the person of Sir Willfull. He and Millamant appear before Lady Wishfort, and consent to her wish that they should marry. Millamant's share of money is thus retrieved but the fate of Mrs Fainall's fortune still hangs in the balance. Even the exposure of Fainall's affair with Mrs Marwood does nothing to stem the ferocity of Fainall. At this last moment, when all seems lost, Congreve produces his brilliant *Peripeteia* and *Discovery* in the form of the black box. Aristotle had stated: 'A Peripety is the change from one state of things within the play to its opposite. . .in the probable or necessary sequence of events.'[1] Totally unexpected as the black box is, it is no external *deus ex machina* suddenly introduced to bring about a happy ending. It is both 'probable' and 'necessary' that in a society sustained by its legal systems Mirabell, the Truewit of his age, would use exactly such a device to protect the interests of Mrs Fainall. Congreve had criticized the coarser devices of Plautus' plots; his own model was Terence and like Terence, he has given us a play which contains within itself 'the artful Solution of the Fable'.[2]

VI

Congreve, in his letter to John Dennis[3] makes an interesting distinction between Wit and Humour. Developing Jonson's theory, Congreve believes that Humour implies certain eccentricities of behaviour arising from differences of 'Constitutions, Complexions and Dispositions of Men'. Wit, on the other hand, is the art of speaking pleasantly and amusingly. On the basis of this definition we can proceed to analyse the wit and humour in *The Way of the World*. There are three 'humour' characters in the play—Lady Wishfort, Sir Willfull and Petulant. The eccentricities of their behaviour make us laugh but they themselves are not consciously witty. Petulant has 'a Humour to contradict'. Sir Willfull's humour stems from his rural background, and Lady Wishfort's humour is to believe that she is young and beautiful. Usually humour characters resolve themselves into stock types and there is no exception to the rule here. Sir Willfull is the proverbial country bumpkin, Lady Wishfort belongs to the long tradition of old women who do not admit their age and Petulant falls into the traditional pattern of the splenetic type. Congreve's art is revealed in the way he makes each of them into a highly individualized character in which the type is hardly recognizable.

The wit derives from the other characters and we are dazzled by what Dobrée calls the 'verbal pyrotechnics' which sparkle on every page. Even Foible has her moment when she tells Lady Wishfort, with delightful irony: 'A little Art once made your Picture like you; and now a little of the same Art must make you like your Picture' (III.i. 153–5). Wit is revealed in the perfect control of vocabulary, in the polished, epigrammatic elegance of style and the delicate antithetical balance of the sentences. The brilliance of the intellectual word-play has led some critics to complain that it has a blinding effect but Congreve takes care that the distinction between the characters does not get blurred. Millamant's wit is the most spontaneous; though her speeches have the period and balance of perfectly constructed sentences, there is less of conscious artistry in them. Fainall and Mirabell, as men of the world, speak in a more studied and sophisticated manner and at first

[1] op. cit. *Poetics*, p. 46.
[2] *The Way of the World*, Epistle Dedicatory, ll. 66–7.
[3] op. cit. *Letters and Documents*, pp. 177–8.

they seem alike, but the cynical twist to Fainall's remarks indicates the difference between the two. Witwoud's wit, on the other hand, is forced and artificial, and his laborious piling of similes drives Millamant to distraction (II.i. 341–54). On rare occasions he manages a genuine piece of witticism, but then, as Congreve says, 'even a *Fool* may be permitted to stumble on them by chance'.[1]

Wit involves imagery, and the antithetical and epigrammatic sentences lend themselves to the use of simile and metaphor. They heighten the artistry of the style and perhaps the most striking image of them all is Mirabell's description of Millamant as she approaches (II.i. 333–4). But the imagery also gives us glimpses of the larger background of seventeenth century life. The newly developing interests of trade and commerce are indicated in a series of images: 'Act of Parliament', 'Credit of the Nation', 'Exportation', 'Trade', 'loss', 'overstock'd' (I.i. 212–17). There are references also to recently published books ('Messalina's Poems', V.i. 502-3), to operas ('Monster in the Tempest', I.i. 228), to the newspapers ('Foreign and Domestick', I.i. 267), and to famous eating-houses ('Lockets', III.i. 106). Outside the charmed circle of Restoration society London looms large, and Lady Wishfort's tirades open up a stark picture of the poverty and hunger and seediness of the larger population of the city. We hear of Long-Lane Pent House, of Blackfriars, we see shivering women warming themselves before charcoal fires, we see second-hand shops, and roadside stalls and prisoners in Ludgate fishing for money. Congreve's world is small but his vision encompasses the whole of England.

Two sets of images stand out from the rest, and they are central to the theme of the play. The imagery of 'the chase' is introduced by Millamant when she recites Edmund Waller's

[1] ibid., p. 178.

poems to herself in Act IV. As she is repeating the third line, Mirabell enters and completes the couplet. The poem is about a chase and its full significance has been discussed in the textual notes. Mirabell develops the image when he addresses Millamant and she elaborates on it in her reply.

The second set of images is more pervasive and the imagery of law forms an iterative pattern in the play. Legal terms are scattered everywhere and the bargaining scene is conducted as we have seen like a legal proceeding, with Mrs Fainall arriving as 'a witness to the Sealing of the Deed'. It is an interesting fact that Congreve had been a student of law and that his legal knowledge had helped Dryden to draw up his contracts with his publishers. Congreve's own will is a masterpiece of legal acumen by which social proprieties were observed, and his personal desires fulfilled. Congreve had become the lover of the young Duchess of Marlborough, and her daughter, Mary, was generally considered to be his child. When he drew up his will, he silenced public opinion by making the Duke of Marlborough his executor, but through a devious legally protected device, all his property utlimately went to Mary. As in his play, so in his life, Congreve thus achieved an 'artful Solution of the Fable'.