The Way of the World Study Guide

The Way of the World by William Congreve

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

In 1700, when *The Way of the World* was performed on the English stage at Lincoln's Inn Fields (a new theatre that William Congreve managed), it was not a popular success. This was the last play Congreve was to write, perhaps for that reason. Since that time, however, this play has come to be regarded not only as Congreve's masterpiece, but as a classic example of the Comedy of Manners. The play is aptly named for two reasons. First, its action takes place in the "present," which means it reflects the same social period during which the play was originally performed. Second, as a comedy of manners, its purpose is to expose to public scrutiny and laughter the often absurd yet very human passions and follies that characterize social behavior. It therefore transcends its time by holding a mirror to the fashionable world in all of its frivolity and confusion while posing something more precious and sensible as an antidote.

As with all comedies of this type, the principle comic material consists of sexual relations and confrontations. Marriages are made for the sake of convenience and tolerated within precise social limits. Affairs are conventional, jealousies abound, lovers are coy, and gallantry is contrived. Dowries are the coin of the marriage realm and therefore they are of central concern in all contracts and adulterous intrigues. Congreve makes clear that the general way of the world may be funny but it is not particularly nice. In the way of all romantic comedies the "marriage of true minds" is finally achieved, but humiliation, cruelty, and villainy are the means by which the action goes forward. His comedy is not intended to remedy the world, of course, but to offer an insightful and amusing view of both its seedy and sympathetic aspects.

Author Biography

William Congreve was born in 1670 in Bardsey (a village near Leeds), Yorkshire. When his father was commissioned to command the garrison at Youghal four years later, the family moved to Ireland, where Congreve was enrolled at a famous school in Kilkenny. In 1686, he attended Trinity College, Dublin along with his contemporary, Jonathan Swift. In 1688, the Congreves moved back to England, where William began writing his first play, *The Old Bachelour*, as he was recovering from an illness. Although he was sent to study law at the Middle Temple in London in 1691, he was not a diligent student. He preferred writing.

The *The Old Bachelour* was an immature work and borrowed heavily from earlier seventeenth century playwrights, especially Wycherley and Etherege, but it was a popular success. Henry T. E. Perry writes in *The Comic Spirit of Restoration* that when the play first appeared on stage in 1693, with the help of John Dryden, "literary London went mad over the new author." Congreve wrote four more plays between 1693 and 1700: *The Double Dealer*, *Love for Love*, *The Mourning Bride*, and *The Way of the World*, which appeared in 1700 and is considered his masterpiece.

As Congreve's reputation grew as a dramatist, he began to enjoy the benefits of the literary establishment. He counted Swift, Dryden, and Alexander Pope among his friends. When Parson Jeremy Collier wrote his notorious attack on the English stage, Congreve answered it with *The Way of the World*. In *William Congreve,* Bonamy Dobráee conjectures that the play's lukewarm reception may have been the reason that Congreve stopped writing plays. At any rate, Congreve still maintained his connections with the stage, managing Lincoln's Inn Fields and collaborating with Vanbrugh and Walsh in writing *Squire Trelooby* in 1704. He also wrote two libretti.

As a man of letters, he also was rewarded with government sinecures. He was given a post in Customs and, in 1714, was made Secretary of Jamaica. With this patrimony, as well as revenue from theatre productions and some royalties, he made a comfortable living. Congreve never married, but he was fond of the actress, Mrs. Bracegirdle, who played leading roles in all of his plays, including the part of Mrs. Millamant in *The Way of the World*. He was also the lover of the second Duchess of Marlborough and fathered her younger daughter, Lady Mary, who became Duchess of Leeds. When he died in 1729 at the age of fifty-nine, he left most of his estate to the Duchess of Marlborough.

Plot Summary

Prologue

In ancient Greek tragedy, a prologue conventionally set forth the subject of the drama to be enacted. It still refers to the introductory material of a play that serves as a sketch of the characters or themes to appear. It also can be an explanatory speech given by one of the characters, which is the case here. Spoken by "Mr. Betterton," the actor who played the role of Fainall in 1700, the Prologue takes the form of rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter meter. Congreve adapts the classic "heroic" verse both to establish this play as a serious dramatic offering but also to add to the comic effect. The Prologue also acts as both a tongue-in-cheek apology (in advance) and a taunt or challenge to the audience to find fault.

The speech begins with a comparison between "natural" fools and fools of "fortune." Those fools, who presume themselves poets and depend upon fortune, have it the hardest because audiences are so fickle, whereas born fools are protected and even favored. Fortune is to born fools what surrogate mothers are to the offspring of cuckoo birds, known to lay their eggs in the nests of other birds. Poets, on the other hand, are like gamblers who get drawn into games with higher and higher stakes. Congreve therefore "pleads no Merit" from his past successes, a "vain Presumption" that might lose him his "Seat" in "Parnasus"—an allusion to the mountain in Greece sacred to Apollo and the Muses. He throws himself on the mercy of his audience and begs indulgence despite the "Toil" with which he "wrought the following Scenes."

However, as the Prologue progresses, the tone changes. Congreve points the finger at "peevish Wits" who insist on the value of their work despite its reception. He playfully reminds his audience not to expect a satire since everyone in "so Reform'd a Town" is already "Correct" and therefore beyond instruction. Likewise, he claims no one should take it personally if he exposes a "Knave or Fool" since surely no such person would be found in this audience. He ends by referring to himself as a "Passive Poet" who will yield to audience judgment, but clearly he believes his play to be worthy and able to please.

Act 1

The major male characters appear in the first act, set in a chocolate house in London. Two young men, Mirabell and Fainall, are playing cards, and Mirabell is losing. Fainall takes the opportunity to question Mirabell about his "indifferent mood," which leads to a confession that Mirabell's ardent love, Mrs. Millamant, rebuffed him the night before in the company of others. Those others include two "coxcombs" or conceited fools, Witwoud and Petulant, as well as several lady friends: Lady Wishfort (Millamant's Aunt), Mrs. Marwood, and Mrs. Fainall. Fainall tells Mirabell that he must have come upon the women during one of their "cabal-nights" when they meet expressly to "sit upon the

murder'd Reputations of the Week" and from which pow-wow men are deliberately excluded with the exception of the two fops mentioned above.

The following exchange reveals that half of Millamant's fortune depends upon her marrying with her Aunt's blessings. However, Lady Wishfort hates Mirabell for having pretended love to her while hiding his true designs to marry her niece. Mrs. Marwood, who, as the name intimates, is a spoiler, exposes the sham for reasons that appear later in the play. The misfortune of the lovers, the central conflict around which the action will revolve, is thus established early on.

Halfway through the act, a servant to Mirabell appears on the scene to tell him that one Waitwell is married "and bedded." While it is not yet clear who Waitwell is or why this is important, Mirabell tells Fainall that he is "engag'd in a Matter of some sort of Mirth, which is not yet ripe for discovery." The conversation then turns to the character of Millamant, whom Mirabell mildly criticizes for suffering fools. But in a revealing passage about the power of love, Mirabell confesses that he likes Millamant "with all her Faults" and even because of them. They are precious to him since he has studied them and knows them by heart. They are "as familiar to me as my own Frailties" he says, and "in a little time longer I shall like 'em as well."

A messenger appears next with a letter from Sir Wilfull Witwoud for his half-brother Witwoud who is in the next room playing cards. Sir Wilfull has come to London to "Equip himself for Travel" abroad, which Mirabell finds outrageous since the man is over forty. Again the conversation between Mirabell and Fainall reveals information about characters introduced later, in this case the bashful, obstinate, but good-natured Sir Wilfull. He is compared to Witwoud whom Mirabell describes as a meddling fool but completely undiscerning about affronts directed at him. Enter Witwoud on cue who then demonstrates the nature of his wit in an amusing exchange among the three. Cajoled into revealing the nature of his friend Petulant's faults, Witwoud reveals several, which he then turns to advantages. During the conversation, a coachman enters calling for Petulant and the audience finds that he has paid three ladies of indistinct reputations to call upon him to impress people with his own popularity. He also comes disguised in public places to call upon himself and leave messages for himself for the same reason. When he enters the room, he is affecting to be put out by the intrusion of the ladies and tells the coachman he will not come. Witwoud remarks, however, that the real reason Petulant does not go out is because there is "no more Company here to take notice of him."

Through Petulant and Witwoud, Mirabell learns that Lady Wishfort is hatching a plot to marry Millamant to Mirabell's uncle, who has come to London for the purpose of disinheriting Mirabell. If Millamant and the uncle marry and have a child, Mirabell will be disinherited. And he will lose his love. Throughout the exchange, Witwoud admires Petulant, but Petulant proves himself oafish and illbred. The men decide to walk in the "Mall" where they are sure to meet the ladies. Mirabell asks the two "gallants" to walk by themselves rather than embarrass him with their ribald remarks to women, whereby Petulant asserts that any lady who blushes deserves the shame since she has revealed in her understanding that either she is not innocent or not discreet enough to turn away.

The act ends with an imputation in the form of a rhyming couplet spoken by Mirabell: the behavior that passes as fashionable wit is really thinly disguised impudence and malice.

Act 2

The action takes place in St. James's Park where Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are first seen discussing the general depravity of men, a fashionable convention of the time; however, despite the assertions that men are "Vipers," both ladies show that they are attracted to Mirabell. While they are talking, Fainall and Mirabell join them. Mr. and Mrs. Fainall seem tender toward one another, but when the two couples split, Fainall with Mrs. Marwood and Mrs. Fainall with Mirabell, it becomes plain that Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are having an affair and that Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall were once lovers. Mrs. Marwood intimates that Fainall's wife likes Mirabell, but when Fainall responds, he accuses them both of being in love with Mirabell. Mrs. Marwood is offended and they quarrel. She threatens to broadcast their affair to the world and Fainall backs down. In Fainall's ensuing attempt to make peace, Mrs. Marwood breaks into tears and to hide her face, dons a mask just as Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall enter.

Mrs. Fainall tells Mirabell how much she despises her husband. At the same time, she remarks how she once loved Mirabell "without Bounds." Her marriage to Fainall, in fact, is one of convenience, made only to save her reputation. Mirabell makes Mrs. Fainall privy to his plot to have his servant, Waitwell, pretend to be his invented uncle (Sir Rowland). He has fixed it so that Waitwell has married Lady Wishfort's waiting woman, Foible, to put them in league together. The plan is to have Waitwell, in the guise of the invented uncle, profess love to Lady Wishfort. Once she is caught in a trap, she will promise her niece to Mirabell to save herself from embarrassment. The plot thickens, so to speak, when Mirabell also tells Mrs. Fainall that he deliberately directed Foible to have Lady Wishfort announce in public that she would try and make a match between this invented uncle and Mrs. Millamant, his strategy being to secretly help Lady Wishfort keep her own marriage plans to the uncle a secret.

The young lovers come together for the first time when Mrs. Millamant enters the scene with her maid, Mincing, and her gallant follower, Witwoud. Witwoud bombards the gathered friends with a barrage of witticisms that demonstrate his tedious slavery to fashion and his silliness. Millamant then playfully satirizes the convention of letter sending as she and her maid discuss how they have "pinn'd up her hair" with the poetry but never the prose. Mirabell cuts through the raillery by confronting Millamant about the previous night when she snubbed him. The exchange conveys a sense of the popular courting conventions that require the façade of pretense, secrets, charm, and cruelty but never the demonstration of true feeling. When Mirabell gets Millamant alone, he questions why she spends time with such fools as Witwoud and Petulant. Millamant accuses him of being tiresome and walks away, but not without first letting drop the hint that she knows all about his plot. When she exits the scene, Mirabell is left alone pondering the "whirlwind" of love.

As the act closes, Waitwell and Foible enter the scene, obviously enjoying their recent nuptials. Foible tells Mirabell how his plot is progressing. She has supposedly gone out to show Sir Rowland the Lady's picture in order to inflame his most ardent desires. She will then hurry back to her mistress to tell her how "he burns with Impatience" to see her. Mirabell is happy with the report and gives her money. He promises her that her future will be secure if all goes well. Just as Foible is about to return to her mistress, she sees Mrs. Marwood go by disguised in her mask. She suddenly panics and is in a hurry to get back lest Marwood tell her Lady she has seen her talking with Mirabell, Lady Wishfort's sworn enemy. Mirabell now encourages Waitwell to "forget" himself and "transform into Sir Rowland." In a comic last speech, Waitwell notes that it "will be impossible" for him to remember his old self since he has been married and knighted all in one day. He speaks the amusing closing line (again in rhyming couplet) that feigns grief over the fact that he must lose his title and yet keep his wife.

Act 3

Finally Lady Wishfort appears. The scene is a room in her house. She is in a tizzy, asking her servant, Peg, to fetch her a "little Red." Peg mistakenly thinks she means "Ratifia," a kind of cherry brandy, but she means her make-up or "paint." However, Foible has locked up the paint and Peg can't get at it. In a fit of anxiety, Lady Wishfort tells Peg to bring the Ratifia after all. The exchange shines a light on the silly vanity and bawdy, colorful humor of the Lady. Enter Mrs. Marwood. She indeed has reached the Lady before Foible and relates what she saw in St. James Park. When the Lady hears Foible entering, she bids Marwood hide in her closet so she can sound out her maid.

Foible, however, is up to the task. She admits speaking to Mirabell, but only because he begged her. She imputes to Mirabell's character a cruelty that readily disposes the Lady to hate him even more. Lady Wishfort is especially incensed when Foible tells her that Mirabell has described her as "superannuated." Lady Wishfort is "full of the Vigour of Fifty-five," as Mirabell remarks in the first act. She has a difficult time keeping her face together and must practically lay on the paint with a trowel. The truth hurts, and the Lady is "so fretted" that she needs to repair her face before Sir Rowland comes, which Foible promises will be soon. Their exchange ends with Lady Wishfort pondering how best to receive Sir Rowland. She hopes he will be somewhat "importunate" so that she will not have to advance and "break Decorums." Clearly, while she wants to preserve conventions, she is desperate for a husband and will not be too "nice" in the observance of convention if it does not suit the purpose. Before the Lady exits the scene, Foible reassures her that Sir Rowland is a "brisk man" and will take her "by storm." The Lady is pacified.

Mrs. Fainall enters and tells Foible that she, too, is privy to the plot against her mother, Lady Wishfort. They discuss the details, not knowing that Mrs. Marwood is still hiding in the closet. Foible tells Mrs. Fainall that she is afraid Mrs. Marwood is watching her and so she must be careful. She hints at Marwood's motivations when she tells Mrs. Fainall that Marwood "has a Month's mind" (meaning she likes Mirabell), but that he "can't abide her." When they exit, Marwood enters the scene. She has overheard everything

and is both angry and resolved that she will ruin Mirabell's plans. Lady Wishfort enters and Mrs. Marwood puts it into her head to match Sir Wilfull Witwoud with Lady Wishfort's niece, Millamant. The Lady thinks it a good idea and says she will "propose it." Foible enters to announce that Witwoud and Petulant have arrived to dine. The Lady and Foible exit to change for dinner.

Enter Mrs. Millamant and Mincing. The exchange between Millamant and Marwood exposes the mean-spirited jealousy of Marwood as she advises Millamant that her love of Mirabell is no longer a secret and therefore not a fit subject for "Pretence." Millamant accuses her of being "Censorious" and they trade thinly veiled insults. Millamant accuses Marwood of revealing to her aunt the secret love between her and Mirabell. Marwood taunts her, and Millamant pretends to be amused that Mirabell loves her so much that he has no use for the rest of the world, including Marwood. Marwood says she hates Mirabell and Millamant merrily agrees that she does, too, although this is just to have another go at Marwood, who is older than her and still unmarried. Marwood warns Millamant: "Your merry Note may be chang'd sooner than you think." Millamant then calls for a song that satirizes the game of love by concluding that love is measured by the ambition involved, and the only worthy conquest is the one that has been won after so many others have tried and lost. Enter Petulant and Witwoud, who strive to showcase their combined wit in an amusing sally that further proves the aptness of their names.

Millamant and Mincing exit while Sir Wilfull Witwoud, dressed in his "Country Riding Habit," along with a servant to Lady Wishfort enter. In a nod to "fashion," which disdains country breeding, Witwoud pretends not to know his half-brother. Sir Wilfull approaches the "two gallants" standing by, who still refuse to speak. He speaks first: "No Offence, I hope." Petulant and Witwoud are disgusted by his country manners and Witwoud adjures Petulant to "smoke him" or make fun of him. However, their attempts to "unman" him rebound, for Sir Wilfull is a match for them and answers them both honestly and artfully, although somewhat coarsely. "The Fashion's a Fool; and you're a Fop, dear Brother," he proclaims. He roundly berates Witwoud for leaving the service of an attorney to become a professional dandy. Mrs. Marwood inquires after Sir Wilfull's plans to travel but he says first he will "tarry" and "learn somewhat of your Lingo." When Lady Wishfort and Fainall enter, the dialogue has established Sir Wilfull as somewhat buffoonish and crude but good-natured and honest.

Lady Wishfort and Fainall enter, and Lady Wishfort greets her guests. Mincing announces dinner and everyone exits except Mrs. Marwood and Fainall, who have been talking apart. Mrs. Marwood acquaints Fainall with Mirabell's plot to outwit Lady Wishfort, and Fainall is dumbfounded that he has been made a cuckold. Mrs. Marwood pragmatically suggests that they prevent the plot and thereby spoil Mirabell's chances at Millamant's fortune. She reassures Fainall that his wife had given up her affair before marriage and that he should be satisfied to stay with her as soon as he has got hold of all her money. Fainall is more outraged that his wife has out-trumped him ("put Pam in her pocket") than that she has been unfaithful. Mrs. Marwood suggests a counter-plot: Tell Lady Wishfort that Mrs. Fainall has been unfaithful with Mirabell and Lady Wishfort will be so "enraged" she will do anything to save her daughter's reputation. Mrs.

Marwood admits that her idea of matching Millamant and Sir Wilfull may now be an obstacle to their plan, for if they should marry, Millamant will claim her rightful fortune. However, Fainall promises to get him drunk so that he will be unable to make proper advances. Mrs. Marwood determines to write an anonymous letter to Lady Wishfort revealing all. Fainall is comforted by the notion that, in the worst case, he still has from his wife a "deed of Settlement of the best part of her Estate; which I wheadl'd out of her." There is both disingenuous conceit and a premonition of truth in the closing couplet delivered by Fainall on the need for husbands to endure, to be neither too wise nor too foolish lest they suffer the consequences of pain or shame.

Act 4

The action continues in Lady Wishfort's house as the Lady and Foible discuss preparations for Sir Rowland's visit. In a moment of unselfconscious comic animation, Lady Wishfort ponders how best to effect the most "alluring" pose and so take Sir Rowland's breath away. As they hear his coach approaching, Foible tells the Lady that Sir Wilfull is on his way toward getting drunk and the Lady anxiously sends Foible to bring Millamant and return so that she is not left alone long with Sir Rowland. They exit and Mrs. Millamant and Fainall enter. Foible tells Millamant that Mirabell has been waiting to see her. She hesitates coyly and then decides to receive him. All the while she is walking and repeating verses by poet John Suckling (an early seventeenth-century poet perhaps best known for his "Ballad upon a Wedding"), which shows her to be deep in thought about the nature of sexual relationships.

Meanwhile, Sir Wilfull enters terribly drunk, and Mrs. Fainall intercepts him. She suggests that Sir Wilfull approach Millamant and "pursue his point" and when he hesitates, too bashful to proceed, she locks him in the room and exits. When Millamant says aloud "Natural, easie Suckling!" referring to the verses she has been quoting, Sir Wilfull thinks she means him and once again his inability to grasp the "lingo" of London makes for an amusing exchange. He is unable to make any headway with Millamant. It is clear that he is no match for her intellect or sophistication, and she sends him away somewhat frustrated as Mirabell enters.

Mirabell finishes the Suckling verse that Millamant has been quoting, which alludes to the mythical romance between Phoebus and Daphne and, by extension, the two of them. Here begins a "dance" of love marked by both conventional coy flirtation and true regard. They explore one another's expectations and needs by setting prenuptial conditions under which the marriage will be managed and tolerated. She wants to make sure of her independence and privacy before she must "by degrees dwindle into a Wife." He also has his terms that must be agreed upon before he is "enlarg'd into a Husband." She must, primarily, not be involved in scandals or become a slave to fashion. Millamant is outraged that he should think her capable of such behavior, and so they agree as Mrs. Fainall re-enters.

Mrs. Fainall shares in their joy but hurries Mirabell out since her mother, the Lady Wishfort is on her way in. There's danger that if he is caught there, the Lady will fly into

a rage and be distracted from the business at hand; namely, Sir Rowland's pretended suit. Mirabell exits. Mrs. Foible comments on Sir Wilfull's drunkenness and mentions that he and Petulant were ready to quarrel when she came away. Millamant admits her love for Mirabell and conveys her disdain of Sir Wilfull. Enter Witwoud who tells them that Lady Wishfort broke up the "fray" and, soon after, a very drunk Petulant enters. He makes a rude, abrupt proposal of love to Millamant, for which Witwoud offers hyperbolic and satirical praise ("thou art an Epitomizer of words . . . a retailer of Phrases").

Petulant responds by insulting Witwoud and calling him "half of an Ass," Sir Wilfull being the other half. Witwoud finds the insult wittily endearing and asks to be kissed "for that." In the ribald dialogue that follows, Millamant learns that the would-be quarrel has been about her. Apparently, Petulant has defended her beauty and his claim to it, but moodily he relinquishes her by his next remark: "If I shall have my Reward, say so; if not, fight for your Face the next time yourself." He exits with a curt explanation that he's going home to sleep with his maid. When Mrs. Fainall asks why everyone is in such a "pickle," Witwoud explains that it is Fainall's plot to "get rid of the Knight" (Sir Wilfull).

Lady Wishfort and Sir Wilfull enter arguing over his drunkenness, but Sir Wilfull is immune to the Lady's reproaches. He is all merriment and pliability, willing and able in his drunken state to marry Millamant if that is in everyone's best interests. He is singing popular drinking songs, talking ridiculously of traveling to the "Antipodes" (the opposite poles of the earth), and making a fool of himself. Millamant and Mrs. Fainall find his smell so offensive they exit the scene. When Lady Wishfort begs him to indeed travel, to travel as far away as possible to the "Saracens or the Tartars, or the Turks" he launches into a whimsical tirade on traveling outside Christian lands. After a third round of song, Foible enters to whisper to Lady Wishfort that her suitor is impatiently awaiting her. Lady Wishfort begs Witwoud to take Sir Wilfull away and the two exit, Sir Wilfull still singing. Waitwell enters disguised as Sir Rowland and pretends to be mad with desire for her. The Lady is taken in by his advances. Goaded on by her own desperation for a husband and Sir Rowland's aspersions against "that Unnatural Viper," Mirabell, she agrees to a quick arrangement, first having secured that Sir Rowland suspects no "sinister appetite" or "scruple of Carnality" has prompted her to marry. Sir Rowland, of course, is a gallant courtier, and he reassures the Lady that her honor is not suspect. Foible enters to tell her a letter has come for her and she exits. Lady Wishfort soon reappears with the letter.

Foible recognizes Mrs. Marwoods's writing and enjoins Waitwell to get the letter from her. He pretends to recognize the writing, and sensing his "Passion" by this show of jealousy, she has him read with her. The letter uncovers Mirabell's intrigue and Sir Rowland as an impostor. Lady Wishfort nearly faints. Waitwell, however, quick on his feet, denounces the letter as the work of Mirabell. He vows to revenge himself but Lady Wishfort pleads with him to act sensibly. He promises to give proof of his authentic intentions by bringing her the "black-box, which Contains the Writings of my whole Estate." Lady Wishfort acquiesces, and Waitwell delivers the final couplet that promises her satisfaction and his immediate vindication. But Foible has the last word. In a final provocative pun, she suggests that the "Arrant Knight" is really an "arrant Knave."

Act 5

Lady Wishfort's house is the setting for the denouement. Lady Wishfort, in some of the most colorful language of the play, is roundly dressing down Foible for her discovered part in the humiliating charade. She threatens to send her back to the streets where she found her, and Foible is desperately trying to defend herself. But Lady Wishfort is not taken in and announces that her "Turtle" is already in custody and that she "shall Coo in the same Cage." She exits as Mrs. Fainall enters. Mrs. Fainall cheers Foible by telling her that Mirabell is releasing her husband. Foible then reveals that Mrs. Marwood and Fainall have been having an affair. She recounts that when she and Mincing caught them red-handed, she was made to swear secrecy on a "Book of Verses and Poems," an oath no one could take seriously. Mrs. Fainall is surprised but quick to understand the opportunity this discovery allows.

Mincing enters and tells them that Lady Wishfort is waiting to see Foible and that Mirabell has freed Waitwell. Mincing delivers a message from Mirabell that Foible is to hide in the closet until Lady Wishfort has calmed down. Fainall has upset her by demanding the Lady's fortune or threatening to be divorced. Mincing reports that Millamant is ready to marry Sir Wilfull to save her fortune. Mincing agrees to "vouch" for Mrs. Fainall when she calls her. Mincing and Foible exit.

Lady Wishfort and Mrs. Marwood enter. Lady Wishfort thanks Marwood for her friendship and her timely discovery of the several plots against her.

She questions her daughter's apparent fall from grace, all the more deplorable since the Lady herself was a "Mold" and a "Pattern" for her. It is of course an ironic moment since by now it is clear how little virtue plays a role in the Lady's pursuits. Mrs. Fainall protests her innocence and claims that they have both been wronged. She accuses Marwood of being a "Friend" to her husband and that she will prove it. Mrs. Marwood takes offense and Lady Wishfort is embarrassed for her. However, Mrs. Fainall is unfazed. She warns her mother that Marwood is "a Leach" who will "drop off when she's full." The comic irony is obvious when Lady Wishfort then soliloquizes about the irreproachable education that her daughter has been given in the "Rudiments of Vertue," taught from infancy to detest and avoid men. Indeed, she talks herself out of belief in her daughter's guilt and agrees that Fainall should prove his charges. But the clever and ambitious Mrs. Marwood regales her with scurrilous scenes of what will happen in court. The Lady shudders to think of what havoc such a course will wreck on her reputation and she backs down.

Fainall enters and details the condition under which she must surrender her estate. First, she must not marry unless, out of necessity, he chooses her husband, and second, his wife must settle her entire fortune on him and depend upon him entirely for her "Maintenance." He finally demands Millamant's six thousand pounds, which "she has forfeited . . . by her disobedience" in contracting a marriage against the Lady's will and by refusing Sir Wilfull. The Lady asks for time to consider and Fainall grants her the amount of time needed to draw up the papers. He exits and Lady Wishfort is left to the

cold comforts of Marwood who, she thinks, is still her friend. She calls Fainall a "merciless Villain," a "Barbarian" compared to Languish, her daughter's first husband.

Millamant and Sir Wilfull then enter with the news that they will wed. Lady Wishfort is greatly comforted that Millamant has nullified her contract with Mirabell, who waits to be admitted outside. Lady Wishfort can not bear to see him, but Millamant persuades her by saying that he plans to travel with Sir Wilfull and never trouble her again. Sir Willful corroborates her statement and Marwood, who senses another plot, exits. Sir Wilfull and Mirabell enter. Mirabell apologizes and Sir Wilfull acts as his supporter. Lady Wishfort grudgingly agrees to "stifle" her resentment on account of Sir Wilfull if Mirabell relinquishes any contract with her niece. Mirabell asserts that he has already done so. Despite her distrust of Mirabell, she is attracted. She says in an aside, "his appearance rakes the Embers which have so long layn smother'd in my Breast."

Fainall and Mrs. Marwood enter together, Fainall with the papers for the Lady to sign. She tells him of Millamant's decision to marry Sir Wilfull, which Fainall calls "a sham." Sir Wilfull, his back up, threatens to draw his "Instrument" if Fainall does not withdraw his. But Fainall is undeterred. He insults Sir Wilfull and again warns that if the Lady doesn't sign, he will set Mrs. Fainall "a drift, like a Leaky hulk to Sink or Swim." The Lady is beside herself, and when Mirabell offers advice, she accepts it. He asks for her niece in "Compensation" but says he is willing to help her no matter what. The Lady is overwhelmed by his generosity and agrees that he shall have Millamant if he can save her from Fainall. Enter Mrs. Fainall, Foible, and Mincing. They expose the affair between Marwood and Fainall, but Fainall still will not back down and stands on his threat to expose Mrs. Fainall's "shame." Mirabell, however, has one more ace up his sleeve.

Enter Waitwell with the black box and soon after Petulant and Witwoud. The box contains Mrs. Fainall's settlement (witnessed by Witwoud and Petulant) signed over in trust to Mirabell before she married Fainall precisely in order to avoid the very treachery now being enacted. Fainall is forced to admit that the settlement he thought had been signed over to him is a fake. He tries to run at his wife with his sword but is stopped by Sir Wilfull. He exits vowing revenge. Mrs. Fainall confronts Mrs. Marwood, who also warns that she will get even. Marwood exits. Nothing remains but to celebrate the restored lovers and the truce between Lady Wishfort and Mirabell. Mirabell reveals that Sir Wilfull has been a willing accomplice in Mirabell's plans and so will suffer no pain at the loss of Millamant. The lovers embrace, and Mirabell quiets the Lady's last fears that Fainall will "pursue some desperate Course." Fainall needs his marriage (and his wife's money) in order to survive, and Mirabell promises to be the mediator of peace. He restores the deed of trust to Mrs. Fainall, suggesting that "it may be a means well manag'd to make you live Easily together." Her unhappy fate, then, is to continue to live with Fainall, but with new knowledge and power. The act ends with a quatrain warning against the evils of adultery.

Epilogue

Mrs. Bracegirdle, the actress who has played the part of Mrs. Millamant, speaks the closing lines of the play, which, according to comic convention, takes a satirical punch at drama critics.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

The prologue is noted in the text of the play as being spoken by the actor who originally played the character of Fainall when *The Way of the World* was staged. It starts with a comparison of two different types of fools. Poets are one kind of fool, because they depend on the tastes and whims of other people to earn their livings. These tastes are determined by fortune, and are completely random, meaning writers are in a sense gambling that the audience will like what they write. "Natural" fools (stupid people) on the other hand are blessed by fortune.

The prologue goes on to state that poets are often fooled by the success of one play or work into believing the next one will be successful. Fame and fortune are said to be fleeting, and one bad play can cost a poet a chance at immortality.

The prologue then refers to Congreve ("He wrought the following scenes") and how he knows this play will have to stand on its own without relying on his past successes. He goes on to say the purpose of the play is to please the audience and not instruct them about life, since the audience is already very knowledgeable. He also says he knows the audience will not be offended by any references to fools in the play, since none of the audience members are fools themselves. The prologue ends by referring to Congreve as a "passive poet" who will accept the audience's opinion of his play.

Prologue Analysis

The prologue acts as an introduction to Congreve and his play. While prologues were a normal way to introduce the subjects of a play in reformation theatre, the prologue to *The Way of the World* also serves as a platform for Congreve to fire back at audiences who had not responded well to the first performances of this play (*The Way of the World* did not appeal to audiences). The prologue, therefore, defends his decision to add some unusual and new elements to his play.

The prologue also challenges the audience to try something new, to use their "reformed" sensibilities to enjoy something a bit subtler than they may have been used to. This challenge stems from the fact that this play was heavily criticized for not having any "farce" (characters placed in improbable or ridiculous situations). Congreve also uses satire (words or language used to make fun of human characteristics) when he says that the play does not contain satire, since it is full of satirical pictures of different behaviors.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The first act is set in a chocolate house (a kind of coffee shop). We are introduced to the two major male characters, Mirabell and Fainall, who are playing cards. When Mirabell loses, Fainall asks him why he does not seem to be paying much attention to the game. Fainall says it is not as much fun to win against a player who does not really care about the game. Mirabell confesses that his time with the woman he loves, Mrs. Millamant, was cut short when she welcomed two other men, Witwoud and Petulant, and her aunt Lady Wishfort. Also included were Mrs. Marwood, Fainall's wife, and a few other ladies.

Mirabell describes how the women became very silent, and then Wishfort talks about how some people stay too long when they are visiting. Millamant agrees with her statement, and so Mirabell then notes that he left after telling Millamant after telling her he knew when he was not welcome. Fainall sympathizes with Mirabell, but tells him not to take what Millamant says too seriously, since she was obeying her aunt's wishes. He adds that the group that gathered was like a women's group and that the two men are only included because together they make up one man from the community to prevent any scandals arising from secret keeping.

We then find out that Wishfort dislikes Mirabell because he tricked her into thinking that he loved her. Mirabell did so to hide the fact that he was in love with Millamant. His plan was to win her aunt's favor so she would give her blessing to a marriage between Millamant and Mirabell (her blessing would ensure that Millamant receives all of her fortune). His plan was to win her over by writing a song about her and having a friend write a lampoon (a poem that chastises bad behavior) accusing her of having an affair with a younger man. He also notes that he appealed to her vanity (by pretending she is much younger than her actual age of 55) by reporting a rumor that she was pregnant.

Mirabell tells Fainall that Marwood told Wishfort about the deception, and this is why Wishfort now dislikes him. Fainall says that Marwood must have done it because Mirabell had not returned her romantic gestures. In return, Mirabell notes that Fainall is probably having a romantic relationship with Marwood, which he denies.

Fainall leaves the room briefly to talk to Witwoud and Petulant. A footman arrives and tells Mirabell that Mirabell's valet Waitwell has married Wishfort's maid Foible. Mirabell is satisfied by this news, and tells the footman to order the newlyweds to meet with him before Foible returns to Lady Wishfort.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Our first view of Fainall and Mirabell shows us about their characters. While they both appear to be "rakes," (men with a "devil-may-care" attitude and a love of courtship and romantic affairs) there are a few differences between the two. Mirabell seems to be a

normal lover although he is clearly a very sneaky and deceptive person willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goals. The married Fainall appears to be a philosophical character, always ready to help his friend understand what is going on. However, Mirabell's hint that he is having an affair also suggests that Fainall can be deceptive as well.

In addition to introducing Fainall and Mirabell, scene one also brings the audience up to date on some events that have occurred before the action begins. By summing things up in this way, Congreve is able to advance the story and spend more time on the central plot involving Mirabell and Millamant, without having to show the Mirabell / Wishfort false romance on stage.

It is also worth noting that scene one introduces the notion that some characters have names that are symbolic of their personalities or character traits. Marwood, for example, "mars" or spoils Mirabell's chances for a covert romance with Millamant, while Witwoud (which can be taken to mean, "would for wit," or lacking in intelligence) and Petulant (cranky or whiny) are not described in very flattering terms by Fainall and Mirabell. Another example is Lady Wishfort, who we learn had "wished for" a romance with Mirabell. This dramatic device allows Congreve to inform the audience about his characters without having to resort to length introductions or character development.

The final few lines of the scene suggest to the audience that Mirabell has some sort of scheme planned involving Lady Wishfort's maid. Although it has not yet been explained, the audience has been teased enough to expect and anticipate something in future scenes.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Scene 2 takes place in the same chocolate house, with Mirabell, Fainall and Betty the waitress. Mirabell tells Fainall that he is planning something, but is not ready to reveal his deception. He then criticizes Fainall for letting his wife be a part of the "cabal" that shunned him the previous night.

The two begin discussing Millamant's character, and Mirabell notes that she is a bit foolish for spending time with the fools in the cabal. When Fainall says that he is to critical of her, Mirabell replies that he has studied all of her faults and decided that he loves her anyway. He adds that her faults have become as familiar to him as his own have, and that now that he has memorized them he finds that they suit her very well.

Next, a messenger enters looking for Witwoud. The messenger tells Fainall and Mirabell that he has a message for Witwoud from his half brother Sir Wilfull Witwoud, and they send him into the next room. Fainall tells Mirabell that if his romance with Millamant is successful he will become Sir Wilfull's relative, since Sir Wilfull is also Lady Wishfort's niece. Sir Wilfull, says Fainall, has come to London to get supplies and clothing for traveling. This fact amuses Mirabell, who notes that Sir Wilfull is over 40. Fainall agrees, but says that Sir Wilfull is going off on an important mission for England, and that the country can have "blockheads of all ages."

The two discuss Sir Wilfull, comparing his behavior when drunk to the monster Caliban in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (Caliban was an awful character who plotted against his master and was cruelly treated). Otherwise, they say, Sir Wilfull is good natured and bashful. They then compare him to Witwoud, whom they say has a bit more humor and intelligence than Sir Wilfull.

Witwoud then enters, and the three have a funny conversation. Witwoud asks Mirabell about Millamant, and then praises her. Fainall and Mirabell draw Witwoud into a discussion about Petulant. Witwoud complains that Petulant has just beaten him at cards and won some money from him. Fainall notes that he should let Petulant win, since Witwoud has all the wit between the two of them. Witwoud defends Petulant, but then notes that his friend does not have good breeding. He describes Petulant as a rogue, and says that he sometimes says things that he should not and has a tendency to lie.

A coachman enters with a message for Petulant that three ladies waiting for him outside. Witwoud reveals that the women are prostitutes that Petulant hired to make people think he is popular with women. He adds that one of Petulant's favorite tricks is to disguise himself and then send himself messages in order to appear like an important man. Petulant enters, and pretends to be mad about the women intruding on his privacy and refuses to go out to the women. Witwoud, however, notes that Petulant stays so

that he can continue to try to impress people. The three make some sarcastic remarks about Petulant, which he does not seem to understand.

Fainall says that Petulant did not go out to the women because he is more interested in Millamant. Mirabell threatens to kill Petulant, and Petulant says that he should be more concerned about other people. Petulant and Witwoud then reveal to Mirabell and Fainall that Lady Wishfort is planning to arrange a marriage between Millamant and Mirabell's uncle, who has recently come to town. We also learn that if this uncle marries and has a child, Mirabell will lose his fortune.

Mirabell then ends the conversation and asks Fainall to walk with him in the "mall" (St. James Park) to find Millamant and the other ladies. Mirabell closes the act with a rhyming couplet that states that fashionable behavior and humor often disguises mean and rude talk.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Scene 2 also introduces several of the play's characters and themes. Mirabell's frank discussion of Millamant's faults and weaknesses allows the audience to see that he really does love her; this is an important reassurance in light of the other characters' constant reference to how much money he will gain by marrying her or lose by seeing his uncle marry her.

We also learn that Witwoud and Petulant are essentially harmless schemers, but they do provide the two male protagonists with information about what Lady Wishfort is planning. This plan seems to be a direct response to Mirabell's earlier deception, and has the double effect of robbing him of his inheritance and the woman he loves. The subject is only introduced, however, and the audience is left in suspense to see what will happen. Witwoud and Petulant are also introduced as a way to add humor to the play with their foolish behavior and speeches.

Despite Mirabell's earlier deception of Lady Wishfort, he is introduced throughout Act 1 as a perfect gentleman. The other male characters in the scene each have their own faults and character flaws, and Congreve leaves the audience in no doubt that there is an "order" to the four characters. From best and most important to least valuable this order runs: Mirabell, the perfect gentleman, Fainall, the unfaithful husband, Witwoud, the petty man who tries to imitate other men, and Petulant, the coarse and rude man.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

The scene opens in St. James Park, where Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are walking. Mrs. Fainall talks about how men change from being passionate as lovers to cold as husbands. Mrs. Marwood says that men are inconstant, but she would rather love and be left by a man than not be loved at all. Mrs. Fainall says that Mrs. Marwood pretends not to like men to impress Lady Wishfort. Mrs. Marwood denies this, insisting that while love is important, she really does despise men.

She then reveals her plan to make her husband thinks she is cheating on him ("cuckolding" him.) Mrs. Fainall asks her why she only wants to give him the impression that he has been cuckolded, and Mrs. Marwood replies that his anguish will last longer if he cannot prove that she has been unfaithful. When Mrs. Fainall mentions Mirabell, Mrs. Marwood says she hates him for his pride, but it is clear to the audience from her sudden anger that she does actually care about him. This upsets Mrs. Fainall, which she blames on seeing her husband approaching.

Fainall and Mirabell enter and soon they are talking individually with the ladies. Mrs. Fainall says she wants to talk to Mirabell about the previous evening and he says that he does not want Fainall to hear, so the two exit briefly. Mrs. Marwood and Fainall then start talking, and Marwood asks if they are going to go with Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall. Fainall says that she is jealous of his wife spending time with Mirabell, and Mrs. Marwood replies that because of her love for him she is worried about the effect that Mirabell being alone with his wife will have on his honor. This makes it clear that Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are having an affair.

Fainall says that both of the women are in love with Mirabell. Mrs. Marwood says that she hates Mirabell, and challenges Fainall to prove otherwise. He brings up how she ruined Mirabell's plan to win over Lady Wishfort, and she claims that she only did this to show her loyalty to Lady Wishfort. She then threatens to reveal their (Fainall and Mrs. Marwood's) affair, and Fainall stops arguing.

She tells Fainall that he has ruined her by spending her money and wrecking her reputation. He replies that her actions to stop Mirabell and Millamant kept Millamant's fortune intact, and that if Lady Wishfort had taken this money away it would have gone to Mrs. Fainall and him. He notes that he could have then spent that money on her. Fainall claims that he only married his wife for her money, and this angers Mrs. Marwood. She says that she hates him, and Fainall promises to get a divorce and marry her instead. Mrs. Marwood starts to cry, and the two leave to get her a mask to wear.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

In the scene we see two women who are both interested in Mirabell testing each other. By claiming to hate men, Mrs. Fainall is actually trying to find out whether or not Mrs. Marwood is in love with Mirabell. Mrs. Marwood almost reveals her belief in love and her desire to be with Mirabell, but quickly covers this with a renewed declaration of hate for men. Mrs. Fainall also reveals that she cares for Mirabell by defending him when Mrs. Marwood accuses him of being too proud.

The exchange between Mrs. Marwood and Fainall shows the audience that Fainall does not have a very happy marriage. He is having an affair, but his relationship with Mrs. Marwood seems to be very unhappy as well – the two fight for the whole time they are alone together. Mrs. Marwood also shows that she can turn on people very quickly when she threatens to reveal her affair with Fainall. Congreve is establishing in this scene that the pairing of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood is filled with scheming, deceit and several different layers of lies.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

In this scene, we see Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell discussing their previous relationship. Mrs. Fainall says that she despises her husband and she only married him because Mirabell made her. Mirabell says that he only told her to marry Fainall to protect her reputation in case she got pregnant during her affair with Mirabell. He adds that they have chosen Fainall to be their dupe because he had a good reputation, and that he is a liar and a cheat. He also tells her that if she is tired of him "you know your remedy" (presumably a divorce).

Mrs. Fainall says that she has done a lot for him, and he notes that he has told her about all his plans and schemes. Mrs. Fainall asks about the plan once more, and Mirabell reveals that his servant Waitwell will pretend to be a made-up uncle (confirming to the audience that the uncle revealed in the first act is in fact a fake) who pursues Lady Wishfort.

We learn that Waitwell was married to Foible because Mirabell does not trust him; the marriage is to ensure that Waitwell does not actually try to marry Wishfort himself. Once Lady Wishfort agrees to marry Waitwell, Mirabell says he will blackmail her (with the embarrassment of her agreeing to marry a servant) into allowing him to marry Millamant. Then he will receive all of Millamant's money. The announcement alluded to in the first act was also part of Mirabell's plan; Foible prompted Lady Wishfort to announce that the uncle was coming to marry Millamant so that it will not embarrass Lady Wishfort by appearing to have come to marry Lady Wishfort and then left her (once the plan comes to fruition). Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell agree that the plan will likely succeed because Lady Wishfort is eager for a marriage.

At this point Millamant makes an appearance, along with Witwoud and her maid, Mincing. Mirabell comments that she is like a ship in full sail, with "fools for tenders" (smaller boats that provide supplies for ships). He tells Millamant that she seems not to have her usual collection of devoted people around her, and she responds that she has denied herself these trappings by walking past the crowd quickly. While they talk, Witwoud provides a stream of silly jokes and witticisms.

Millamant mentions that Mirabell left the night before, and adds that it makes her feel good to have the power to inflict pain on him. He replies that this kind of cruelty does not really suit her, and that she gets her real power from pleasing others. She disagrees, noting that cruelty makes a person powerful, and that giving up cruelty causes people to age and grow ugly. Mirabell responds once again by saying that a woman's beauty comes from her lover, and if she uses her cruelty on her lover, she may end up destroying her own beauty in the process.

Millamant then seeks support from Mrs. Fainall, noting that men are vain and that Mirabell is wrong. She adds that a woman's beauty does not depend on her lover. Mirabell then gets Witwoud and Mrs. Fainall to go away so that he can be alone with Millamant.

Mirabell next asks Millamant why she snubbed him the night before and why she spends her time with fools like Witwoud and Petulant. She replies that she does whatever makes her happy. Later she says that Mirabell is too serious, and that if he is going to be boring she will leave. She also mentions Foible's marriage to Waitwell and implies that she knows about his plan. She then leaves him, and he speaks briefly about feeling that a "whirlwind" has passed through him.

Waitwell and Foible then enter, and Foible reports that she has been filling Lady Wishfort's mind with stories about Mirabell's "uncle." While stealing this moment in the garden she has told her lady that she is showing Sir Rowland her picture, and plans to return with a story about how much Sir Rowland wants to see her. Mirabell gives her some money and tells her he is pleased with her part in the plan. He also says she will have a good future if the plan goes well. Foible hurries away; worried that Mrs. Marwood may have seen her with Mirabell.

Mirabell encourages Waitwell to embrace the part of Sir Rowland. Waitwell notes that he will be very confused after the plan is over, since he was married and knighted on the same day. He speaks the act in end-rhyming couplets, which in this case deals with the fact that when all is said and done, he will be forced to give up his title – but he will be forced to keep his wife.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

This scene introduces the complex relationship between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall. The two have obviously been lovers, and Mirabell has arranged her marriage rather than marrying her himself. Although he spurned her by not marrying her, the two are obviously on good terms and trust one another. We are not told why Mirabell did not marry Mrs. Fainall, whose name was Arabella Languish when she was single. Mrs. Fainall has said she will help Mirabell, although there is really nothing in it for her.

The marriage that Mirabell arranged for his former lover is clearly an unhappy one, and it reinforces the theme that relationships in the play are all motivated by greed. One ominous note that foreshadows later events is Mirabell's reference to a shadowy "remedy" that Mrs. Fainall can use to be rid of her husband Fainall.

Mirabell's plan to defeat Lady Wishfort is complicated and involves many different characters. However, he plans to use her own feelings of desire and vanity against her. This reinforces the symbolism of her name ("wishing for it").

Millamant's first appearance leaves the audience with the feeling that she is a powerful character, despite the efforts of others to control her destiny. In a sense, she wears all of her admirers like a cloak, gathering them around her so that no one will have a hint of

what she is really feeling or thinking. She proves herself more than a match for the devious and witty Mirabell, and although she reproaches him for being a bore, it is clear that the two of them love one other.

Waitwell and Foible appear on stage at the end of the scene for two reasons. The first is to advance the story by providing more information on the "Sir Rowland" plot. The second reason is to show that their relationship, although it appears to be happy, is also motivated by greed. This is especially important after we see Millamant and Mirabell together, because it shows that the main love relationship in the play seems to have nothing to do with money.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

This scene starts with Lady Wishfort sitting in her dressing room waiting for Foible to return. Her impatience is making her irritated, so she takes it out on her servant Peg. Lady Wishfort is applying makeup, and she asks Peg to bring her rouge. Peg misunderstands and asks if she wants a drink of cherry brandy. When Peg cannot produce the rouge, Lady Wishfort notes that she will have a drink after all.

Mrs. Marwood enters, and reports that she has seen Foible with Mirabell. Lady Wishfort has Mrs. Marwood hide and listen in while she questions Foible. Foible then enters and reports that Sir Rowland loves the picture of Lady Wishfort. When asked about Mirabell, Foible reassures her mistress that Mirabell had spoken to her and said that she was plotting against him. Foible notes that Mirabell insulted Lady Wishfort for being old, and that the best revenge for her would be to marry Sir Rowland right away. Lady Wishfort agrees and vows to marry the next day, and announce her intentions to marry that evening.

Foible tells her mistress that Sir Rowland will arrive that evening. Lady Wishfort is worried that she will not look young, and Foible says that she will look wonderful – with the help of makeup. Lady Wishfort leaves, and Mrs. Fainall enters.

Mrs. Fainall tells Foible that she knows the details of Mirabell's plan and is worried that Mrs. Marwood may try to ruin the plan. Foible does not trust her at first so Mrs. Fainall reveals the details of the plan to get her to trust her, not knowing that Mrs. Marwood is in the closet listening. Foible notes that Mrs. Marwood told Lady Wishfort that she had seen Foible and Mirabell in the park.

She reveals how she reassured Lady Wishfort, and tells Mrs. Fainall that she has made Lady Wishfort so angry that she will quickly accept Sir Rowland's proposal. Foible asks Mrs. Fainall to tell Mirabell how things are going, since she believes Mrs. Marwood is watching her. She also reveals that Mrs. Marwood loves Mirabell, but that Mirabell does not return these feelings and finds her unattractive. The two depart.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Our first view of Lady Wishfort shows that she is vain, but that she has a good sense of humor. She is also a bit gullible - something that Foible finds a way to exploit. The cosmetics she uses in the scene become a symbol of the way people cover up and lie about themselves in order to advance themselves. This make-up becomes a kind of paint, and this operates on many levels.

First, Lady Wishfort had a portrait painted (the one Foible supposedly shows to Sir Rowland) that shows her as younger. Next, she is forced to paint herself to match the

idealized image of herself she has created. Congreve's point in choosing this symbol is to cast light on how vanity makes people change themselves.

Congreve uses another theatrical device in this scene: eavesdropping. Like the arch villains in a spy movie characters in a Restoration play cannot help but stand around talking about their evil plans. This often leads to ruin – but it does add a necessary element of intrigue to the play. There is also an element of comedy as well, since Mrs. Marwood is listening to all the nasty things other characters are saying about her.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

This scene starts in Lady Wishfort's closet, where Mrs. Marwood has been listening. She has now heard everything about Mirabell's plan, and is angry with her "friend" Mrs. Fainall. She is also unhappy with the idea that Mirabell cannot stand her. She promises not to chase him anymore, and adds that she will ruin his plans.

Lady Wishfort then enters and apologizes for leaving her in there for so long. Mrs. Marwood replies that she has been entertained by what she has overheard. Mrs. Marwood tells Lady Wishfort that she thinks Sir Wilfull would make an excellent husband for Millamant, and Lady Wishfort agrees. Foible comes in to tell them the Witwoud and Petulant have arrived, and Lady Wishfort asks Mrs. Marwood to keep the men company until she is dressed and ready for dinner.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Mrs. Marwood has proven in this scene that she is a very nasty character with no real friends – not even Lady Wishfort. What she hears angers her, and she immediately thinks of revenge. She does not tell Lady Wishfort everything, however; instead, she hatches a new plan of her own – leaving the audience to wonder whether the Sir Rowland plot will continue as planned or it will be sabotaged later on in the play.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

The scene shifts to another room in Lady Wishfort's house. Millamant tells Marwood and her maid, Mincing, that Petulant has made her angry by constantly contradicting everything anybody else says and that she thought that Witwoud and Petulant might have a fight. Mrs. Marwood tells Millamant that Petulant would leave her alone if she just admitted her love for Mirabell. She adds that their "secret" romance is now the talk of the town, and that this secrecy will be their undoing. Millamant sends Mincing away to bring Witwoud and Petulant. Millamant tells her that she knows Mirabell loves her, and that she wishes he would be more forward in presenting his intentions.

Millamant makes some remarks about Mrs. Marwood's age, and then decides to sing a song. Mincing comes back and says the men are coming. Millamant's song makes fun of the "game" of love, and it notes that love is linked to the amount of ambition it takes to achieve a relationship. It goes on to say that these relationships are only good if many people have already tried and failed to win one of the participants' hearts.

Witwoud and Petulant enter, and Millamant asks if they have stopped arguing with one another. They then try to show off their wit be talking about the importance of being able to argue. Millamant gets frustrated with them, and she and Mincing leave as Sir Wilfull Witwoud enters with a footman. Witwoud tells Mrs. Marwood that he hardly knows his half brother.

The footman tells Sir Wilfull that Lady Wishfort is dressing and Sir Wilfull shows his ignorance of city manners by expressing surprise that she is not already dressed, since it is afternoon and not morning. He then quizzes the footman about his aunt (Lady Wishfort) and learns that most of the servants have only been with Lady Wishfort for a week, and that Lady Wishfort looks much different in the morning (before her make-up is applied).

Witwoud tells Petulant to start an argument with his half-brother. Petulant obliges by making fun of Sir Wilfull's clothing and horse. To stop the quarrel, Mrs. Marwood introduces the two brothers. Sir Wilfull says that Witwoud is rude and boorish, while Witwoud says that Sir Wilfull is an ignorant country peasant. Mrs. Marwood asks Sir Wilfull about his plans to travel, and he says that before he leaves he wants to learn about how town people live.

Fainall and Lady Wishfort enter. They both greet Sir Wilfull, and they briefly discuss Witwoud and Petulant's' rudeness. Mincing enters, and everyone except Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, who have been talking quietly away from the other characters, leave. Fainall is upset that his wife has had an affair with Mirabell, so it is clear Mrs. Marwood has been telling him about what she overheard. She asks him to help her spoil

Mirabell's plan, and she tells him that his wife's affair ended before their marriage. She says that despite the affair he can still lead a happy life spending his wife's money.

Fainall responds by noting that Mrs. Marwood wrecked his earlier plan by exposing Mirabell's attempt to deceive Lady Wishfort, since his wife would have gotten Millamant's fortune if Lady Wishfort had taken it away from Millamant. Mrs. Marwood suggests that Fainall should tell Lady Wishfort about his wife's affair with Mirabell in order to blackmail Lady Wishfort to save Mrs. Fainall's reputation.

The only obstacle to this plan that Mrs. Marwood can see is her own idea to marry Millamant to Sir Wilfull, which would give Millamant her whole fortune. Fainall says he can solve that problem by getting Sir Wilfull drunk. They then plan to tell Lady Wishfort about Mirabell's plan with an anonymous letter. The scene ends with Fainall professing his desire for Mrs. Marwood, especially now that he considers himself single.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

The scene starts with an interaction between Mrs. Marwood and Millamant, and each of them shows their true characters. Mrs. Marwood is a schemer, deliberately trying to provoke Millamant into revealing more details about her relationship with Mirabell. Millamant, on the other hand, displays the devilish attitude that Mirabell noted in Act I by making nasty comments about Mrs. Marwood. This provocation further poisons Mrs. Marwood against her and Mirabell.

Our first look at Sir Wilfull shows that he is somewhat uncultured, but that he seems to have a good nature. One of the reasons Witwoud and Petulant constantly teas him about his country manners is so that Congreve can make a statement about the pretentiousness of city manners; Witwoud and Petulant end up looking like idiots, while Sir Wilfull comes off as a genuine and likeable character. In addition, Sir Wilfull's statement during the scene that Witwoud would have been better to have lived in the country for a while to learn the value of hard work is Congreve's way of saying that town life is pampered and often focuses too much on social issues and not enough on honest hard work.

Mrs. Marwood's discussion with Fainall shows that she will conspire with just about anybody to get what she wants. She is also an expert at finding and using the information that will help her ruin other peoples' plans and ambitions. Mrs. Marwood's actions expose her as the least sympathetic character in the play, since she is willing to hurt anyone to carry out her plans.

Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

The scene begins in Lady Wishfort's house. Lady Wishfort questions Foible about preparations for Sir Rowland's visit. These preparations are elaborate and include music and dancing, as well as cologne for the footmen so that Sir Rowland will not smell the stables. The two then discuss Lady Wishfort's appearance, and how Lady Wishfort should be sitting when Sir Rowland enters the room.

Lady Wishfort then sends Foible to make sure that Sir Wilfull talks to Millamant after learning that Sir Wilfull is drinking in the parlor. Foible goes to Millamant, and instead of doing what Lady Wishfort told her to do, she tells Millamant that Mirabell has been waiting to see her. She also says that Lady Wishfort has sent her to get Sir Wilfull and Millamant together. Millamant at first says she will not see Mirabell, but changes her mind and asks Mrs. Fainall to entertain Sir Wilfull since as a married woman Mrs. Fainall can tolerate fools.

Sir Wilfull enters and tries to delay his proposal to Millamant. Mrs. Fainall urges him to carry on, then leaves, and locks the door behind her, forcing Sir Wilfull to talk to Millamant. Millamant ignores him and wanders around the room chanting verses about love and sex. The drunken Sir Wilfull misunderstands her words and tries to ask her to walk with him. She defeats him easily with her wit and he ends up leaving, promising to return with something important to say another time.

Mirabell enters and is able to finish the line of poetry Millamant has been reciting. This poem, by Sir John Suckling, is about a romance between the mythical characters of Phoebus and Daphne. Mirabell and Millamant discuss their views on marriage, telling each other what they expect from each other.

They each lay out terms, with Millamant insisting on privacy in a variety of different areas of her life before agreeing to marry and Mirabell insisting that she not have a female friend with whom she plots and schemes. He also asks that she not be a gossip. Millamant agrees to his terms after asking the newly arrived Mrs. Fainall for advice. Millamant tells Mirabell to keep quiet, and Mrs. Fainall urges him to leave quickly before Lady Wishfort arrives.

Mirabell leaves and Millamant discusses her love for him to Mrs. Fainall. Mrs. Fainall notes that Sir Wilfull has gotten very drunk and quarreled with Petulant. The situation has become so bad that Lady Wishfort has left Sir Rowland to deal with it, but that she has been unable to calm Sir Wilfull down. Witwoud enters the room drunk, and admits that Petulant and Sir Wilfull were quarreling over nothing.

Petulant then enters. He is also drunk, and he and Witwoud start to argue. Petulant finally admits that the quarrel was about Millamant, and that he has been defending her

beauty. Petulant stumbles off claiming to be headed for a sexual liaison, and Witwoud tells the ladies that the quarrel was the result of a plan by Fainall to keep Sir Wilfull from winning Lady Wishfort's favor.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

The act begins with a look at the silly excitement of Lady Wishfort, who is clearly completely fooled by Mirabell's plan. Her girlish excitement is Congreve's way of painting her as a vain fool longing to be young once again, and, like the makeup in a previous scene, serves as a comment on the ways that ladies in Restoration society tried to look younger rather than being genuine people.

Sir Wilfull's attempt to woo Millamant serves mostly as comic relief. It also demonstrates Millamant's intelligence and wit, showing that she is intellectually superior to the well meaning but ignorant Sir Wilfull. Mirabell's entrance (by completing her thought) serves as a way to show that he and Millamant is a perfect match.

Their discussion has been considered as one of the most definitive analyses of marriage ever written about in literature. Though their discussion is mostly cheerful, it demonstrates that both of them have carefully considered what they each want from marriage. Their agreement allows Millamant considerably more freedom than what was the norm for a wife during the Restoration. In fact, the terms they agree on will make Millamant virtually Mirabell's equal, which would have been considered revolutionary at the time.

This equal marriage, however, is indicative of Congreve's ideal image of marriage; rather than being stuck in a conventional marriage, Fainall Mirabell and Millamant will experience true communication and understanding. By creating this image of marriage, Congreve is able to make a serious comment on the ways that marriages are more about convenience, money, and social standing rather than true love.

Millamant appears rather calm during the discussion, but allows the audience to see her true feelings after Mirabell leaves with her confession of love to Mrs. Fainall. Witwoud's appearance and later interaction with Petulant show that Fainall's plan to keep Millamant and Sir Wilfull apart is working, which will be further confirmed in the next scene.

Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

This scene takes place in the dining room of Lady Wishfort's house, with Millamant, Mrs. Fainall, Lady Wishfort, Witwoud and Sir Wilfull. Lady Wishfort is lecturing Sir Wilfull about his drunkenness, comparing him to Borachio, a drunken schemer in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. Sir Wilfull is happily drunk, however, and makes broad declarations about how he will marry Millamant. Millamant and Mrs. Fainall leave.

Foible enters to tell Lady Wishfort that Sir Rowland is waiting for her. Lady Wishfort asks Witwoud to take Sir Wilfull away, and then reflects that Sir Wilfull will not make a good husband for Millamant. Waitwell then enters (pretending to be Sir Rowland). She apologizes for leaving him alone to deal with Sir Wilfull, and he notes that he is in a hurry to be married to her and will be impatient until they get married. He adds that he will die of a broken heart if the marriage is delayed, or that Mirabell will poison him (because he plans to take away his inheritance). He states his desire to starve Mirabell, and Lady Wishfort talks about how Mirabell had tried to woo her. Waitwell pretends to be insulted by this, and threatens to kill Mirabell. Lady Wishfort then agrees to marry Sir Rowland, as long as he does not think she is agreeing just to be able to start having sex with him.

Foible then enters with a letter for Lady Wishfort, who steps out of the room briefly. Foible and Waitwell quickly chat, and he notes that he would rather become a chairman (one who carries a sedan chair on his back, a particularly hot and heavy job) than marry Lady Wishfort. Lady Wishfort comes back, and Foible recognizes that the latter is from Mrs. Marwood. She urges Waitwell to grab the letter away, but Lady Wishfort reads it aloud and discovers that "Sir Rowland" is actually an imposter.

The quick-thinking Waitwell, however, says that Mirabell is trying to stop him from marrying Lady Wishfort. He agrees to verify his identity with a black box containing personal documents, and promises to bring a marriage contract for her to sign later that evening. Waitwell delivers the act-ending rhyming couplet, which states that Lady Wishfort will be satisfied with his proof that he is an "errant knight." Foible completes the rhyme by saying that she will also learn that he is an "errant knave" (a fool on a mission).

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

This scene begins with Lady Wishfort discussing drunkenness with Sir Wilfull. This once again serves to contrast the oafish Sir Wilfull with the image of a fine Restoration gentleman like Mirabell.

Waitwell proves to be very effective in his pursuit of Lady Wishfort, and she pretends to "play it cool" and resist his advances. This interaction serves as a parody of courtship, and again shows Congreve commenting on accepted norms – instead of only one lover telling lies, both are telling lies. Waitwell is lying both about who he is and about what he really wants, while Lady Wishfort is trying desperately to get a marriage by pretending not to want a marriage at all.

Waitwell and Lady Wishfort's discussion about marriage also serves as a counterpoint to the earlier discussion between Mirabell and Millamant. While the two true lovers discussed a marriage based on love, truth and equality, Waitwell and Lady Wishfort plan a marriage that has its roots in falsehood, deceit and compliance with what society expects of a marriage.

The black box alluded to in the scene becomes an important symbol of truth in the play. Although it cannot prove the existence of Sir Rowland, it will later be used to solve just about all of the play's conflicts.

Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

This scene takes place in yet another room in Lady Wishfort's house. Lady Wishfort has discovered that Waitwell really was a fake. At the beginning of the scene, we see Lady Wishfort dismissing Foible and accusing her of plotting with Mirabell. Foible asks for forgiveness, and says that Mirabell has seduced her. She points out that he has fooled many others, and that he had promised her that Lady Wishfort would not be harmed. She adds that Waitwell could not have consummated a marriage with Lady Wishfort because he was already married (to Foible). Lady Wishfort becomes angry and leaves after threatening to have Foible arrested.

Mrs. Fainall enters the room. Foible tells her about the situation, and says that Lady Wishfort has gone to get a constable to arrest her. It becomes clear that Fainall has had Waitwell arrested, but Mrs. Fainall assures Foible that Mirabell has gone to bail him out of jail. We also learn that Lady Wishfort did not read the entire letter so she does not know that Mrs. Fainall was a part of the plot. Mrs. Marwood has told Fainall about Mirabell's affair with Mrs. Fainall, however, and so the Fainalls' marriage is over. Foible tells Mrs. Marwood that she can help by revealing some information about Mrs. Marwood.

Mincing enters and tells the two that Mirabell has gotten Waitwell out of jail. She tells Foible that Mirabell has ordered her to hide until Lady Wishfort is not angry anymore. Mincing adds that Fainall has threatened to divorce his wife unless she hands over her fortune, and that Millamant agreed to marry Sir Wilfull to receive her own six thousands pound fortune. Mrs. Fainall urges Mincing to swear to testify for her if she is called upon to refute charges of adultery, and Mincing agrees before leaving with Foible.

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

The scene begins with Lady Wishfort venting her anger and rage against a servant. However, despite the fact that she is berating a poor girl she says she has trusted; Lady Wishfort is presented in a sympathetic light. She, after all, has been deceived by Mirabell, and her trusted servant Foible was conspiring against her for Mirabell's money. As the act goes on, she becomes an even more sympathetic character, especially since Mrs. Marwood, the character she has trusted the most, later tricks her.

The scene between Foible and Mrs. Fainall is meant to be comic. Although Foible is genuinely worried, the audience cannot help but think things will turn out all right for her in the end. More interesting is the fact that Mrs. Fainall is overjoyed that she has not been exposed as a schemer to her own mother. She, in effect, has "gotten away with" her plotting with Mirabell. She also gets her servant friends to promise to help her lie to her mother (and to tell the truth about her husband's affair).

Act 5, Scene 2

Act 5, Scene 2 Summary

Mrs. Marwood and Lady Wishfort enter, with the latter praising Mrs. Marwood for revealing Mirabell's plots against her. Lady Wishfort then criticizes her daughter Mrs. Fainall for being an adulteress. She says that she finds it hard to believe, since her daughter grew up with a fine example of morals like herself. Mrs. Fainall acts injured, and urges Mrs. Marwood to produce proof of her infidelity. Mrs. Fainall assures her mother that she can prove her innocence, and tells her that Mrs. Marwood is not really her friend.

After Mrs. Fainall leaves, Lady Wishfort talks about how chaste her daughter had been as a child. Through a soliloquy, she brings herself to believe in her daughter's innocence and wants to hear Fainall's proof. After she finishes speaking, however, Mrs. Marwood urges her to reconsider and think about how damaging a public scandal would be to the family's reputation. Lady Wishfort agrees, and notes that she will "give up" her fortune rather than become a public joke.

Fainall enters and begins to dictate the terms he is demanding to keep his secret. He says that he has decided to let her keep her own estate as long as she lives, provided she does not marry. He insists that he be given all of his wife's fortune, along with the six thousand pounds that would have gone to Millamant if she had agreed to marry Sir Wilfull. Although Lady Wishfort is shocked by the severity of Fainall's demands, he insists that she sign a contract he is preparing.

Fainall leaves and Lady Wishfort expresses regret that her daughter had agreed to marry him at all. She adds that Mrs. Fainall's first husband would never have done this, and that she cannot find any comfort in the world. Sir Wilfull Witwoud and Millamant then enter. Sir Wilfull apologizes for anything he might have done when he was drunk and says he is now ready to marry Millamant. Millamant says she and Mirabell are willing to destroy their marriage contract. Sir Wilfull asks if Mirabell can come in, and when he goes to get him Mrs. Marwood leaves quickly.

Mirabell enters and offers sincere apologies for all of his trickery against Lady Wishfort. Sir Wilfull argues on Mirabell's behalf and urges Lady Wishfort to forgive him like a good Christian. Lady Wishfort agrees as long as Mirabell is willing to tear up his marriage contract with Millamant, which he agrees to do. As she looks at Mirabell, Lady Wishfort notes that although she could have killed him just a short while ago looking at him stirs up old passions within her.

Act 5, Scene 2 Analysis

This scene sets up the finale of the play, with both sets of plotters firing their last "shots." Fainall presents his ultimatum promising to embarrass Lady Wishfort's family, and Mrs.

Marwood helps to persuade Lady Wishfort that following his wishes is the right course. This proves that Lady Wishfort has no one to trust in the play, and that she is completely dominated by societal expectations and judgments. This is especially shown by the fact that she is easily talked out of her belief in her own daughter's goodness.

Mirabell, who orchestrates all of the other events, makes the other major move in this scene. Having Millamant renounce him is a stroke of genius since it serves the dual purpose of pleasing Lady Wishfort and foiling Fainall's claim to Millamant's money. Mirabell's own pose of genuine repentance when he asks for Lady Wishfort's forgiveness provides a stark contrast to the demands of the quick-talking and cruel Fainall.

Act 5, Scene 3

Act 5, Scene 3 Summary

Mrs. Marwood and Fainall enter and demand that Lady Wishfort sign the papers turning over the money to Fainall. Lady Wishfort replies that she cannot sign it because Millamant has agreed to marry Sir Wilfull. Fainall does not believe Millamant is sincere, but argues that Lady Wishfort must still turn over his wife's fortune or risk public disgrace. Lady Wishfort laments the fact that Fainall is blackmailing her. Mirabell offers his advice, and asks that Lady Wishfort allow Millamant to marry him as "compensation" for his help. However, he adds that he will help her no matter what.

Lady Wishfort agrees, and offers Millamant to him if he can save her from Fainall's accusations. Mirabell then exposes Fainall's affair with Mrs. Marwood with testimony from Mrs. Fainall, Foible and Mincing. This does not deter Fainall, who threatens once more to expose Mrs. Fainall as an adulteress. Waitwell arrives with a black box and Witwoud and Petulant follow him. Mirabell asks them to remember a document he had them witness. They recall signing it, and Mirabell produces an agreement Mrs. Fainall signed before her marriage placing her fortune in Mirabell's trust. Fainall admits he has been fooled, running at his wife with his sword, only to be stopped by Sir Wilfull.

Fainall threatens Mirabell and then exits, followed quickly by Mrs. Marwood who vows to be avenged. Lady Wishfort praises Mrs. Fainall, who thanks Mirabell for his advice. Lady Wishfort forgives Waitwell and Foible, and notes that she must give Millamant to Mirabell. Sir Wilfull resigns his claim, noting that Mirabell and Millamant love one another and he himself wants to go traveling. He adds that he wants to take Witwoud and Petulant with him. Lady Wishfort blesses the union of Mirabell and Millamant.

Sir Wilfull says that they should have a dance, but Lady Wishfort says she is too tired. She worries that Fainall will try some other mischief. Mirabell tells her that Fainall will have no grounds for protest. He gives the deed of trust back to Mrs. Fainall, remarking that this could end the fighting with Fainall. Mirabell ends the play with a quatrain (two rhyming couplets) warning the audience to avoid falsehood and adultery in marriage.

Act 5, Scene 3 Analysis

In this final scene, all of the storylines are solved. The motivations of the lovers seem to determine whether they are successful, rather than their methods (since every character in the play lies, plots and schemes regardless of motivation). The money-seeking scoundrel Fainall and the bitter Mrs. Marwood are sent off empty handed, while Mirabell and Millamant, who are motivated by true love, are successful.

The powerful symbol of the black box returns, and proves that Mirabell has been "one step ahead" of things since well before Fainall married Mrs. Fainall. Mirabell's promise to work to help the Fainall's achieve "peace" in their marriage, however, is somewhat

baffling; it appears that Mrs. Fainall will be stuck living with Fainall forever. One thing that has baffled many audiences is why Millamant agrees to marry Sir Wilfull. Congreve introduces this twist without warning, and the audience is left to assume that this is a part of Mirabell's plan to spoil Fainall's demands for money.

Sir Wilfull's gracious bowing out is a convenient twist in the plot, at least from Mirabell's perspective. However, his actions are consistent with his character. In a sense, he has already begun his "travels" by learning about love, adultery and deceit from the other characters in the play. It is not surprising that he does not want to marry into this environment, and getting out of this marriage (and his eagerness to get away from town) indicate his desire to get away from the behaviors that Congreve has exposed so well in the play.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

The epilogue is said in the text to have been delivered by Mrs. Bracegirdle, the actress who played Millamant in one of the play's earliest productions. In the epilogue, Congreve notes that there are three types of critics. The first type of critics, he says, are always going to dislike the plays they see. The second group of critics is failed poets who will find fault with the play even though they lack the qualifications to judge another writer's work.

The final type of critic is almost like a tabloid reporter who will be looking for ways to connect Congreve's characters with real celebrities. Congreve adds that these critics should all be the subject of on-stage satire, but that doing so would inflate their sense of self-importance. He ends by saying that a good satirist (such as himself) keeps his subjects anonymous in order to make broad comments about society.

Epilogue Analysis

An epilogue was a standard dramatic convention during the Restoration. It allows Congreve to provide a pre-planned response to anticipated criticism, also to reinforce the themes in his play. By keeping his satire and comedy of manners very general and not relating it to specific real life figures, he is able to create a play that focuses on social issues rather than lampooning famous people. By doing so, he has created a play that makes timeless statements about love, marriage and honesty.

Characters

Fainall

Fainall is a faithless husband who depends on his wife's inheritance for his ease and livelihood. His "Wit and outward fair Behaviour," as his friendly acquaintance and rival, Mirabell, remarks, has allowed him to enjoy a good reputation "with the Town," but his true nature is greedy, false, and profligate. While he is carrying on an affair with Mrs. Marwood, his wife's friend and confidante, he is plotting to wrest full control of both his wife's and his mother-in-law's estates. As his name implies, he is a pretender, but one whose talent for getting along serves him well in society. It is, in fact, this tractability that makes him a suitable man to be "sacrificed" to "Arabella Languish" (Mrs. Fainall's name by her first, deceased husband) when this widow is in need of an inoffensive second husband.

Mrs. Fainall

Mrs. Fainall is daughter to Lady Wishfort and heir to her fortune. Previously married to one "Languish," she was widowed and then remarried to keep her love affair with Mirabell safe from public scrutiny. Unfortunately, her mother raised her to hate and revile men. Thus, while she can hardly bear her husband, she has warm regards still for her former lover, whom she is compelled to relinquish before she is remarried to preserve her good reputation. She is professed intimate friends with Mrs. Marwood until she learns that Mrs. Marwood is her husband's lover. Mrs. Fainall is clever and cautious, having signed over a large part of her estate in trust before her marriage because she suspected that her husband's greed would eventually force it from her. She is a loyal friend to her cousin, Mrs. Millamant, whom she helps to obtain Mirabell as a husband. In so doing, she is also generous: she not only willingly parts with her former lover, but she contrives to help Millamant, who stands to gain a portion of the moiety of her aunt's (the Lady Wishfort's) fortune when she marries.

Foible

Foible is a simple yet quick-witted, dissembling yet good-hearted waiting woman to Lady Wishfort. She nonetheless helps dupe the Lady by means of a clever yet harmless ploy hatched by Mirabell. Since her betrayal is in the cause of love, and since no one is injured (only mildly embarrassed), she is forgiven in the end. Thought to be an obedient errand girl whom her Lady uses as an emissary to procure a husband for herself, Foible guilelessly turns the tables and finds a husband for herself (Mirabell's servant, Waitwell) as well as one for her Lady's niece, Millamant. It just so happens that Millamant's choice is Mirabell, her aunt's sworn enemy, hence the necessity of Mirabell's ploy. As a servant, Foible has the means to come and go throughout her mistress's home and is therefore privy to much that other characters would like to hide. Through Foible's assistance,

Fainall and Marwood's adulterous affair and their designs to steal her Lady's fortune are found out and justly brought to closure.

Mrs. Marwood

Pretended friend to Mrs. Fainall and secret lover of her husband, Mrs. Marwood schemes to spoil the happiness of others to enrich herself. She almost succeeds in foiling the hoped for marriage between the true lovers Mirabell and Millamant by exposing their love and so inciting the rage of Lady Wishfort who scorns Mirabell because he made false advances to her. Although she pretends she hates him and all men, Marwood also likes Mirabell and is jealous of his attentions to Millamant. Of all the characters in this comedy of manners, Mrs. Marwood is perhaps the least sympathetic: in fact, she is more than once referred to as "that devil" by both Mrs. Fainall and Foible. Because she deliberately sets out to destroy the happiness of others, and because she is duplicitous in her friendships, she is finally despised as an adulteress and a traitor. Even the trusting Lady Wishfort, who believes Marwood's loyal friendship has saved her from the disgrace and villainy of others' machinations and plots against her comes to see her as a "wicked accomplice." While she is clever, she is not nice; while she has wit, she is not funny.

Mrs. Millamant

Mrs. Millamant is a young, vivacious, pretty, and fashionable lady who loves Mirabell and, as niece to Lady Wishfort, is heir to part of her fortune should she marry with Lady Wishfort's approval. She affects a coy demeanor, as well as disdain for the opposite sex. She is often seen in the company of "fops," somewhat tiresome and affected young wits who nonetheless are entertaining enough and whom she tolerates to hide her true regard for Mirabell. She is willful and witty in her own right and adeptly manages to steer clear of the convoluted plots and schemes that pack the action and threaten to undo most of the characters by their twists and turns. Mrs. Millamant's nature is graceful, decorous, and confident; however, her tolerance for Witwoud and Petulance show her to be a creature of the world and somewhat at the mercy of the dictates of fashion. Despite her good breeding, she is not above abiding fools for her own mischievous ends.

Mincing

Mincing is a somewhat affected yet dutiful and loyal waiting woman to Mrs. Millamant. Together with her friend, Foible, Mincing witnesses and corroborates Fainall's and Marwood's adulterous affair, and so helps expose the deception of the two in plotting to exploit Mrs. Fainall and extort from Lady Wishfort her entire estate. The two servant's testimony leads to Lady Wishfort's blessing of the marriage between Mirabell and Millamant.

Mirabell

Mirabell is a clever, handsome, young, and headstrong gentleman of good manners who is the admirer of and persistent suitor to Millamant. He also is the former lover of Mrs. Fainall, and he is liked by Mrs. Marwood. While once the object of desire, he is now the sworn enemy of Lady Wishfort for pretending love to her. A man of sense, he is also a clever and effective strategist who carries out his schemes to marry Lady Wishfort's niece against her will and thereby secure his love and Millamant's dowry. While likeable, he is also ruthless in his exploitation of both servants and peers to get his own way. But since nearly everyone benefits from his schemes, no one seems to mind, except Fainall and Marwood, whom he exposes at the end as perfidious and maladroit traitors. Mirabell is a proud, artful, and generous man of the world who knows he is suffering from a love sickness from which he cannot and does not want to escape.

Petulant

This dandy and follower of Mrs. Millamant is every bit as rude and ill humored, as peevish and capricious, as the name would suggest. Friend to Witwoud, he is perceived by other characters to be the inferior wit of the two. He is illiterate and proud, boorish and vain. To give the impression that he is popular, he pays ladies of questionable virtue to call on him in public places, and he has also disguised himself precisely to call upon himself in public. He likes Mrs. Millamant but really would just as soon sleep with his maid. His raillery is pure brilliance to Witwoud, but he is barely tolerated by people of any sensibility. Petulant is endowed with a brutal tactlessness but is unable to speak a truth since everything he says and does is a performance based on his mood at the moment. As a fool, he is rather more dour than deft.

Waitwell

Servant to Mirabell, Waitwell is essential to furthering his master's marriage designs. Being loyal and eager to please, he agrees both to marry Lady Wishfort's maid, Foible, in order to better secure the plan, and also to impersonate Mirabell's uncle in order to profess love to Lady Wishfort. As Mirabell's invented uncle, Sir Rowland, Waitwell gives a delightful performance that convinces the Lady of his ardent desire and his rush to marry in order to foil Mirabell's hope for a marriage dowry. It is his gallant love act that places Lady Wishfort in the embarrassing and precarious position of being fooled once again by a suitor, and, by helping to place her at the mercy of her enemies, clears the way for Mirabell to extricate her.

Lady Wishfort

An aging grand dame, Lady Wishfort is as desperate to get a husband as she is unsuspecting of the plans afoot to rob her of her fortune and her "virtue." Mother to Mrs. Fainall and aunt to Mrs. Millamant, she holds the key to the money and the maid that

will bring the action to its conclusion. Lady Wishfort's colorful language and vehement expressions of emotion cause the greatest moments of amusement and liveliness in the play. She is the dupe of nearly everyone close to her, including her own daughter, and while she is in danger of loosing her fortune, she is more worried about damaging her reputation. Her "paint" is practically laid on with a trowel to hide the wrinkles, but she fancies herself attractive to men the likes of Mirabell and the pretender, Sir Rowland. While she raises her daughter to hate men, she cannot be reconciled to life without them. And while she is at great pains to keep up appearances, her mighty constitution suffers all forms of indignities and humiliation, yet she is able to recover with some modicum of good grace and in the end forgive all.

Witwoud

A man who prides himself on his never failing wit, raillery, and charm, this "becravated and beper-riwig'd" fool (as Sir Wilfull calls him) is an admirer of Mrs. Millamant and a pretended favorite of the ladies. His chief usefulness is entertaining with his droll wit, and he is taken into the confidence of the ladies' thrice weekly "cabals" as they set about destroying reputations and professing their fashionable opinions on marriage, men, and morals. By his good-natured affectation and unself-conscious methods, he allows the other characters to disguise their true emotions; his superficial and careless remedy of jokes, similes, and puns relieves tension and unwittingly exposes the foolishness of contemporary fashion and manners. While he is foolish, he is also harmless, and he furnishes, despite his desperate attempts at wit, some very funny and insightful moments.

Sir Wilfull Witwoud

Bashful and obstinate by turns, feisty and deferential when necessary, a country bumpkin with a good nature and a will to please, Sir Wilfull Witwoud, half brother by marriage to Witwoud, would be a wit if he could. He has come to town to look around before setting out on his travels and finds he doesn't understand the "lingo" of the fashionable world. He serves as a foil to the well bred. In contrast to their studied rudeness and affectation, he is simple and matter-of-fact. Thus, he is an easy mark in the scheming game of matchmaking, but a cheerful one, especially after a long bout of drinking. In a show of generosity and an imposture of sincerity, he gladly agrees to marry Millamant as a last resort to save her fortune. However, he also dissembles well. His is but another actor in Mirabell's clever ruse to catch Fainall and Mrs. Marwood in their deception and to lure Lady Wishfort into his harmless trap.

Themes

Social Convention

Congreve's "comedy of manners" takes the fashionable or conventional social behavior of the time as the principle subject of satire. Conflicts that arise between and among characters are prompted by affected and artificial social mores, especially with respect to relationships between the sexes. Social pretenses and plot complications abound in *The Way of the World*. Women are compelled to act coyly and to dissemble in courtship, couples deceive one another in marriage, friends are double-dealing, and conquests have more to do with dowries and convenience than love. All moral principle is risked for the sake of reputation and money. However, what makes the action comic is the subterfuge. What one says is hardly ever what one really thinks or means. To judge by appearances, for example, no one could be happier in his marriage than Fainall, who in reality disdains his wife and is carrying on an adulterous affair with his wife's close friend. Congreve intimates that, in fashionable society at the turn of the eighteenth century, it is crucial to preserve the outer trappings of beauty, wit, and sophistication no matter how egregious one's actions and words might prove.

Dowries, Marriage, and Adultery

In the male-dominated, patriarchal society of Congreve's time, a woman was little more than property in a marriage transaction. Her dowry (money, property, and estate) was relinquished to her husband at marriage and she became, by law, his chattel. In the upper classes, women had little voice in their own fate, and marriages were usually arranged according to social status, size of fortune, and family name. In the play, Millamant's dowry is at the center of the struggle that pits Mirabell, her true lover, against Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, the two adulterers plotting to gain control of Millamant's fortune as well as Fainall's wife's. Cunningly, Mrs. Fainall has had a large part of her estate signed over in trust before her marriage to prevent her husband from acquiring it.

While marriages are important economic contracts, they are also convenient vehicles for protecting social reputations. Mrs. Fainall has made such a marriage, which is socially acceptable and even expected, as long as the pretense of civility is maintained. However, getting caught in an adulterous relationship puts both reputation and fortune at risk. Hence when the relationship between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood is discovered, the two become social outcasts. Fainall has staked his reputation on a plot to disinherit his wife. As punishment, he will have to bear the humiliating exposure, continuing to live with his wife and depend on her for his livelihood. Mrs. Marwood's reputation is ruined, her future hopes destroyed. Congreve's intent is to reflect the way of the world in all its manifest greed. The lesson is that those who cheat get their just desserts in the end.

Decorum and Wit

Congreve invents several characters who, as fops, dandies, and fools, provide fitting foils to the romantic hero and heroine. He pits these purported "wits" against Mirabell and Millamant to comment on the social decline of manners. Since the play is a comedy, audiences are to take it both as serious social satire and also as an amusing romp. No one, of course, escapes Congreve's satirical pen entirely. All people are sometimes fools, Congreve suggests, or sometimes too earnest or too busy inventing counterfeit personas in order to hide their own moral turpitude. Petulant and Witwoud make good fools for they epitomize the shallowness and silliness of fashionable society, but they both also are capable of voicing through their wit the real motivations behind people's actions. They mistake fashionable behavior for decorum and good manners, but they are basically harmless. The comic hero, Mirabell, unscrupulously uses blackmail and trickery to promote his own interests, yet he also represents what is wise and decent in society, and he protects and thoughtfully provides for his friends. Millament, while she acts capriciously and spends time with fops, is inherently thoughtful and able to distinguish between fashion and principles. Lady Wishfort is perhaps the most sympathetically comic character in that, for all her desperate attempts to preserve decorum and for all the power she wields as the wealthy matriarch of the family, she is at heart a lonely widow who will do anything for a husband.

Passion and Puritanism

It has been noted that this final Congreve play was, in effect, a dramatic answer to Puritan Pastor Jeremy Collier's vilification of the theatre world, in which he publicly denounced the English stage as morally bankrupt. As comic heroes, Millamant and Mirabell represent characters who are most in touch with their own natural passions and creative spirits, free of both a fashionable sexual freedom and overwrought piety. Lady Wishfort symbolizes the tyranny and hypocrisy with which society constrains these natural, creative passions in the name of Puritanism. In contrast to the true lovers, she pretends to an elegance and pretentious demeanor at odds with the emotions and passions raging inside her. In a strict and amusingly eccentric Puritanical education in the ways of the world, she has served as a "model" by which to teach her daughter to despise men and lewd behavior, including "going to filthy Plays." It is no coincidence that, in order for the two lovers to finally come together, they must reduce Lady Wishfort's logic and principles to the transparent artifice that it has so clearly become by the end of the play.

Sexual Politics

The war between the sexes in this dramatic comedy is played with wit and artistry, treachery and complex design, tenderness and teasing, passion and charm, and, above all, precise timing. In Congreve's play, it is safe to say that in this particular struggle—the high stakes of which are love, money, and social survival—men and women are equally proficient and powerful. Gender behavior is proscribed within the limits of social

convention. Thus male and female attitudes and actions are expected to be very different and those differences are to be strictly maintained. The prenuptial "negotiation" scene between Mirabell and Millamant amusingly yet sincerely establishes the rules by which the couple will manage their marriage, preserving independence and privacy as well as intimacy and love. While the conditions of their agreements seem petty at first glance, it is clear that they reflect prohibitions against the "evil" tendencies of each sex. The bottom line is that Millamant will not be unduly dominated or possessed by her husband and her husband will not be vexed with the wiles of intrigue or the vain fashions of the time. It is a good exchange: it preserves the respect of each party as well as the distinctions and charms perceived to be natural and unique to men and women. Mirabell and Millamant's union is certainly intended as a corrective to the deceitful adultery of Fainall, the pathetic loneliness of Lady Wishfort, and the emptiness and debauchery of the life of the dandy.

Style

Restoration Comedy

Congreve's plays belong to a genre known as Restoration comedy. The Restoration refers to the reestablishment of the monarchy in England with the return of Charles II to the throne in 1660 after a period of social upheaval. In English literature, the Restoration "age" parallels the political period, covering roughly the years from 1660 to the revolution in 1688 when Parliament regained power. The genre is characterized by its satirical view of the times, with its particular focus on the relationship between conventional morality and the individual spirit. Its comic characters are often reflections of the shallow aristocrats of court society; they are peopled with libertines and wits, gallants and dandies. The hero is usually sophisticated and critical of convention and fashion: In *The Way of the World*, for example, Mirabell is able to out-rascal the other rogues and thereby wins the love and prosperity he seeks as well as the respect and admiration of the other characters. The plays of George Etherege, William Wycherley, Sir John Vanbrugh, and George Farquhar also belong to the English tradition of Restoration comedy.

Setting

Congreve's play takes place in London, an apt setting since the play's action revolves around the ways of the fashionable world. Indeed, the play reflects the manners and customs of London life in 1700, when it was first performed. Within the play, Congreve contrasts the pretentious, artificial (and often reprehensible and barbaric) manners of "Town" life with the rough, untutored but more natural country manners reflected in the character of Sir Wilfull. The play's five acts include just three settings: a chocolate house, St. James Park, and Lady Wishfort's London house. Each setting allows a glimpse of the way in which characters comport themselves in public and private.

In the chocolate house, the major male characters meet to drink and gamble in act 1. This is the domain where men seem to rule, and Congreve orients the audience to the social dictates by which they speak and act together. In act 2, the action moves to St. James Park, a more open and public place where men and women interact. In this setting, the intrigues of plot multiply. Couples are on display in the park, to see and be seen. The park is central to the plot because it allows Congreve to show the gap between the outward appearance of good manners and the scheming dialogue between couples in which slander, deceit, and trickery hold sway and where reputations are being ruined or advanced. In the following three acts, the scenes shift to Lady Wishfort's house. Again, the setting is appropriate since it is Lady Wishfort's fortune and her central position as the matriarch of the family that drives the action of the play. The house plays an important role in the development of the action because it has both public and private spaces—closets where characters may hide and overhear, rooms that can be locked, chambers where the private habits of the characters come into

sharp contrast with outward appearances. It is in the private world of the house where the management or mismanagement of domestic affairs—marriage, dowry arrangements, match-making, and sexual intrigues—most properly belong.

Five-Act Play

Congreve is following a long tradition of dramatists who, since the classical period, used a formula of dividing the play into five acts of approximately the same length and playing time. The action rises, where it climaxes in the third act, and falls to its denouement. Typically, and it is true in Congreve's play, the first act introduces the characters and sets up the plot, giving background information that helps the audience understand relationships between characters as well as thematic direction. For example, in the first act of this play, Congreve introduces the major male characters, sets up a romantic conflict, establishes the hero as antithetical to the shallow mannerisms of the times, and indicates that the dramatic action will revolve around the play of courtship. The second act complicates the action, increases the conflict, and leads the audience to the crisis of the third act, where the action reaches its most exciting turning point.

The women converge with the men in the second act where the park is the setting for intrigue, the revelation of extramarital affairs, and the hatching of the plot to trick Lady Wishfort into agreeing to the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant. The action leads naturally to the third act where all characters meet in Lady Wishfort's house and where Fainall and Marwood plan their devious plot to exploit Lady Wishfort. It is in the third act that suspense is greatest. The action falls in the fourth act with the resolution of the various plots. The merriment is at its height here: Millamant and Mirabaell negotiate their famous prenuptial agreement, Sir Wilfull performs his finest drunken hour, and the fake Sir Rowland plights his troth to Lady Wishfort only to be undone by the evil machinations of Marwood and Fainall. In the fifth act, the various plots are unraveled and the final event is a happy marriage contract between the two heroes.

Dramatic Devices

Congreve uses several dramatic devices to good purpose. Of particular importance here are impersonation (and disguise), the foil, comic relief, counterplot, and hyperbole. Without these devices, the action could not go forward and the comedy would fall flat.

Impersonation is, of course, a ploy by which Mirabell plans to trick Lady Wishfort into surrendering her niece. With Waitwell disguised as Sir Rowland, Mirabell hopes to inflame Lady Wishfort's passion, persuade her to marry Sir Rowland, and then, when the hoax is revealed, to force her into agreeing to his marriage with Millamant. Disguise is also used in two other instances—when Marwood dons a mask to escape attention in the park after her quarrel with Fainall, and when she hides in the closet and overhears Mirabell's plot. Pretense and disguise are the raw materials of comedy, and they abound

in this play. Everyone is pretending, from Lady Wishfort, who must wear layers of paint to hide her age and layers of self-righteousness to feign her disinterest in men, to Mrs. Fainall, who appears to be a wife at the mercy of her husband and turns out to be a shrewd businesswoman. Mirabell plays at being Lady Wishfort's lover; Fainall appears to be an honest husband; Foible is not the loyal waiting woman she seems; and Sir Wilfull good-naturedly feigns his pursuit of Millamant, who, in turn, demonstrates that the shallow and capricious "femme fatale" is in reality an intelligent, passionate, and worthy match to Mirabell.

A character may serve as foil to a protagonist or hero by representing unattractive traits or immoral behavior, thereby causing the hero to shine in a comparatively brighter, superior light. It's easy to see how Fainall, for example, acts as a foil to Mirabell. Both are gentlemen, both are scheming to achieve their own ends. However, Fainall's treachery, his willingness to sacrifice everyone to win, makes him a villain. From the shadows cast by Fainall's evil, Mirabell emerges as a true gallant, saving Mrs. Fainall and Lady Wishfort's reputation and fortune, winning his bride as a reward, and generally succeeding in bringing the action to a happy ending. A similar comparison can be made between Marwood and Millamant.

Comic relief signifies precisely what its name suggests—the introduction of laughter to break the tension over a conflict arising in the action. Paradoxically, comic relief is designed both to ease emotional intensity and to heighten the seriousness of the potential crisis or action. In Congreve's play, as in all good dramatic comedy, tragedy figures largely. It is the reverse side of the coin, the tension, that makes the comedy work. In this play, a funny remark or observation relieves many serious moments of suspense. For example, in act 5 Mirabell first enters Lady Wishfort's presence having been cast out as an object of scorn. His future depends on this moment. He must complete his scheme to liberate Lady Wishfort from her foes and win Millamant. Enter Sir Wilfull by his side, and stepping into the serious breach between them offers words of encouragement:

"Look up Man, I'll stand by you, 'sbud an she do
frown, she can't kill you;—besides—Hearkee she
dare not frown desperately, because her face is none
of her own; 'Sheart an she shou'd her forehead wou'd
wrinkle like the Coat of a Cream-cheese."

Sir Wilfull has managed both to remind the audience of the seriousness of the undertaking and to immediately relieve any prospect of danger by alluding to Lady Wishfort's by now generally-acknowledged vanity and her desperate attempts to maintain her looks.

Using counterplots or subplots, Congreve echoes the themes being played out in the main drama. Subplots complicate the drama and are intended to further engage the audience in the action, vary the theme, and convey the sense of a real and larger world beyond the life of the heroes. Marwood and Fainall conspire in a subplot to ruin Lady

Wishfort that provides a counter to Mirabell's own scheme to win the hand of her niece. Lady Wishfort also secretly plans to marry her niece to Sir Wilfull while she herself marries Sir Rowland (Mirabell's pretended uncle) hoping at one and the same time to foil Mirabell's prospects of marriage and have him disinherited.

Hyperbole (deliberate and obvious exaggeration) works together with understatement (deliberately restrained and therefore ironic expressions of reality) to make comedy potent. Such devices also serve to expose cultural stereotypes and, especially in this play, deeply held assumptions about male and female behavior. Examples of hyperbole and understatement abound in Congreve's play. The two "experts" are Witwoud and Petulant, although each character is endowed with a witty energy that is often employed to insult or outsmart a foe. In act 3, Petulant hopes to insult Sir Wilfull by remarking how obvious it is that he's been traveling. "I presume," he says, "upon the Information of your Boots." Petulant's attitude and speech are patently silly and pretentious. But Sir Wilfull is not taken aback. He matches Petulant at his own game by replying in just as exaggerated and deliberate a fashion, "If you are not satisfy'd with the Information of my Boots, Sir if you will step to the Stable, you may enquire further of my Horse, Sir." In the same act, a servant entering the scene with Sir Wilfull conveys the deliberately understated information that Lady Wishfort is growing so old that it takes her all morning to prepare herself for public examination. It is afternoon, and Sir Wilfull has asked the servant if he would even recognize the Lady since he has only been in her employ a week. The servant replies, "Why truly Sir, I cannot safely swear to her Face in a Morning, before she is dress'd. 'Tis like I may give a shrew'd guess at her by this time."

Historical Context

The period in English history from 1670 to 1729, when Congreve lived and worked, was marked by a dramatic political event, which gave its name to the literary tradition known as Restoration drama. In 1660, Charles II came to the throne, and the monarchy, which had been in exile, once again ruled England. Although that restoration period was short-lived (Parliament regained power in 1688), it was important to western culture in that it provided a perfect milieu for the comedy of manners.

The English comedies of this time, Congreve's included, take the manners of high society and the aristocracy as material for satire, focusing their attention, as Henry T. E. Perry writes in *The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama* "upon the surface of a highly polished and fundamentally insecure civilization." The merry licentiousness that characterized the new court was itself a reaction against the civil war of the 1640s, which resulted in the dissolution of the monarchy and led to the subsequent Puritanical mood that settled over the country. As Joseph Wood Krutch observes in *Comedy and Conscience After the Restoration,* the court of Charles II

> wished to make the time to come in every way the reverse of the time that was past, and the sin of regicide of which the preceding generation had been guilty made it seem a sort of piety to reverse all that had been done; to pull down all that had been set up, and set up all that had been pulled down; to hate all that had been loved and love all that had been hated.

King Charles loved the theatre, and the Restoration comedies that flourished in this period contain ample cultural evidence of the sophisticated decadence of the times during which he ruled. In the theatres, playgoers did their best to prove the point that the dramatic characters had indeed been modeled on them. High society gentlemen were loud and lewd, more interested in the appearance of their wigs than the play itself, keen to appear witty and cruel and willing to preserve their reputations as gallants by any means necessary, be they ever so barbaric. Krutch notes that it is no wonder that language and actions that would shock modern audiences would merely amuse a seventeenth-century audience. He writes,

> "Dramatists were not perverse creatures creating monsters to debase the auditors, but . . . were merely holding the mirror up to nature, or rather, to that part of nature which was best known to their fashionable auditors."

Of course, not all of England was peopled by creatures of fashion or high society. Plenty of Puritans lived among the middle and lower classes, and most of the literature written

in this period was either religious in nature or scientific and philosophical. John Bunyan had published "Pilgrim's Progress" in 1684, and John Locke published his "Essay Concerning Humane Understanding" in 1690. The epistemology of Locke and the religious passion of Bunyan were far cries from the London stage. It is interesting to note that critics such as the Puritan moralist Jeremy Collier—whose criticism of the stage best expresses the dogmatic protest against it—led the charge to "reform" the English theatre world. Collier's attack on the theatre came two years before the performance of *The Way of the World*. This play, then, can be read as an amusing retort to the criticism leveled against the stage as well as a symbolic maker at the historical juncture when Restoration comedy was giving way to the next incarnation of English drama, the socalled Sentimental comedy.

Critical Overview

The Way of the World is considered one of the finest examples of late seventeenth-century Restoration drama during the period when the comedy of manners flourished in England. Congreve had written two extremely popular dramas before this, *Love for Love* (1695) and *The Mourning Bride* (1697), which received rave reviews in London and cemented his reputation as a major playwright. However, his next and final play, *The Way of the World*, was only a marginal success when it was performed in 1700. Several theories have been forwarded as to why audience reaction at the time was lukewarm. One of Congreve's biographers, Bonamy Dobráee, speculates that, while Congreve's masterpiece must be appreciated for "depth and sympathy of its characterization . . . together with the general sense of what is precious in life, and the magnificent handling of language," the play might have been "too subtle." A character like Witwoud, he notes, is "indeed a coxcomb" but he was also "no idiot." Dobráee also characterizes the resolution of the plot as "abrupt and unlikely."

Several studies of late seventeenth-century drama make the claim that Congreve was writing for a "coterie" audience (fashionable high society) that disappeared at the turn of the century. The argument is that new playgoers were middle class or bourgeois in their tastes, and they demanded a new style, hence the rise of "sentimental" comedy popular after 1700. As Virginia Ogden Birdsall writes in *Wild Civility, The English Comic Spirit on the Restoration Stage,* the "conditions and circumstances in which English civilization had to grow" led to "a new and not inconsiderable ally in the cause of repressive sobriety—namely, an increasingly influential middle-class mentality almost invariably hostile to the comic or play spirit."

Recent studies by such scholars as Emmett Avery, Harold Love, and Pierre Danchin have demonstrated that the late seventeenth-century London theatre-going audience (at the time only two theatres, Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields, were in operation in London) was perhaps more heterogeneous than modern audiences. Robert Hume calls the audiences of the period between 1697 and 1703 "cranky" and for reasons not completely understood, they "damned" the new plays of the Restoration while continuing to enjoy the older, stock dramas of the period that expressed similar sentiments. In the 1697-1698 season, writes Hume, "fifteen out of seventeen new plays failed." Jeremy Collier's attack on the theatre and the consequent controversy over the theatre world's morality probably added to the troubles that plagued the theatre at this time, but as Hume observes, audiences were "revolting" prior to Collier's scathing denouncements. Here, it is worth quoting Hume at length:

> Why audiences were so difficult in the years around 1700 we frankly do not know. Authors were baffled: in prologue after prologue they lamented the fickleness of the audience, and in prefaces and dedications they tended to blame actors and managers for their misfortunes. If authors were puzzled and indignant, managers were frantic. They imported foreign singers

at inflated prices, tried entr'acte dancers, animal acts, acrobats, and vaudeville turns. They cannibalized favorite scenes from plays and popular operas. They kept changing the starting time of performance.

Whatever the reasons for the minimal success of *The Way of the World* in 1700, it was revived to popular acclaim in the eighteenth century: it was performed over two hundred times in London. Professor Avery, writes Hume, concluded that Congreve's play flourished and "gained popularity steadily over a period of some forty years, achieving his greatest share in the repertory around 1740." When Garrick, who was indifferent to Congreve, took over management of Drury Lane, performances of the play diminished. During the nineteenth century, as Herbert Davies notes in *The Complete Plays of William Congreve,* it was performed "with considerable cuts and alterations to suit the taste of the times." It was revived in 1904 and continues to be performed today.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Smith is an independent scholar and freelance writer. In this essay, Smith explores the significance of Congreve's play to Restoration drama, particularly the comedy of manners.

Western philosophers have theorized about the nature and causes of mirth at least since the time of Plato. Comedy feeds on incongruity; people laugh even when the joke is cruel because they want to feel a sense of relief that their own follies are not fatal. Indeed, comedy has the power to heighten people's sense of belonging to a common human family. Restoration playwrights understood the value of laughter as a social force, and they used the theatre as a staging ground. With an attitude of detached instruction that was still entertaining, they contrived their plots, fashioned their stock characters (the country bumpkin, the wit, the hero, the fool, etc.), and satirized familiar domestic situations and themes to reflect the ridiculous but nonetheless very human impulses of the times. No playwright was more adept at this in the late seventeeth century than Congreve. And no play better represents his mastery of the comedy of manners than his final play, *The Way of the World*.

Congreve's decision to include lines from Horace, the Roman satirist, on the title page of the printed play immediately alert the reader that his work will relate to the immorality and unscrupulousness of society. These lines, quoted in the original Latin from Horace's *Satires,* cautions adulterers and mocks the fate of those who, caught in the act, must relinquish their dowries. Of course, marital disharmony and sexual intrigue are not new themes. What is of interest is the way these themes are treated in Restoration comedy, where, as Joseph Wood Krutch notes in *Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration,* "the technique of wit" is used to great advantage in "rationalizing debauchery into a philosophical system."

Taking nothing away from Congreve as a master of polished dialogue and a purveyor of wit, it must be observed that this final play was written in answer to one of the most notorious Puritanical attacks on the theatre by Parson Jeremy Collier. The play therefore offers much more than a witty "rationalization," however. It playfully teaches people how to find an antidote to debauchery. In Congreve's dedication of the play to the Earl of Montague, he announces the profound, if comic, intent of his art by placing himself in direct line of ancestry with Terence, "the most correct Writer in the World" who is himself a descendent of the masters of comedy in the classic tradition from Theophrastus to Moliére. Of this new play, he laments that it will be little understood because it is not animated by the usual characters who "are Fools so gross, that in my humble Opinion, they should rather disturb than divert the well-natur'd and reflecting part of an Audience. . . ." While Congreve is no moralist, nor should his play be read as anything more doctrinal than a well-wrought fable with a moral attached, the heroes of this play nonetheless undertake a "remarriage" of minds that is possible only when both perversely jaded and self-righteously censorious views on marriage are rejected.

In order for the romantic heroes Mirabell and Mrs. Millamant to come together in marriage and to achieve a happy ending for the play, they must first thwart the devious intentions of their foes and character foils Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, who are carrying on an adulterous affair. Moreover, they must undermine Lady Wishfort's falsely pious pronouncements and patently disingenuous hatred of men. It is no accident that the Lady appears in the third act to take her place as the central comic figure of the play when the action reaches a climax. As the dominant matriarch in control of the purse strings, she is also the character who best reflects the sworn enemies of comedy: hypocritical and self-righteousness, with a fashionable but overdeveloped appetite for the opposite sex. Finally, by relying on their intelligence and thoughtful common sense, the two heroes also deflect the tiresome banter of the self-proclaimed "wits," Witwoud and Petulant. These two dandies playfully engage the audience in amusing and often sophisticated dialogues, pointing up unpleasant yet honest insights into the way of the world. But they are essentially shallow, as is the fashionable world they represent, and as such they also serve as foils to the heroes.

In the opening of the first act, when Fainall and Mirabell are gambling (a foreshadowing of the suspenseful battle they will wage for love and money), Congreve establishes the prevailing cavalier attitude toward sexual encounters. Fainall's quip to Mirabell over cards that "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" demonstrates the value both he and society place on conquests that will prove disastrous for the vanquished. Congreve would have the audience smile at the sentiment, to acknowledge its compelling force in the way of the world. But he also finally undermines Fainall and society's libertine attitudes toward adultery and scandal. Both Fainall's "Inconstancy and Tyranny of temper" have led Mirabell to protect Mrs. Fainall's fortunes from her husband by deeding them over in trust to him before she was married. In the final act, this precaution proves to be Fainall's undoing, for without the deed to Mrs. Fainall's property he is without means. He cannot extort Lady Wishfort's estate by blackmail or make good on his promise to set his wife "a drift, like a Leaky hulk to Sink or Swim, as she and the Current of this Lewd Town can agree." He needs his wife's money (which he thought he had "wheadl'd out of her") to survive. Mrs. Marwood suffers a more ignominious fate for her role as a spoiler. She exits the play vowing revenge on Mrs. Fainall. My resentment, she swears, "shall have Vent, and to your Confusion, or I'll perish in the attempt." But her vow is an empty one. She has been revealed as a vicious, grasping adulteress, and she is left without husband or means. Fainall can return to his wife, and Mirabell promises to "Contribute all that in me lies to a Reunion," but Marwood has become, ironically and by her own hand, the "Leaky hulk" that risks perishing. She has exploited her wit, Congreve implies, at the expense of true feelings.

Congreve comically draws out the natural and enduring conflict between the sexes in order to make his audience laugh at human foibles and to poke fun at the posturing associated with romance and sexual intrigue. Early on, Mirabell expresses his mocking disdain of the romantic entanglements that drive the story. The night before the story begins, Millamant has rebuffed him. What can he expect, Fainall asks. The women had met on "one of their Cabal-nights . . . where they come together like the Coroner's Inquest, to sit upon the murder'd Reputations of the Week." Men are excluded from the

gossip circle, and their presence (with the exception of the "coxcombs" Witwoud and Petulant) would naturally stall all conversation.

Clearly Mirabell is too grave, too love-struck, to understand that he has breached "decorum." It is further learned that he cannot win Millamant without first pacifying her aunt, whom he has angered by playing the knave and pretending love to her. Fashion has dictated the rules by which men must pay court to women, and, in the case of Lady Wishfort, Mirabell has paid them only lip service. He has indeed engaged in the "last Act of Flattery with her, and was guilty of a Song in her Commendation." He tells Fainall he even went so far as to "complement her with the Imputation of an Affair with a young Fellow . . ." But his attentions have been false. Throughout the exchange of dialogue in act 1, Congreve shines the light of truth on the way things are. The none too subtle implication is that fashionable women and men are victims of their own vanities, that they delight in the weaknesses of others, and that they are blind to their own defects.

For his gravity as a lover and his knavery as a gallant, Mirabell must temporarily suffer. He will be disappointed in his expectations of Millamant until it appears that his gallant efforts to win her have been in vain. For his ability to read the corrupt nature of the world and his desire to circumvent it, even while deploying its methods, he is victorious in the end. He is able to rise above the superficial manners of his peers; furthermore, his deceptions and undisguised attempts at blackmail have been wrought in the name of love rather than greed or artificial gallantry. He is, as Virginia Birsdall has pointed out in *Wild Civility: The English Comic Spirit on the Restoration Stage,* "a promoter of marriages." The marriages he promotes and also helps to sustain suit his own interests. His arrangement of Foible and Waitwell's marriage secures him the co-conspiracy of Foible against Lady Wishfort. His arrangement of marriage between Mrs. Fainall and her husband and his consequent safeguarding of her estate enable him to foil Fainall, who wants to use his wife's fortune as leverage in the game of extortion. Yet, at the same time, Foible loves Waitwell and is made happy by the union. And Mrs. Fainall, who has been widowed and has indulged in an affair with Mirabell, protects her reputation by marrying Fainall. His ability to be both gallant and wise, both sophisticated and loving render his plots harmless and instructive. It is later left up to Millamant to teach him how to be "enlarg'd" into a proper husband.

In the famous "prenuptial agreement" scene in act 4, Millamant outlines the conditions under which she will "by degrees dwindle into a Wife." The gaiety, capriciousness, and arrogance that has characterized her behavior and conversation with Mirabell are offset by veins of gravity and intelligence, an energetic charm and a desire for profound love that culminate here in a style that reflects her power as a heroine. She has toyed with Mirabell unmercifully, snubbing and teasing him until, at the end of act 2, he can think of her only as "a Whirlwind" and himself unwittingly lodged in that whirlwind. While he allows passion to tyrannize him, she is in complete control. Her airy detachment is a challenge to the despotism of the old marriage code. Indeed, she wishes to establish a new marriage pattern that will look very much like a permanent courtship: "I'll fly and be follow'd to the last Moment," she asserts to Mirabell,

"tho' I am upon the very Verge of Matrimony, I
expect you should sollicit me as much as if I were
wavering at the Grate of a Monastery, with one Foot
over the Threshold. I'll be sollicited to the very last,
nay and afterwards."

While she is a genius in her manipulation of other characters and while her playfulness borders on cruelty, she is intrinsically aware of her own follies, and she finally cannot deny her own natural inclinations. At the end of the scene she admits to Fainall, "Well, If Mirabell shou'd not make a good Husband, I am a lost thing; for I find I love him violently."

It is fitting to conclude with Lady Wishfort, whose declarations of piety and hatred of men have fooled no one, including herself. In act 3, Mrs. Marwood enters the Lady's house to tattle on Foible whom she has seen speaking with Mirabell in St. James Park. Lady Wishfort knows Foible has gone out with the Lady's picture to show Sir Rowland, the more to incite his passions for her. Of course, she doesn't know that Mirabell has invented the admiring uncle for his own purposes. She only fears here that her own passions will be found out and that she will lose her last chance at marriage, an unpleasant thought at the ripe old age of fifty-five. She laments to Marwood,

"Oh, he carries Poyson in his Tongue that wou'd
corrupt Integrity it self. If she has given him an
Opportunity, she has as good as put her Integrity into
his Hands. Ah dear Marwood, what's Integrity to an
Opportunity?"

Despite her willingness to take advantage of her own opportunity, especially at the expense of ruining Mirabell, she falsely insists on her disdain of men in general. Compare the very funny scene with Foible in act 4, during which she readies herself for Sir Rowland:

"In what figure shall I give his Heart the first Impression? . . .
Shall I sit? . . . No I won't sit . . . I'll walk . . .
and then turn full upon him . . . No, that will be too
sudden . . . I'll lie . . . aye, I'll lie down . . . I'll receive
him in my little dressing Room . . . with one Foot a
little dangling off . . . and then as soon as he appear,
start, aye, start and be surpriz'd, and rise to meet him
in a pretty disorder . . ."

to her soliloquy in the final act on the virtues of raising a daughter to despise men:

"I chiefly made it my own Care to Initiate her very
Infancy in the Rudiments of Vertue, and to Impress
upon her tender Years, a Young *Odium* and *Aversion*
to the very sight of Men . . . she never look'd a Man in

the Face but her own Father, or the Chaplain, and him
we made a shift to put upon her for a Woman, by the
help of his long Garments, and his Sleek-face . . . "

Her unnatural parenting is not only hypocritical, it has by implication contributed to the unfortunate circumstances in which her daughter has found herself sadly married to a man she truly does hate. And it is Congreve's final "revenge" that she not only be humiliated in her romance with "Sir Rowland," but be the butt of his general joke. For while her fortune is "saved" from Fainall, her reputation as a "superannuated Frippery," a fate she fears most, has indeed come to pass. If Congreve took exception to the lewdness and over-elaborate artificiality of the times, he also clearly resented the Puritanical attacks upon it. Clearly, Lady Wishfort supplies his comic vehicle for demonstrating the weakness of both extremes. But perhaps the most unconsciously insightful remark belongs to the rude but kind-hearted country bumpkin, Sir Wilfull, who for all his misunderstandings of the "lingo" of London, speaks the great lesson of the play when he denounces Witwoud as a fop and declares that "Fashion" is indeed "a Fool."

Source: Kathy Smith, Critical Essay on *The Way of the World,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Kaplan studies The Way of the World *as a representative twentieth-century revival of a Restoration comedy.*

Opening in a small Greenwich Village playhouse in 1924, *The Way of the World* created a considerable stir among New York theatregoers. The play was a novelty to many, "so old," one reviewer said, "that it is new." The play, however, seemed fresh and unusual not simply because of its age but because it had not been seen and heard for a long time. Considered too bawdy for public performances, most Restoration comedies had been banished from theatres in Great Britain and the United States for several generations. The necessary prelude to their twentieth-century return to the stage—and to the attention that return generated—was literary. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, men of letters such as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Edmund Gosse rehabilitated the comedies' reputations, convincing their readers that the plays were not tasteless, obscene works but brilliant and witty classics.

Restoration comedy seemed as new to theatre workers in the 1920s as to their audiences, for the plays had no performance tradition. An authentic or "authorized" performance style for classic plays is, of course, unattainable, but there were no vital conventions on which theatre groups could draw. How, then, were the plays to be performed? This essay charts the answers provided to this question in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Although that performance history can not be isolated from twentieth-century British revivals of Restoration comedies, I have chosen to foreground the American productions because their history is generally unknown. Reviewers of the American revivals still all too frequently invoke only British productions. Indeed, they do not always seem aware, when reviewing a particular comedy, that it was revived in the United States earlier in the century. But my aim is to do more than just fill in a gap. We can not adequately understand and assess the ways that Restoration comedies are currently being performed in the U.S. unless we historicize the production and reception of these plays.

I focus on the theatrical career of one play in order to make manifest long-term trends impossible to see in an essay surveying productions of several different plays. I have chosen William Congreve's *The Way of the World* because of its prestige and prominence on twentieth-century British and American stages. Often said to be not just the greatest comedy of its period but the greatest English language comedy, it was the Restoration play first offered in modern, commercial revivals in both London and New York. And it has been performed steadily over the course of the century, travelling the route taken by many other classic plays in the U.S.—from little theatres and semi-private theatrical clubs to off and off-off-Broadway and resident theatres after World War II, with an occasional British import offered on Broadway or in one of the larger resident venues. *The Way of the World* is regarded by many critics as the quintessence of Restoration comedy. Moreover, when staged, it concentrates the problems as well as the virtues of Restoration comedy. Its plot may be even more maze-like, its pyrotechnic wit somewhat

more dense and topical, but these features in most Restoration comedies have challenged twentieth-century directors and theatre companies and have influenced the way Congreve's play and the other comedies of its period have been performed. It is not, to be sure, the quintessence of bawdiness. *The Way of the World* comes late—1700—in the corpus of Restoration comedies, and it is less ribald than many of its predecessors written during the reign of Charles II. But for most twentieth-century American theatre workers and the atregoers the reputed naughtiness of Restoration comedies has been more salient than the *degree* of ribaldry within any one of them.

The revival history exemplified by *The Way of the World* has at its center a single performance style. When Restoration comedies came back to American theatres in the 1920s, a period style that had recently been devised for them in Britain was imported along with the plays. It included late seventeenth-century props and costumes and acting that mixed farce, parody, and "artificial" or "high style" performance. The artificial acting, conveying the affectations and hauteur of the play's elite characters, was considered the most important and most characteristic element of this period style. In the interwar years, theatre companies appropriated the period style, but some of the most successful also adjusted it to suit the New York context. Early on, theatre workers and critics identified certain features of the style as "British" and certain as "American," and directors exploited these nationalistic constructions and comparisons to the enjoyment of their audiences. Such identifications and juxtapositions of stylistic elements expressed simultaneously a recognition of Restoration comedy as culturally prestigious drama and performance *and* an iconoclastic, nationalistic impulse—to mock British, highbrow culture and assert the superior vitality of popular American theatrical arts. By contrast, after World War II there was very little interest in adjusting or altering the 1920s period style. Theatre companies engaged in reverential conservation of the early twentieth-century style, which had come to be seen as entirely, admirably British and traditional.

These two phases in the performance of Restoration comedies we owe, of course, to theatre companies and, especially, to directors. But the institutional contexts for productions also constrain or enable performance styles or, in this case, alterations in the treatment of a single performance style. The cultural stature accorded to a theatrical production has an impact on its presentational features, and the development of diverse theatrical institutions has underwritten the creation of a hierarchy of cultural prestige. This variation in institutions has in twentieth-century America succeeded in establishing classifications of high and popular theatre, even though the boundaries between American theatrical institutions in this century have usually been weak. The type of theatre institutions, including the audiences they address, and the social and financial strains they experience have had an impact on the style of the productions.

My history of Restoration period style that follows will suggest the revivals offered in the interwar period were more interesting than those presented after World War II. Modern bodies, modern materials, and the modern mental lives of theatre workers and the atregoers make inevitable the mediating function of performance styles, suiting a play

written in and for one culture to the culture in which it is staged. Between the two world wars, the period style was reproduced, but it was also challenged and altered with new "Americanized" elements. After World War II, however, the intercultural work of performance styles was denied, as directors and companies sought again and again to recapture a style devised in the 1920s.

Those years of denial appear to be coming to an end, for the question of how to perform Restoration comedies has recently been reopened. Distancing themselves from the theatrical Anglophilism so pervasive between 1945 and 1990, some directors have consciously rejected many if not all of the elements of the period style. While they have acknowledged Restoration comedies as classics, they have not given the plays' conventional performance style the same status. In the second section of this essay, I look at three of the revivals of *The Way of the World* that have pioneered new approaches to Restoration comedy. Although these recent productions have not all been critical or box-office successes, they have been important efforts to find new and compelling performance idioms. More than aesthetic achievement is at stake in these attempts. Their directors have sought to bridge the cultural chasm between Restoration comedy and late twentieth-century audiences in the United States.

Critical Essay #3

During the interwar period, a handful of Restoration revivals were offered in New York. The institutional contexts for the majority of the American productions—the art theatre and the private theatre club—facilitated the inventiveness of their stylistic appropriations. The art theatre provided a venue for serious contemporary and classic European plays, new American plays, and experimental stagings. The Players' Club, in its annual spring productions, staged mostly classics. By presenting plays and productions not usually seen on Broadway, these two institutions contributed to the segmentation of theatre, to the creation of a "high" as opposed to "popular" culture. But while they helped to create these categories, they enjoyed playing with this new distinction as well. Such play was possible because culturally elite audiences in this period were notable for their broad tastes, enjoying popular as well as high art. It was also possible because the institutional boundaries between the culturally prestigious and the popular were not yet firm. That transformation occurred gradually, between 1910 and 1940. Productions done initially under the aegis of the art theatre and the Players' Club did not always play only to small, culturally elite audiences. The Restoration revivals they sponsored were most compelling precisely when they mingled high and popular elements for audiences consisting not only of "longhairs" with wide interests but also of those with less cultural capital.

An art theatre, the Cherry Lane Playhouse in Greenwich Village, first offered *The Way of the World* in twentieth-century New York. The immediate impetus for the production in the Village was a revival that had opened nine months earlier in February 1924. Directed by Nigel Playfair, Congreve's play was the first commercially produced Restoration comedy in twentieth-century London. Because of its great popularity with both critics and the theatregoing public, this and other Restoration comedies were deemed "playable" again. The performance style that Playfair developed for *The Way of the World* was subsequently emulated in the United States as well as in Great Britain because British actor and director Dennis Cleugh presented not only the comedy but also Playfair's performance style at the Cherry Lane.

What was it he appropriated? Nigel Playfair had chosen to do the play because he considered it "the greatest of all comedies of manners," but he disliked reverential, scholarly, and theatrically dull approaches to classics. He believed that "one is out . . . in reproducing old plays, not so much to give a replica (which is impossible) as to furnish a sort of review and criticism—a *parody* if you like, but a parody which expresses admiration." He mocked many aspects of Restoration period manners. Doris Zinkeisen created brightly colored, poster style sets, whose overtly artificial strokes complemented the stage business he devised. As one reviewer summed up the production, "the servants had to light the candles in quartet formation, and everybody who was not speaking had to strike attitudes with arms raised or elbow stuck out, and all the dresses were as gorgeously polychromatic as could be, and the very ladies in the orchestra wore full-bottomed wigs. In a word, the play was fantasticated." The actors were even instructed to give archaic pronunciations to certain words—"tay" for tea, for example,

and "rallery" for raillery—not for the sake of historical accuracy but to give aural reminders of the "old-fashioned" character of this Restoration world.

Playfair worried that audiences would find the plot of *The Way of the World* too confusing. His response was to mock the plot as well and, in general, to draw attention away from it and to the style of the production. Some reviewers thought that he was also trying to distract spectators from the sexual content of the already lightly expurgated script. In Great Britain, Victorian prudery had not yet entirely disappeared. His mocking approach also infused the acting, which was a mix of high style, parody, and farce. In Edith Evans, as Millamant, Playfair found an actress capable of brilliant high style playing. Nineteenth-century essayist and critic Charles Lamb had insisted on the artificiality of Restoration comedy, and early twentieth-century actors attempted to make themselves as highly mannered and affected, as polished and brittle, as possible. Writing in 1963, John Gielgud remembered Evans's performance as "probably the finest stylized piece of bravura acting seen in London in the last fifty years. Her economy and grace of movement, her perfectly sustained poses, the purring, coquetry of her voice with its extraordinary subtlety of range, was inimitably captivating." As Gielgud's description suggests, high style acting could—and sometimes did—shade into the parody of camp. Playfair also encouraged farcical playing by a few of the actors. Next to Edith Evans, Margaret Yarde attracted the most attention in his production with her broad interpretation of Lady Wishfort. Some spectators objected, convinced that her performance was not in the spirit of Congreve's play, but most praised her performance.

Although a few reviewers thought that Playfair gingered up *The Way of the World* too much, this generally well-received production determined what became known as Restoration period style in early twentieth-century Britain. "The approach," according to J. L. Styan, "was not that of 'Let's put on a Restoration comedy,' but of 'Let's *pretend* to put on a Restoration comedy.'" And the playfully ridiculed, campy world produced became "the Restoration" in British revivals for many subsequent decades. Playfair's work also set the perimeters for Restoration period style and the world that it conveyed in the United States through the medium of Cleugh's production in New York.

The actors at the Cherry Lane aimed for both high style and farce, giving their performances parodic touches as well. Cleugh steered the actors to silly sounding pronunciations such as "obleeged" for obliged, for example. Playfair's style also influenced the visual look of the production: "beribboned and bewigged, flaring linings, lace cuffs, tight bodices, fans and monocles; the world of fashion did not spare color." This review in the *New York Times* suggests not just elaborate but also comically exaggerated period dress. The sets too, another reviewer noted approvingly, were "quaintly and amusingly done," no doubt, referring particularly to the scenery for act two, signifying St. James's Park. The backdrop offered a row of townhouses, painted only one or two feet high to indicate their distance. Because perspective was only suggested and not realistically represented, the residences looked like doll houses.

The successful commercial production between the wars had 100 performances, and Cleugh's revival topped that number by twenty. So popular was it that part way through the run the production was moved uptown to the Princess Theatre near Broadway at

39th Street. *The Way of the World* was so successful at least in part because it offered theatregoers an opportunity to demonstrate their cultural sophistication. The play had high status as a British dramatic classic. But it was also known as a risqué work, and spectators could display their cultural capital by responding aesthetically rather than morally, by remaining unperturbed by what they heard. Reviewers let it be known that they were unfazed by the play's bawdiness and observed no "moral agitation" among audience members.

Moreover, culturally sophisticated New Yorkers appreciated popular and mass culture as well as high culture, and they took pleasure in comparing the ribaldry of the Restoration with homegrown, widely enjoyed versions. Critics proudly asserted that American entertainment was at least as bawdy as what had been produced long ago about a British social elite. For *Variety*'s reviewer burlesque was the relevant comparison. In the slang that writers for the weekly liked to affect, he announced: "I heard it was very 'dirty' before I cum down, but it's as tame as a Sunday night with the wife . . . if this mob think this is a peppy opera I would just like to see a flock of them long-haired guys sittin' in rail seats up at the Prospect when the "Hot Water-Bag Babies" strut bare-legged out on that runway."

It was not just the ribaldry of the play, however, but the performance as a whole to which New York theatregoers responded. Although the American production revealed small alterations in Playfair's composite of acting styles, it did not dispense with high style playing. Most reviewers thought that the actors failed to convey its polished artifice, but high style was apparently already understood to be an aspect of the Restoration period style too crucial to reject. Critics attributed the difficulties that the cast had with it to their modernity: "it is of course impossible in this year of grace," noted one, "to bring back to the stage the full flavor of aristocratic comedy. The grand air must be acquired for the occasion, and the grand air does not flourish on Broadway or even on Shaftesbury Avenue." The actors' national identity, however, and, in particular, their location in a polyglot and poly-accented American city, was thought to be an even greater handicap, preventing the players from achieving an Anglo-Saxon standard. "The actors," he continued, "must learn to speak the English language. This is a particular difficulty in New York."

If being American was deemed a cultural liability for performing high style, it was an asset for performing farce and parody, the other components of Restoration period style acting. Americans were considered very adept at low comedy, as the vaudeville and burlesque industries were demonstrating. Sir Wilfull Witwoud was apparently the character most farcically rendered, and the critics loved him. Bruce de Lette and Lawrence Tulloch, as Witwoud and Petulant, also won praise for presenting the parody of camp. Indeed, references to the "slapstick" and "buffoonery" in the production as well as to Witwoud and Petulant as "female impersonators" suggest that the actors borrowed from vaudeville and burlesque—and perhaps from the drag balls and "Pansy" acts, popular at that time in New York—for their "low turns." *The Way of the World*'s performance style may have been appealing enough to fill the uptown Princess Theatre not only because the farcical and parodic elements compensated for the technical

deficiencies of the high style playing but also because the farce and parody incorporated elements from other New York entertainments.

Cleugh's production set precedents not only by introducing Restoration comedies to the twentieth-century American stage and not only by introducing Playfair's performance style for that comedy but also by introducing acting tagged according to nationality into Restoration comedy. The propensity to treat high style acting as British and farce and parody as American shaped both the production and consumption of some of the most successful of the American revivals in the interwar period. In a more pronounced way than Cleugh's, subsequent productions exploited the hybrid of high and low, British and American. Playfair had lightly parodied the world of Restoration comedy. In the United States additional parodic effects were achieved through the juxtaposition, and by that means the creation, of "national" styles. These revivals simultaneously offered high art fare and took advantage of Playfair's parodic approach to make fun not just of the early eighteenth century but also of highbrow and British art.

To see this, we need to turn to the other institution that showcased Restoration comedy, the Players' Club. Established by Edwin Booth in the late 1880s as a men's club for actors and others interested in the theatre, the Players' began offering annual spring productions in 1922 and continued until 1940. During that time it presented three Restoration plays. Its productions can not be readily characterized as either art or commercial theatre. The club usually performed classics for an audience that contained a strong contingent of artists and others in the theatre industry. It ran productions for only one week and gave some of the profits to charity. But it also performed in Broadway theatres and used all-star casts who donated their services. Moreover, successful productions sometimes got picked up by producers who sent them on tours. The ambiguity or even liminality of the club's position in the emerging cultural hierarchy for theatrical productions could make for dramatizations of surprising, audience-pleasing incongruities.

The Players' Club's production of *The Way of the World* in 1931 was the flop that proves the rule. No one quarrelled with the look of the production. "Bewigged, becravatted, beflounced and also bedevilled with amorous intrigue," noted *New York Times* reviewer Brooks Atkinson about the characters, "they make a fine pictorial showing as they strut across the stage." "There are singers and dancers and musicians," another critic enumerated, "and no end of silks and satins and furbelows and wigs upon the players." Critics grumbled once again, however, at the high style acting. Walter Hampden, famous for his appearances in costume dramas, knew how to express elegance and artifice in his stage posturings. But he had so much difficulty with diction that it was impossible for the audiences to understand him much of the time. The other cast members too had substantial difficulties with technique, so much so that they were unable to give the impression of a common, lacquered playing style. What sunk the production, however, was not poor high style playing but a dearth of the broad, "Americanized" comedy that could offset it. Although he commended Ernest Cossart for his performance as Sir Wilfull Witwoud, Percy Hammond, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune,* thought the part "cries out for Mr. James T. Powers to play it."

Famous for hamming it up in musical comedies and comic operas, Powers had played Scrub in the Players' Club's revival of *The Beaux' Stratagem* in 1928. He and Raymond Hitchcock—star of vaudeville, musical comedies, and revues and in *The Beaux' Stratagem* playing the role of Boniface—delighted audiences with their improvised antics. Both took liberties with the text, inventing a good deal of "horseplay." One reviewer thought the production lacked "cohesion," but most critics and the audiences in general did not care. With its combination of high style and shtick, *The Beaux' Stratagem* played to standing room only crowds.

The Players' Club's production of *The Way of the World* failed because American actors were not deemed capable of carrying a Restoration revival on the strength of their high style playing alone. But more problematic than that, the production took a reverential approach to a Restoration classic. (Playfair knew that he couldn't sell that approach even to British theatregoers, to whose national dramatic heritage the play belonged.) New York theatregoers were ready to acknowledge the cultural prestige of the play as long as they weren't asked to attend exclusively to its performance metaphor—high style playing—or to watch American actors defeated by that playing. The other Players' Club revivals of Restoration comedies succeeded not just because they included irreverent acting but because they relied on indigenous versions of irreverence.

Theatre workers and audiences understood and enjoyed the incongruities of putting twentieth-century vaudevillians and musical comedy stars into Restoration comedy. Funnier still were productions in which the encounters between high and low, British and American, old and modern did *not* seem incongruous. When Bobby Clark played Ben in the Players' Club's revival of *Love for Love* in 1940, he brought his well known vaudeville and burlesque routines to Congreve's comedy. As one reviewer explained, he "abandoned the painted spectacles and immense cigar, which are his trademarks, but he played the part with all the abundant spirit of burlesque, the lusty, gusty, leering magnificence that makes his modern clowning supreme in its field." The play had become an exhilarating showcase for American popular culture. "All those years ago William Congreve was really writing a vehicle for Bobby Clark," declared one amused—and gratified—reviewer.

After World War II, with the exception of an occasional British production imported to Broadway, Restoration comedies were performed in the U.S. by off-Broadway and resident theatres and, only in more recent years, by off-off-Broadways. The impetus for off-Broadway originally was "more economic than artistic." It provided outlets for plays produced more cheaply than they could be on Broadway, though a few off-Broadway companies, such as Proscenium Productions, which performed *The Way of the World* in Greenwich Village in 1954, were dedicated to classic revivals or to new plays without commercial appeal. By contrast, the not-for-profit resident theatres, in general, did aim at least originally "to be an independent channel for presentations of a more adventurous, if usually less popular, nature." But they and an increasing pool of non-profit off-Broadways, while supposedly protected from the whims of the marketplace, needed to take into account the tastes of their subscribers, their boards of trustees, and the private foundations and government agencies that began providing financial support in the late 1950s and mid-1960s respectively. The regional and many of the off-

Broadway theatres settled on a repertoire of culturally prestigious high art mixed with some entertaining Broadway-like and, beginning in the late 1960s, Broadway-bound fare.

Resident and off-Broadway productions throughout this period had to please audiences that were notably homogeneous—white, affluent, and well-educated. Theatre historians and critics were lamenting the absence of multi-class audiences by the mid-1960s, and though some theatres, often with the help of government and foundation support, sought out new, more diverse audiences in that and subsequent decades, they had little success. Audiences did become somewhat more racially diverse over the course of the 1980s, but the multi-class audience remained an unattainable goal. In 1965 Richard Schechner enumerated the stultifying effects that resulted from resident theatres addressing the interests of middle-class subscribers—"little truly adventurous drama" and productions that "have a museum quality." "A resident theatre that has systematically retreated into the middleclass is doomed to a monotony equivalent to an Ohio highway," he complained. It was a monotony that Jack Poggi found particularly in the major resident theatres. In their schedules, he observed, "the same plays crop up over and over again. The directors, the managers, and the actors can move easily from one company to another—an indication that there really is not much difference in style among the theaters." The predominance of an upper middle- and middle-class audience, and the consequently monotonous fare of the theatres that catered to them, help to explain why the style of Restoration revivals was so unvarying in this period.

And yet, within these staid off-Broadway and resident venues, the revivals were *more* unvarying than productions of other classic plays. These institutions did make excursions off the bland Ohio highway, choosing unusual plays or performance styles. Off-off-Broadway, which emerged in the 1960s, was a likely source of their experiments with style. Conceptual directors working in unconventional performance spaces were occasionally invited into off-Broadway or resident theatres to essay boldly avant-garde productions of plays by, for example, Euripides, Shakespeare, and Molière. The plays of Congreve and other Restoration writers, however, did not receive similarly innovative treatments.

In addition, even the alternative Restoration period style seen in London theatres by the early 1960s had little impact on the American revivals. William Gaskill, directing *The Recruiting Officer* at Britain's National Theatre in 1963, did most to transform the style of performance. He replaced high style and its camp extremes with naturalistic acting. There were bits of farce in the production, but Playfair's parodic approach to period and play was banished. Gaskill steered the actors away from "coy archaisms" in pronunciation and rejected "lisps, huge wigs, canes and fans." He tried, as he later explained, "to make the text sound as if it was being spoken by real people in recognizable situations." The result was a dark and biting vision of the period, whose cynicism seemed quite relevant to late twentieth-century audiences and critics. But while that performance style quickly spread to most subsequent Restoration revivals in Great Britain, including most of the major productions of *The Way of the World,* only one American production in this period, staged at New Haven's Long Wharf Theater in 1972 by British director Malcolm Black, adopted a naturalistic style.

The lack of change can be explained by considering the function of Restoration revivals within resident and off-Broadway theatres. These institutions justified their non-profit status and established themselves more firmly through the interwoven public services of cultural conservation and instruction. They helped to maintain dramatic canons through productions, educating theatregoers and theatre workers in older plays. And they were sometimes able to win government and foundation grants specifically earmarked for gathering student audiences or improving the skills of their companies. Such public service extended to performance styles as well as to play—when possible. Many artistic directors included a Restoration comedy in their seasonal offerings in order to introduce audiences and actors not just to a dramatic classic but also to that classic's "classic" performance style. And it was the 1920s version of period style, rather than the alternative devised by the early 1960s, that reigned in the non-profits. It was older, of course. But, ironically, it also had the stature of a tradition precisely because of its strangeness and greater difficulty for those used to naturalistic acting.

Some directors with reputations as specialists in Restoration period style were invited in those years to train American theatre companies. Norman Ayrton and Anthony Cornish, for example, both known for that expertise, staged two of the resident theatre revivals of *The Way of the World* in the post-war period, Ayrton for the Acting Company and Cornish for the Intiman Theater Company. Ayrton acknowledged in a newspaper interview, just before the Acting Company's production opened in 1976: "I'm very often called upon for Restoration drama . . . I don't like to be typed any more than an actor does. But I feel compelled to accept Restoration assignments to help keep the style alive and well."

Within institutions that needed to offer culturally prestigious as well as popular art, Playfair's performance style became highbrow not only because it was supposedly traditional but also because it was British. That national identity was encoded now not just in high style acting but in the composite of acting styles and in late seventeenth-century costume. It was expressed in the impression produced by these period elements: at best "brightly quaint figures flitting about, sparkling and remote, in an unfamiliar world." And it was reinforced through publicity that stressed the nationality of the director/specialists. "London Expert Here for 'Way of the World,'" was the title of a local newspaper article featuring Cornish, a few days before the Intiman Theater Company began its run of Congreve's play.

Directors who viewed the preservation of Restoration period style as a cultural mission found support among theatergoers. "Ever since the end of World War II," Robert Brustein has observed, "American audiences have been in thrall to the theatre emanating from Great Britain.... Our admiration for British playwriting, directing, composing—and particularly acting—has begun to resemble something of a national inferiority complex." Those who disliked sacralized and Anglo-identified styles, however, were, no doubt, repelled by the style and the silly, self-mocking—and irrelevant—world it constructed. The wonder is that the dominance of this reified period style in the postwar era did not permanently inhibit new approaches. In the early 1990s some directors did finally begin to see in late seventeenth-century comedies possibilities for innovative performance styles and new Restorations.

Source: Deborah Kaplan, "Learning 'to Speak the English Language': *The Way of the World* on the Twentieth-Century American Stage," in *Theatre Journal,* Vol. 49, No. 3, October 1997, pp. 301-21.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Kimball examines the theme of gaming in The Way of the World, *including the "idea that life is a game in the world of play and elsewhere."*

The opening chocolate house scene of Congreve's last comedy, *The Way of the World*, informs the rest of the play, establishing gaming as the playwright's metaphor for life and love. The comedy's prolific gaming imagery provides a thematic and structural emphasis on gaming as the world's way, and, finally, every character is at one time or another playing a game that may be a singles or doubles match, but that is usually part of a team effort. The audience of *The Way of the World* would, of course, have been familiar with the circumstances of the scene that begins with Mirabell and Fainall "rising from cards." We learn that Mirabell, though he has lost to Fainall, will "play on" if his competitor insists on further entertainment. Fainall demurs:

> No, I'll give you your revenge another time, when you are not so indifferent; you are thinking of something else now, and play too negligently. The coldness of a losing gamester lessens the pleasure of the winner. I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune than I'd make love to a woman who undervalued the loss of her reputation.

This speech of Fainall's is a most significant passage, not only because it is pregnant with dramatic irony, for reasons to be discussed later, but also because it establishes the motif on which the play's structure, theme, and much of its language build and introduces the idea that life is a game in the world of the play and elsewhere, with love, money, and their concomitant pleasures as reward to the winners.

Congreve introduces his gaming imagery in the Prologue, first describing poets as the unluckiest of fools, and then as

> . . . bubbles, by the town drawn in,
> Suffered at first some trifling stakes to win;
> But what unequal hazards do they run!
> Each time they write they venture all they've won.

The word "bubble" acquired in the seventeenth century the meaning of "dupe" or "gull" and was frequently used to describe one easily victimized at cards. An attaché at the British Embassy in Paris had warned his countrymen against gaming with the French because "Even the ladies do not want tricks to strip a Bubble." About 1700, English manufacturers of cards began issuing decks with propaganda depicted on the backs; one such set entitled "All the Bubbles" warns against investing in spurious business ventures. Congreve intimates in the Prologue that poets are gulled into writing plays by some "trifling stakes," despite the "hazards." The word "hazard," as it is used in two prologues by Congreve, would have been a gaming pun familiar to the audience, as the

game of hazard is described in *The Compleat Gamester* as the "most bewitching game that is plaid on the dice." Congreve's suggestion that poets "venture all they've won" is perhaps an oblique reference to Jeremy Collier's celebrated *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage,* a pamphlet that appeared in 1698, the year before the actual writing of *The Way of the World*, and to which Congreve later wrote a "vindication." Undoubtedly, the playwright found the Puritan divine a threat to his security in the dramatic world, and much of the criticism of the play contains conjectures about the effect of Collier's attack on Congreve's decision to retire from the stage world after 1700. Interestingly, Collier fired a later salvo in 1713, entitled "Essay on Gaming," in which he deplored the bloodthirsty instincts fed by gaming: "When your bubbles are going down the hill, you lend them a push, though their bones are broken at the bottom."

The Prologue continues with another gaming pun: "Should he [the poet] by chance a knave or fool expose, / That hurts none here, sure here are none of those." The word "knave" by the sixteenth century carried a double meaning—an "unprincipled man given to dishonourable and deceitful practices," and also the "name given to the lowest court card in the deck, bearing the picture of a soldier or a servant." "Expose" is a gaming term used to describe an inadvertently overturned card; an exposed knave in a whist game, for example, would result in a redeal, or if the exposure occurred during play, a penalty.

In Act I of *The Way of the World*, Witwoud relates that he has lost money to his fellow gamester Petulant, but Fainall consoles Witwoud with the remark:

You may allow him to win of you at play, for you are
sure to be hard of him at repartee; since you monopolize
the wit that is between you, the fortune must be
his of course

To Mirabell, Witwoud explains,

Petulant's my friend, and a
very honest fellow, and a very pretty fellow, and has a smattering—faith and
troth a pretty deal of an odd sort of a small wit.

Witwoud continues the gaming motif with his pun on the word "deal": Petulant has been "dealt" a small amount of wit, or he has a great "deal" of it. Cotton describes a card game called plain-dealing as being "a pastime not noted for its ingenuity." Mirabell later remarks to Millamant,

I say that a man may as soon make a friend by his wit,
or a fortune by his honesty, as win a woman with plain
dealing and sincerity.

The delightful ambiguity here allows the choice between the card game or a straightforward manner as a means of winning the lady and is also a commentary on the times: devious means seem to be required for almost any undertaking, Millamant,

well aware of her value as the prize in their game, urges him, "Well, Mirabell, if ever you will win me, woo me now."

Also in Act I, Petulant "calls for himself" at the chocolate house, and then refuses to go, with the words, "Let it pass," and "pass on," phrases that he might have used at the whist table. When Mirabell threatens him, Petulant replies, "Let that pass. There are other throats to be cut." He is so casual in his suggestion that he might be offering a deck of cards to be cut, but what he is actually offering is information, which is Petulant's only contribution to the game of intrigue. Petulant, who is the witless fop, repeats the word "pass" so frequently that it seems to be a refrain associated with him, and he inquires "whose hand's out?" when Waitwell arrives with the black box.

In Act II Witwoud, who has been observing the game of wit in which Millamant and Mirabell are engaged, observes to the lady, "Very pretty. Why, you make no more of making of lovers, madam, than of making so many card-matches," an expression that carries the dual meaning of cardboard matches and the holding of a pair or three of a kind in a game like gleek or picket. Witwoud later compares himself and Petulant to two battledores—or to participants in an early eighteenth-century version of badminton; what they bandy back and forth is witless banter instead of shuttlecocks. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Marwood, in speaking to Fainall about his wife's virtue, remarks, "I dare swear she had given up her game before she was married," to which Fainall replies, "Hum! That may be. She might throw up her cards; but I'll be hanged if she did not put Pam in her pocket." The imagery here is that of the then popular gambling game of loo, or lanterloo, in which the Pam is the jack of clubs. Lynch's note indicates that "Fainall implies that although his wife might have given up other lovers, she has an 'ace' up her sleeve—Mirabell."

Fainall tells Mrs. Marwood how he will dispose of Sir Wilfull: "He will drink like a Dane; after dinner I'll set his hand in." Here Fainall may mean "I'll start him in his drinking," or "I'll take his 'hand' in whatever game comes up." And in referring to his wife's reputation, Fainall muses, "Bringing none to me, she can take none from me. 'Tis against all rule of play that I should lose to one who has not wherewithal to stake." In this instance, Fainall cruelly notes that his wife has nothing in the way of a good reputation to lose; therefore convention decrees that he should not allow her in the game. In the parlance of poker, or its four-hundred-year-old antecedent, brag, she has no ante to put up, so she cannot play. This statement recalls Fainall's line from the chocolate house scene in which he indicates he will not "make love to a woman who undervalues the loss of her reputation."

In addition to its language, a further indication that *The Way of the World* is a consciously devised metaphor for gaming is Congreve's choice of quotations from the poets Waller and Suckling. First of all, the two poets represent opposing views about how to play the game of love and life—one arguing against, the other for, premarital or extramarital fruition. Millamant uses their poems, which deal with inconstancy in love, to prove that Sir Willful is incapable of playing any of the sophisticated games of wit that she enjoys; he not only cannot complete the couplet she offers him but does not even

recognize it as poetry. Suckling, a writer for whom, according to Lynch, Congreve had a "more than casual esteem," had established a dialogue pattern in his play *Agalaura* that was much like a conversational game. In the play, Agalaura's lover, at her request, and without knowing her reasons, agrees to give up his favorite diversion of gaming; yet she is required to assign him a new sin to replace this one. The poet Suckling himself, known as "the most skillful and reckless player of his time" is the only man credited with singly inventing a major card game—cribbage. He was a gambler who, according to rumors, arranged for the importation from France of specially marked decks for his own personal use and advantage. Waller, who may have been present when Queen Catherine tore the celebrated card at ombre, wrote a delightful little epigram to celebrate that occasion:

The cards you tear in value rise;
So do the wounded by your eyes.
Who to celestial things aspire
Are by that passion raised the higher.

Interestingly enough, the lines Sir Willful fails to recognize are those of the inconstant lover, Suckling, while Mirabell completes a couplet by Waller, the more idealistic poet.

In order to observe the structure of the play as a game, it is helpful to determine the kinds of partnerships involved. Millamant and Mirabell are silent partners who work toward the same end, have the same desire, and have the same reluctance to acknowledge their desires publicly. Mr. Fainall's ostensible partner is Mrs. Fainall, who is actually allied in sympathy with Mirabell and Millamant. Mrs. Marwood is Mr. Fainall's actual confederate, and the one for whom he is scheming; at one point, Marwood intimates to Lady Wishfort that they (the two ladies) might escape to some rural, idyllic spot, but Marwood actually continues to work with Mr. Fainall because of their common aim, which is the frustration of all of Mirabell's plans. The Marwood-Fainall relationship should parallel that of Mirabell and Millamant but cannot, because it is extramarital and because Fainall and Marwood are selfish and completely unscrupulous. While there is some evidence that Mirabell abides by the rules in the game of life in this world, there is no rule that Fainall will not break if he can advance himself by doing so. Witwoud and Petulant are partners of a sort. They complement, but do not compliment, one another, and there is definite evidence that the pair of them would represent but a single entry in any game. They are habitual, ineffective, halfhearted competitors for the game prize of Millamant and her fortune. Lady Wishfort wants a marital partner and refuses to admit that she has nothing to contribute to a connubial relationship. Even her fortune cannot outweigh the fact that she is no longer attractive as a marriage prospect; she is so blind to reality that she for a time has accepted Mirabell's advances as proof of her desirability. Foible and Waitwell appear to be a minor partnership—the second team necessary to support Mirabell in his game plan—but Foible, when examined carefully, is indeed, as Marwood calls her, the *passe-partout.* Sir Willful, a loner who serves as bumpkinlike contrast for his half brother, and an involuntary contestant for the first prize, willingly relinquishes it once Millamant is within his grasp, so that he can travel to find for himself "another way of the world."

Partnership understandings vary, as do audience understandings of partnerships. In the chocolate house scene, the audience impression is that Fainall is a good sport who is willing to terminate his game during a winning streak in order to give his opponent a chance on a luckier day. Later developments show, however, that although Fainall never acts from benevolent motives, he speaks the truth when he says, "The coldness of a losing gamester lessens the pleasure of the winner." He enjoys the winning more when his victim writhes; a listless Mirabell affords Fainall no joy. The irony of Fainall's statement lies in the fact that he is actually expressing the sentiments of Mirabell, who is the same kind of competitor. Several critics have wondered why Mirabell holds for so long his ace-in-the-hole in the form of Mrs. Fainall's deed, when he could have produced it earlier. The reason is that, like Fainall, Mirabell finds no thrill in competing with a "cold gamester," or one who "slights his ill fortune," and he does enjoy toying with an overconfident Fainall. He wants to let Fainall believe himself to have won Millamant's fortune and then stymie the villain with one master stroke. Doubtless, Mirabell had dreamed early in the game of having everyone present for his revelation, as proves to be the case. The idea of delight in resistance is also reiterated in the song requested by Millamant in Act III:

Then I alone the conquest prize,
When I insult a rival's eyes;
If there's delight in love, 'tis when I see
That heart, which others bleed for, bleed for me.

As do Fainall and Mirabell, Millamant thrives on spirited competition.

Source: Sue L. Kimball, "Games People Play in Congreve's *The Way of the World,*" in *A Provision of Human Nature: Essays on Fielding and Others in Honor of Miriam Austin Locke,* edited by Donald Kay, University of Alabama Press, 1977, pp. 191-207.

Topics for Further Study

The seventeenth century was a time of great political upheaval in England. Research the period dating from the Civil War in the 1640s, which led to the dissolution of the English monarchy, to the "Restoration" of Charles II in 1660. In what ways did political change help shape "Restoration Drama?" In particular, how did political realities contribute to the rise and popular appeal of the "comedy of manners?"

Lady Wishfort is a central comic figure in *The Way of the World*. As the aging but still amorous dowager, the capricious yet tenacious holder of the purse strings, and the twice duped lover so desperate to marry and so patently superficial in her disapproval of men, she amuses by the very nature of her naïve yet bold heart. How would you direct the pivotal opening of act 3, when we are introduced to Lady Wishfort for the first time? This will involve her interaction with Peg, Foible, and Mrs. Marwood up until her exit from the scene.

John Dryden is a major literary figure of the seventeenth century, and he was one of the most vocal supporters of Congreve's work. It was Dryden who helped Congreve polish his wildly popular first play, *The Old Batchelour* for the London stage. Research the life of Dryden and discuss the significance of his relationship to Congreve in particular and Restoration literature in general.

Read William Wycherley's *The Country Wife.* As an early example of Restoration comedy, how does it compare to Congreve's *The Way of the World,* written twenty-five years later? What are some common themes and comic devices? What are some essential differences?

Choose a major character in *The Way of the World*. Say why that character is important to the theme and plot. How is that character significant in relation to other characters in the play? How does the character's role add to the overall comic effect? Refer directly to dramatic lines of the text in your analysis.

It has been said that every good comedy contains an element of tragedy. Describe the tragic elements in *The Way of the World*. Does the play have a happy ending?

Compare and Contrast

1600s: The patronage of a wealthy aristocrat or noble is an important source of income as well as inspiration for artists of all kinds. In his dedication of *The Way of the World* to "The Right Honourable Ralph Earl of Mountague," Congreve acknowledges his gratitude and respect to the earl for his "protection" of the play. Congreve started work on it soon after summering with the earl and taking inspiration from the company he met at his home.

Today: The work of artists is often supported by public grants and residencies, and young writers are often championed by older, more experienced ones. The system of patronage has been replaced by professional agents, and authors depend upon publishers to buy and promote their work.

1600s: The theatre is a raucous place in Congreve's time. Prostitutes and people of questionable character jammed the "pits," while fashionable ladies and gentlemen busied themselves in boxes making loud, "witty" observations and exchanging malicious gossip, while the actors strove to be heard above the audience.

Today: The theatre audience is polite and attentive. Although critics still yield as uncompromising a pen as they did in Congreve's day, it is not considered either fashionable or agreeable to hiss, boo, or demonstrate obnoxious behavior at any time during the performance of a play.

1600s: The theater is one of the few forms of public entertainment available, but during Congreve's time, no more than two theatres are in operation in London. Because plays are written for a general audience, the price of theatre tickets is affordable to almost everyone.

Today: The various kinds and forms of public entertainment are numerous. While cinema has replaced the theatre as the most popular and affordable medium for drama, plays, especially in urban areas, still represent an important cultural outlet. Generally, however, they are expensive and must be booked far in advance.

1660s: The Stuart courts regain power after an English civil war that temporarily dissolved the monarchy. Plays of the time reflect the restoration of the aristocracy in their comic attempt at mirroring the high society world of immorality and decadence.

Today: Contemporary comedies also mirror the times and lives of real people. As in the late seventeenth century, popular modern comedies offer similar subject matter. Neil Simon's plays, for example, revolve around marital relationships or antagonism between the sexes.

1600s: In the late seventeenth century, reform of the theater world is pursued by critics who find it too licentious. Much of the impetus for this reform comes from the fact that England is still, by and large, a Christian land with strong Calvinist leanings.

Today: The National Endowment for the Arts, a federally-supported grant agency, comes under attack for its sponsorship of art that is perceived by the government to be pornographic and without artistic merit.

1600s: Women possess few political rights and little or no economic independence. Upon marriage, women of means are obliged to relinquish their property to their husbands' control and depend upon them for their livelihood.

Today: Women are, by law, politically equal with men and control their own property and financial affairs. In contemporary marriages, joint ownership of property and money is common, and most women work to help support the household.

What Do I Read Next?

The Mourning Bride was Congreve's only dramatic tragedy. Performed in 1697, it was a triumphant success and ran for thirteen days at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Set in the south of Spain, it dramatizes earlier historical conflicts between Granada and Valencia and the part played in this struggle by Moorish expeditions from the north coast of Africa. But the plot is fictional and characters are drawn not from history but from earlier heroic plays.

When *The Old Batchelour,* Congreve's first play, was printed in 1693, it was an immediate success and its author hailed as John Dryden's successor. Indeed, Dryden helped Congreve, who was only twenty-three years old at the time, prepare the play for the theatre. This first play, like his later comedies, mirrored the manners of fashionable society. It can be enjoyed for its sheer gaiety and youthful energy, but it also provides a contrast to later works where maturity affords him a more original style and a more discerning attitude to the society he evokes.

William Wycherley's play *The Country Wife* is one of the best examples of early Restoration comedy. Born in 1640, thirty years before Congreve, Wycherley is often regarded, along with Sir George Etherege, as one of Congreve's most important literary predecessors. Although there is disagreement about when Wycherley's play was first performed, most scholars put it between 1672 and 1675. The play takes a satirical look at the jealous husband, concluding that jealousy is indeed a monster that consumes those who suffer from it most.

More than any other English playwright, Ben Jonson probably had the most influence on the comic tradition of which Congreve is a part. He was a primary force in the rise of the comedy of "humours" during the Elizabethan period. His play *Volpone,* or *The Fox,* first performed in 1606, provides one of the best examples of comedy at work in the service of social satire.

When Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* was published in 1698, several playwrights of the period, including Congreve, responded to this attack. Indeed, Collier's book is one of several popular works of Puritan piety that Lady Wishfort tells Mrs. Marwood to entertain herself with when she hides in the closet in the third act of *The Way of the World.* Collier's book is considered one of the most articulate expressions of the Puritanical attempt to reform the stage and purge it from the perceived evils and corruption of the day.

Further Study

Gardiner, Samuel R., *History of the Great Civil War, 1642-1649,* London, 1886-1891.

Gardiner discusses the Civil War that temporarily ended the reign of the monarchy in England and replaced it with a parliamentary form of government. The "Restoration" of the monarchy took place when Charles II came to the throne in 1660.

Holland, Norman, *The First Modern Comedies: The Significance of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve,* Harvard University Press, 1959.

Holland provides a thorough study of the three Restoration playwrights, their influences, and their heirs.

Johnson, Samuel, "Preface to William Congreve" in *Lives of the English Poets,* 1781.

It is a token of Johnson's eminence that the later eighteenth century is often called the "Age of Johnson." His collection of biographies on the lives of the poets from Cowley to Gray are amusing, often disparaging, but always insightful glosses on the literary giants of the age. The language of the "Preface" is singularly witty, urbane, and acerbic. He outlines the life and work of Congreve from his vantage point only fifty years after Congreve's death.

Loftis, John, *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding,* Stanford University Press, 1959.

As its title would suggest, this critical work reviews the relationship between social history and culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The book is particularly appropriate in its study of moral matters, social customs, and theater values.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

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Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535