

## “*The Way of the World*”— An Introduction

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**Failure on the stage.** Congreve's masterpiece, *The Way of the World*, was produced in 1700. That it was a failure on the stage is not remarkable. It was written to please its author's fastidious taste, not to conform to the prevailing fashion of the age. It was a new invention in English literature. It is deformed neither by realism nor by farce. The comic spirit breathes freely through its ample spaces. There is no hint of grossness in the characters. They are not of the common sort, "rather objects of charity than contempt", which were then popular on the stage. In brief it was Congreve's purpose "to design some characters, which should appear ridiculous not so much through a natural folly (which is incorrigible, and therefore, not proper to the stage) as through an affected wit, a wit, which at the same time that it is affected is also false." And so he placed on the stage a group of men and women of quick brains and cynical humours, who talked with the brilliance and rapidity which an accomplished swordsman displays. There is very little of action in the play. What Congreve calls the "fable" is of small significance. It is difficult to believe the document which unravels the tangle and counter-acts the villainy of Fainall. The trick played upon Lady Wishfort, the most desperate of all creatures, a lady fighting an unequal battle with time, does no more than interrupt the raillery which, with a vivid characterization, is the play's excuse. The cabal nights, on which they come together, and sit like a coroner's inquest on the murdered reputations of the week, demonstrate at once what manner of men and women are the persons of the drama.

**The central theme.** The central theme of *The Way of the World*, as of his other comedies, is the misfortunes of lovers. Here, as in *The Double-Dealer*, the lovers' difficulties are chiefly external ones, and hence perhaps the weakness of these two plays. Mirabell and Millamant in *The Way of the World* are, to all intents and purposes, plighted to each other. The story is how they are to get the consent of Lady Wishfort (Millamant's aunt), which is a necessity before they can be married. The moving force of the play is the hero, Mirabell, who is trying to obtain Lady Wishfort's consent.

He has already made one bad tactical mistake by directly wooing the old lady herself as her suitor, because she has discovered what was his real purpose in so doing and is now his sworn enemy. As the play begins, he is planning to substitute his servant for his uncle and to have Lady Wishfort seek the impostor as a husband for herself and thus incur disgrace and bring about her own ruin. As a matter of fact, she does this, but meanwhile the plot has been found out by Mirabell's enemies, and retaliation comes by the exposure of his old love-affair with Mrs. Fainall, Lady Wishfort's daughter. The villains seem to be about to triumph, when Mirabell proves Fainall's own infidelity to his marriage vows, the tables are turned and all ends happily.

**A complicated plot.** The plot, it may be seen, is not very elaborate, but it is complicated. The most difficult thing is to discover the relationships of all the characters involved at the moment the curtain rises. It takes full three Acts to make the situation clear, and it is not until Act IV that the servant, Waitwell, appears disguised as the rich uncle. By that time we know the loves and hates of Mirabell and Millamant, Lady Wishfort and Mrs. Marwood, Fainall and his wife, Sir Wilful Witwoud, Waitwell, and Foible; but it is too tangled a skein to remember for long at a time. Fortunately the characters are not much more than puppets in their actions, and we do not greatly care what happens to them from a serious point of view.

An eminent critic thus comments on the plot of this play. "Congreve's plots have been the despair of his admirers, and the plot of *The Way of the World* is no exception. In fact, the ramifications of the intrigues in *The Way of the World* are considerably more difficult to follow than those in *Love for Love* and only a little less confusing than in *The Double-Dealer*. The salient facts of the predicaments that must be resolved in *The Way of the World* are dropped allusively, almost casually, here and there; and when the play is read, a hawk's eye is required to detect them and keep them in order. The close family relationships of the characters and their developing schemes are not easily remembered; and when all threads have been untangled, it appears that nothing is really concluded. It is unlikely that the Fainalls will cease wrangling. Lady Wishfort will continue to hanker for a young lover. Mirabell and Millamant are apprehensive that the constancy for which they long may not be realized."

"There is some justice in the complaint that *The Way of the World* is "a series of still-life pictures". Of physical action the play offers only occasional outbursts. Mrs. Marwood turns from Fainall with the threat: "Break my hands, do! I'd leave them to get loose". Millamant is on one occasion so "nettled" that she tears her fan. Sir Wilfull, noisily and joyously drunk, shatters throughout a single scene the decorous atmosphere of the drawing-room. Lady Wishfort paces the stage in a furious passion and faints with calculated vehemence. But the usual tone of the play is "a harmony of

agreeable voices." Despite these handicaps *The Way of the World* acts well. Agreeable voices have never been more enchanting, and the gestures that emphasize those flawless cadences make up in precision for what they lack in force."

**Enchanting dialogue.** *The Way of the World*, Congreve's literary masterpiece, was a failure on the stage, says a critic, and deserved to be. An audience cannot be expected to sit with any pleasure through five Acts of a drama (particularly an abstruse fifth Act), if there be no coherent plot to hold one's interest and, in fact, no attraction but enchanting dialogue. After all, a play is to be acted on a stage before an audience and must be written with that end in view; it is unlike purer forms of literature which fulfil every requirement if they can be read with pleasure in the solitude of one's study. Judged by this standard, Congreve's last and most characteristic play is not a play at all, but a so-called "closet drama", written in well-nigh perfect dialogue, which must be read and re-read to be appreciated. Moreover, this finished style pervades the entire comedy. One has only to open it at random to light on some gem of comic insight polished to a fine lustre of expression. Mirabell tells Fainall that his mistress's failings have become as familiar to him as his own; and in all probability he will soon like them as well. To which the worldly Fainall's answer is: "Marry her, marry her! be half as acquainted with her charms as you are with her defects, and my life on't, you are your own man again." Witwoud has a *mot* on friendship which, he says, is as dull without freedom "as love without enjoyment, or wine without toasting". Petulant asserts that women should "show their innocence by not understanding what they hear, or else show their discretion by not hearing what they would not be thought to understand." Even a waiting-maid at a chocolate-house, when asked what time her clock says cannot reply without a jocular, "Turned of the last canonical hour, sir". All these quotations are from the first Act of the play, and as yet the resplendent Millamant has not appeared on the stage. When she does, her creator's genius reaches the highest point to which it ever attains.

**The proviso scene.** The proviso scene, where both Mirabell and Millamant pretend that they are not desperately in love, is in a sense traditional. Beatrice and Benedick have something of the same attitude at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The conditions of marriage can be paralleled in D'Urfe's *Astree*, and in the scene between Florimel and Celadon in Dryden's *Secret Love*. In spite of obvious resemblances, the enormous superiority of Congreve's scene is apparent. Dryden's lines are generalised, and they could have been spoken by almost any lovers on the verge of matrimony between 1660 and 1710; Congreve's are all perfectly in character, rich in detail, and continuously witty; and the scene gains from its nearness to Sir Wilfull's abortive proposal of marriage to Millamant. The absurdity of supposing that Millamant could ever marry Sir Wilfull throws into relief the more civilized qualities of Mirabell.

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## “The Way of the World”— Critical Approaches

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### I

**A lukewarm reception.** *The Way of the World* received a somewhat lukewarm welcome. The critic John Dennis tells us that it was “hissed by barbarous fools”; and the dramatist was so exasperated that he is said to have harangued his audience from the stage. Congreve himself admitted that *The Way of the World* had been ill-calculated to “that general taste which seems now to be predominant in the palates of our audience”; and, after its failure, for the remaining thirty years of his life he preferred to be known as a gentleman rather than as a dramatist. The sentimental comedies then becoming popular would scarcely have appealed either to his acute sense of humour or to his astringent sense of style.

### II

**Complicated opening.** “He (Congreve) really did write novels in dramatic form. Take *The Way of the World* as an example. That complicated opening Act really needs some narrative to allow the reader to grasp the essentials of the plot. I’ve been told that even some actors have had a part in the play and never really known what it was about and I wouldn’t be surprised at that.

**Heartless characters.** “The truth is, I have a guilt about *The Way of the World*. I feel I ought to like it and yet I don’t. I’ve tried to view it with Bonamy Dobree’s favourable eye and I can’t. I’m more in tune with Leigh Hunt who said: ‘*The Way of the World* is an admirable comedy yet it is tiresome in its very ingenuity, for its maze of wit and intrigue; and it has no heart, therefore wants the very soul of pleasure’. Yes I agree, it’s a heartless play. Coleridge even went further and accused Congreve of taking wickedness as his subject. He said that the characters of Dryden and Wycherley are ‘often vicious, indecent but not, like Congreve’s, wicked’. I’m sure it’s blasphemy in some quarters to call Mirabell and Millamant wicked but surely they cannot be said to stand for truth and innocence in a naughty world. They both appear to enjoy the artificial shallow lives they lead. They plot to dupe a foolish old woman. Mirabell certainly acknowledges past intrigues and alliances while

Millamant is far more concerned with displaying her wit and getting her own way than responding to a mutually inspiring and fulfilling love. The famous marriage contract scene, praised sometimes for its witty demonstration of honest commonsense about marriage, indicates to me the selfish material basis on which the whole thing is founded.

**Complex plot without much action.** "Congreve is sometimes led astray by admiration for his own cleverness; Wycherley never forgets that action is the most important element in a play and dialogue which does not illuminate or develop the action is inappropriate and inartistic. Lady Wishfort painting her face and sipping brandy before the expected visit of Sir Rowland is of the very stuff of the theatre but her liveliness is not shared by many of the elegant scheming figures who move languishly in and out of the complex plot."

### III

**The importance of money.** "I think that to respond to these characters (in *The Way of the World*) with sympathy or affection is to do the exact opposite of what Congreve wanted. He is writing about the way of the world, a world which he does not particularly like, the new world where the primary good is goods, where everything that lives and breathes and thinks and feels can be reduced to the status of a commodity, a saleable, buyable, or stealable article. Gone are the metaphysical abstractions of spirituality, dignity, reverence. These are not measurable, not amenable to the laws of arithmetic, and therefore do not exist. Money exists, estates exist, coaches and horses and men-servants and maidservants exist, so these head the inventory of desirable equipment in the new paradise, the new rational mathematical computable world.

**View of marriage.** "Congreve's satire is less virulent than Wycherley's, but not the less passionate. To take the marriage contract scene seriously, as Dobree\* appears to do, is in my opinion a total misreading. Congreve is guying† the whole idea of marriage in his age. Marriage too has become an arrangement to be defined in Newtonian terms, a series of checks and balances, subject to definable laws, stripped bare of mystery. This scene can be enjoyed by actors and audience alike, a game of witty badminton, a contest in rhetoric, the outcome of which is not in doubt. The balanced shaping of the dialogue reminds us, in Dobree's phrase, of the couplets of Pope. It is not however the kind of balance which establishes dramatic tension; rather is it inclined to neutralize, enervate, dehydrate the action so that we may, if we approach this play unsympathetically, come away with the impression of having listened to a group of articulate dummies. I would not admit that

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\* Dobree: Bonamy Dobree has written a book called *Restoration Comedy*.

† *guying*—ridiculing; mocking at.

Congreve fails as a dramatist because he is 'led astray by admiration for his own cleverness' or because he uses dialogue which 'does not illuminate or develop the action.' Is he not in effect saying that these people have nothing significant to illuminate, no important action to develop? They are all talking to themselves. We may not like them but that does not justify us in saying they are inaccurate representatives of a certain culture."

#### IV

**The social code.** William Congreve brought to perfection the form which we call the comedy of manners. Its concern is rather with the social postures adopted by human beings than with their native endowments. Men and women are measured according to their capacity to adjust graciously and intelligently to the social code of the day, and this gives the plays a decisive topicality. But Congreve does not accept the social code of the day as an absolute. Though it is the mark of a civilized man to live at ease with it, the intelligent man will see its absurdities. Congreve's ironical detachment gives his work lasting qualities. The squire who is up from the country may cut a poor figure in the drawing-room, but what he has to say about the values of polite society carries its sting nonetheless. Witwoud is an acclimatized townsman and his former guardian, Sir Wilfull, comes up from Shropshire. "This fellow would have bound me to a maker of felts", Witwoud says in horror. "'Sheart'", says Sir Wilfull, "and better than to be bound to a maker of fops; where I suppose you served your turn."\*

**Merits of this play.** *The Way of the World* is certainly the finest comedy of the period. Its felicitous phrasing and polished wit give it an air of sophistication perfectly in tune with the mores\*\* depicted. Mirabell's aim is to win lady Wishfort's niece, Millamant, without sacrifice of that half of her inheritance over which Lady Wishfort has control. And it has already been put at risk by Mirabell's device of "wooing" Lady Wishfort in order to cover his love for her niece. Lady Wishfort's inclination to be wooed is not weakened by her fifty-five years and Mirabell's plot to get her into his power involves subjecting her to another false suit† by a disguised servant, Waitwell, who must be made to marry a maid-servant, Foible, in order to make sure that the tables are not turned by a real wedding between servant and lady that could put everything into the servant's hands. Lady Wishfort is a great comic study and, when roused, a fluent source of what has been called "boudoir Billingsgate". Her preparation for receiving her bogus suitor, Sir Rowland, anticipates the humour of Sheridan:

"Well, and how shall I receive him? In what figure shall I give his heart the first impression?...yes, yes, I'll give the first impres-

\* *The Way of the World*, Act III.

\*\* *mores*—customs or conventions regarded as essential or vital.

† *suit*—courtship; wooing.

sion on a couch.—I won't lie neither, but loll and lean upon one elbow ; with one foot a little dangling off, jogging in a thoughtful way...yes—O, nothing is more alluring than a levee from a couch in some confusion :—it shows the foot to advantage, and furnishes with blushing and recomposing airs beyond comparison."

**The dialogue of the young lovers.** Over against this devastating mockery of middle-aged pretensions to charm and allurements, Congreve's young lovers, Mirabell and Millamant, are partners in wit and discrimination whose brittle phrases and shared ironies suggest an inner contract deep below the level of their banter. "I won't be called names after I'm married", says Millamant in the famous bargaining scene :

**Mirabell.** Names !

**Millamant.** Ay, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are fulsomely familiar...Let us never visit together nor go to a play together ; but let us be very strange and well-bred ; let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while ; and as well-bred as if we were not married at all.

*The Way of the World* brought Congreve's literary career almost to completion at the age of thirty. Of his earlier comedies *Love for Love* is the most memorable. The pursuit of love and money is again at issue, and there is thematic unity in the spectacle of true love requited by true love and spurious love meeting with spurious requitals. The astrologer, Foresight, reminds us of Jonson's quacks, while Sailor Ben Sampson brings a breath of the seven seas that anticipates Smollett. But there is less subtlety in the play than in *The Way of the World*, and there is a hardness in the wit of Angelica, the heroine, which compels one to ask whether Congreve's women do not too often talk like men.

## V

**Plot, characterization, dialogue.** A plot carefully contrived, but not too obviously artificial ; contrasted effects, a repressed vigour which bursts out in certain realistic traits ; moments of comic liveliness, and farcical scenes : such are the elements of variety which save the play from too constant a distinction, from too dry a preciousity.\* In this solid framework, which offers nothing exceptional, psychological raillery and dialogue are displayed with incomparable brilliance. Congreve's heroes are animated by a greatness which is above circumstance, which seems to be its own end, to raise life higher than itself, and to carry the painting of character on to the plane of a poetic and charming creation. There is here a rapture of imagination recalling the early comedies of Shakespeare ; at the same time idealized and strikingly true to life, Millamant and Mirabell are the decisive types of a passion which, welling up from the heart,

\* *preciousity*—affected workmanship.

intoxicates the brain with its light vapours, and excites the intellect without depriving it of its self-command. The exact and restrained skill of a master tones down the radiance of these figures, who come very near to the realm of romantic fancy, without actually entering it. At times the sparkle of the dialogue reminds one of Shakespeare; it revels in impertinent sallies and witty diversions, aided by a wonderful gift for repartee and neat phrasing.

## VI

**The fine flower of Restoration comedy.** *The Way of the World* contains many of the standard situations of Restoration comedy—the witty pair of lovers, the amorous widow, the would-be wit, the squire from the country (who is, however, less mocked for his rusticity than admired for his openness and honesty), intrigues and adulteries and all the usual tensions between desire and reputation. But in the handling of this material, in the perfect balance and control of the prose dialogue and the levels of meaning developed in individual scenes, Congreve develops a tone that is radically different from that found in Etherege or Wycherley. The tone is half amused, half sad. Amid all the perfection of the dialogue, especially the brilliant bouts between the hero and the heroine, Mirabell and Millamant, there are overtones of a partly rueful, partly compassionate awareness of the ambiguities and ironies of life, of youth and age, of love and marriage, of vanity and affectation. From one point of view this play represents the fine flower of Restoration comedy, blooming a generation and more after the society which first bred it had passed away or at least radically changed. But if we look at the play more closely, we see something very different from either the hedonist ease of Etherege or the brutal wit of Wycherley. We see a mellower and profounder comedy in which hero and heroine, perfectly aware of each other's faults and willing to keep up the usual social games in order to save them from the embarrassment of confrontation with each other's naked emotions, reveal in their mutual conversation something of the complexity and sadness of all human relationships.

## VII

**A damaging picture of contemporary life.** In his first plays, *The Old Bachelor*, and *The Double-Dealer*, Congreve had already revealed his stage-craft and his mastery of fluent and witty dialogue, *Love for Love* follows a similar pattern, but is a more explicit social satire. Its complicated plot turns on the mercenary motives that were apt to underlie a modern marriage. The play was violently attacked by a clergyman named Jeremy Collier, and against Collier's accusation of immorality, Congreve defended himself in a sensible, but somewhat ineffective pamphlet. *The Way of the World*, his last play, presents a no less damaging picture of the contemporary social scene. Apart from the witty hero, Mirabell, and the delightful heroine, Millamant, none of the characters portrayed possesses the smallest grain of virtue; avarice, lust, and sexual



jealousy appear to govern all their actions. The endless intricacies of the plot are handled by Congreve with an almost casual ease—but it is in the creation of character through dialogue that he displays his real dramatic genius. The dialogue is continuously witty and concise; and each character has a distinctive mode of speech—a rhythm and choice of language that is his or hers alone. An example is the description by the wonderfully spirited Millamant of the conditions she lays down before she will embark on marriage.

### VIII

**Reasons for its failure.** *The Way of the World* proved a failure on the stage. Not all of the play was above the heads of its audience: Sir Wilfull in his cups and the “boudoir Billingsgate” of Lady Wishfort were well within their understanding. But Congreve on this occasion had written to please himself and a few discriminating friends. He knew this comedy was not suited to the general taste which prevailed. His finer things were thrown away on the average play-goer—such as his subtle discrimination of a Witwoud from a Truewit; his gentle satire on the artificialities of polite society; his concern for intelligent behaviour, personal integrity, the golden mean; his fastidious choice of words and the delicate turn of his ideas. In such a scene as that in which Millamant discusses with her maid Mincing the superiority of verse over prose for pinning up her hair, we have the very poetry of affectation. But this was perhaps one of those beauties which the greater part of his audience were incapable of tasting.

**Wit and satire.** *The Way of the World* contains some of the most brilliant conversation in English literature, and some of the most devastating wit. Congreve’s special note of droll satire is heard perfectly in the scene between Lady Wishfort and her maid Foible, when she looks in the mirror and laments how badly her face compares with her picture. No wonder if such wit, so calm, so precise, so exquisitely muted, met with an uncertain hearing in the pit and the boxes, and never reached the gallery at all. Congreve had finished with the stage; it asked for more than he was prepared to give for, as Mirabell puts it, “to please a fool is some degree of folly.” He had given a good deal of thought to the problems of characterisation in a play. His own characters in *The Way of the World* range from the broadly hilarious to the more nicely discriminated, and he found a personal mode of speech for almost every one of them. Here, as in other respects, he is to be praised not for any striking originality, but for bringing to perfection what other men had done before him.

**The genuine feeling of the lovers.** What is new in *The Way of the World* is the glimpse that we have in Mirabell and Millamant of a world of genuine feeling and permanent relationships. Congreve is obviously turning away in his last play “from the naturalistic philosophy of wit-comedy, and is making concessions to morality, good sense, and sensibility.” Less than a year after this

play was produced, the eighteenth century began, and the old comedy of wit came almost to an end. To some extent Congreve may have anticipated what was coming, but he had no desire to take part in it; he looked back rather than forward. His main contributions to English comedy lie in his intelligent and subtle awareness of the modes and manners of artificial society brought into a sharp contrast with the natural and the vulgar, in his own cool poise and detachment, and in his impeccable style. In the seventeenth-century world of London the mind of Congreve "looked upon the degraded men and things around him like moonshine on a dunghill which shines and takes no pollution."

## IX

**Finer points of the play.** But in spite of such\* passages, in spite of the drunken scenes of Sir Wilfull and Petulant, and the masquerading of Waitwell as Sir Rowland, which are calculated to appeal to the most stupid elements in an audience, the whole play needs close following sentence by sentence. But even that glorious farcical scene between Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland (Act IV) is too fine for immediate appreciation. When Lady Wishfort hopes Sir Rowland will not "impute her complacency to any lethargy of continence", nor think her "prone to any iteration of nuptials", or believe that "the last scruple of carnality is an ingredient", he assures her, "Dear madam, no. You are all camphire and frankincense, all chastity and odour". One must repeat it, laughing to oneself—"all camphire and frankincense, all chastity and odour". Like good poetry, it speaks to the inward ear.

**The denouement.** The *denouement* is forced, a mere trumped up affair, but it does not matter. With the exposure of Fainall, and emotional torture of Mrs. Marwood, the atmosphere seems almost irretrievably ruined; but then we have

**Millamant.** Why does not the man take me? Would you have me give myself to you over again?

**Mirabell.** Ay, and over and over again.

So that the whole torrential scene dissolves before us into grace, and clear, straight-forward feeling. When the first rush has gone, one can only gasp at the incomparable art.

## X

**Reasons for the failure of the play on the stage.** It is not difficult to see why *The Way of the World* was not so immediately a success as *Love for Love*, and why it has never been so popular with audiences. The first Act contains no action, and there is a

\* The reference is to the following bit of comic dialogue:

"Mirabell. Excellent Foible! Matrimony has made you eloquent in love.

Waitwell. I think she has profited, sir. I think so."

(Act II, lines 44-46)  
Waitwell's comment shows the "complacency of the satisfied male".

great deal of discussion of characters whom we do not meet till later in the play, Millamant not appearing before the middle of Act II and Lady Wishfort, who provides the broadest comedy, not before Act III. Some allusions in the opening scenes are difficult or even misleading if we are witnessing a performance for the first time. When Mirabell, for example, hints that Mrs. Marwood is Fainall's mistress, an audience would have to be very quick and alert to take the hint: "You pursue the argument with a distrust that seems to be unaffected, and confesses you are conscious of a concern for which the lady is more indebted to you than your wife." It would also be impossible for an audience to gather in Act I that Mirabell's uncle was an impostor, and that he was to court Lady Wishfort rather than Millamant. (However, such difficulties do not arise after the first reading or the first hearing, and may indeed give ironical undertones to the dialogue).

**The theme of the play.** The plot certainly is a stumbling block to readers, and this has led to an exclusive interest in the scenes in which the plot is of minor importance. Yet this is likely to lead to a distorted understanding of the play. It may be argued that the theme of the play, implicit in the Horatian epigraphs, is the danger of losing fame and fortune through the exposure of adultery, and that the plot is primarily a legacy conflict centring in Lady Wishfort and the four adulterers. This, and the contrast between Fainall and Marwood on the one hand, and Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall on the other, is as important thematically as the wooing of Millamant.

**Objections against Congreve's plays.** Congreve's plays are admitted to be incomparably the first examples of the comedy of manners. Some critics complain, however, of the artificiality of this genre. It is no longer possible to accept Lamb's ingenious argument that the plays are fantasies about an imaginary world. The plays do in fact reflect in a highly polished mirror the society of Congreve's day. The truly artificial comedies (as Bonamy Dobree tells us) are the sentimental comedies of Congreve's successors. But other objections which critics raise is that the world which the Restoration comedies deal with is a narrow one, that the characters are heartless, and that we do not much care what happens to these characters. Schelling, while admitting that Congreve's dramatic art is brilliant, called it "soulless". Henry Eyck Perry, while admitting that the surface of Congreve's plays is dazzling, complained of the lack beneath: "It is only too evident that Congreve never really understood the fundamental principles of human behaviour. He is, after all, only a professional funny man."

**Not a very narrow world.** It is difficult to answer such misunderstandings. But it may at least be said that the world of Congreve's plays is not so narrow as it is sometimes painted, and that we are not bounded by the walls of a fashionable drawing-room, as we are, for example, in *Le Misanthrope*. The outside world—in the shape of Sir Wilfull, for example—is continually breaking in.

**Characters not heartless.** It is necessary also to emphasize that the central characters are not heartless although they pretend to be less in love than they are (as is the case with Mirabell and Millamant, for instance). The ladies and gentlemen are also men and women, *i.e.*, human. The characters for whom our sympathies are engaged are the most sympathetic ones in the plays. All Congreve's heroines are, for instance, chaste. The adultery of Fainall with Mrs. Marwood is condemned; and if the relationship of Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall is condoned, Mirabell's continuing regard and concern for his past mistress are certainly to be recognised.

## XI

**Meredith's lack of appreciation.** Meredith says that *The Way of the World* "has no idea in it, beyond the stale one, that so the world goes"; as though he had been unable to see further into the play than its title, which he did not understand. It is true, however, that Congreve's plays embody a mentality rather than a philosophy; that their consistency is emotional and aesthetic, not systematic and theoretical like Ben Jonson's.

**Good-natured Congreve.** Congreve was both fastidious and good-natured: a rare combination, and the best possible omen for comedy. The same blend is to be found in Chaucer and Jane Austen; they are all three good-natured, with the real good nature that can hate what is hateful, fiercely and whole-heartedly. Congreve hates malice: the deeply-rooted selfish malice of Fainall, as well as the shallow malice of Witwoud. This comes out in the style of his dialogue: for instance in Act I, lines 123—163.

**Gaiety and high spirits.** Congreve's good nature was the quality that most impressed his contemporaries, and has least justice done to it to-day. It is the more important because good nature is really essential to the comic mode; without it comedy sinks to the level of satire, and with it a satirist can rise to the level of comedy. But the most characteristic quality of Congreve's style is not so much good nature as gaiety and high spirits. He was a very young man when he wrote his plays, and it is quite proper that they should be irreverent, especially towards the elderly as in that scene from *Love for Love*, where Angelica is ragging her uncle and her cousin's nurse. Congreve was only beginning in this play to discriminate between slowness of wit, silliness, and knavery; even if he had never learnt it he would have been a delightful, but scarcely perhaps a great, comic writer. His triumphs of discrimination are Lady Wishfort and Sir Wilfull Witwoud in *The Way of the World*—both of whom receive the most exact comic justice.

**Friendly clash.** There is gaiety of another kind in the conversations between Mirabell and Millamant; a delight in the clash between two friends of very different temperaments and of opposite sexes: in that sort of equal and drawn battle that makes for the highest comedy, as in Act II, lines 341-378.