

Re-reading *The Way of The World* With Its Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

The present research focuses on the study of the people and scenario of the Restoration Era and how the contemporary society is very much similar to the drama under study, The Way of the World by William Congreve. 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. The drama shows the various characters, how they act in the society and what their true colors are. There is not only one but many characters in the drama that has a vivid personality and which can also be found in our contemporary society. Deception is

portrayed in several ways, for example, when Waitwell disguises himself as Sir Rowland, in Fainall's affair with Mrs Marwood and in Mirabell's attempt to trick Lady Wishfort into allowing him to marry Millamant. Congreve presents us with a world where morals values and principles are exchanged for prestige and wealth. In addition, the deceit is practiced by all characters make this play incredibly comic. Apart from the presentation of incidental wit, Restoration comedy has two main interests: the behavior of the polite society and of pretenders to polite society, and particular aspects of sexual relationships, which is, to some or more extent seen in our contemporary society.

Keywords: Deception, infidelity, restoration comedy, contemporary society.

Introduction

The side-splitting play *The way of the World* is known as a comedy of manners precisely. Any comedy of manners takes as its basis the social shibboleth and etiquette of its day and then uses that as the basis of satire. This is particularly true in the way in which such texts depict relationships between men and women in real life. This is why this text concerns social hoax so greatly. In this play, we are presented with a world in which society forces women to deceive and act coyly in the merry dance of courtship and couples deceive each other in their marriage and even friends deceive each other. Marriage is shown to be more about wealth and convenience than true love.

Congreve presents us with a world therefore where moral values and principles are reciprocated for prestige and wealth. In addition, the deceit that is practiced by all characters makes this play incredibly comic. In this play, the words that characters speak and the way that they act to each other are almost never a reflection of what they really believe. Consider Fainall as an example, who, if we look at appearances alone, we would imagine to be incredibly happy in his marriage. Reality however shows us that he

scorns his wife and is having an adulterous relationship with the best friend of his wife.

This conflict between appearance and reality exposes the way in which Congreve is satirizing the society and how this society was based on the importance of maintaining an outer veneer of wit and sophistication, no matter how questionable the reality was underneath that veneer. Congreve indeed uses this play to hold a mirror up to his own society and to find it wanting.

Restoration literature

Restoration Literature is the English literature written during the historical period commonly referred to as the English Restoration (1660–1689), which corresponds to the last years of the direct Stuart reign in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. In general, the term is used to denote roughly homogeneous styles of literature that center on a celebration of or reaction to the restored court of Charles II. It is a literature that includes extremes, for it encompasses both *Paradise Lost* and the Earl of Rochester's *Sodom*, the high-spirited sexual comedy of *The Country Wife* and the moral wisdom of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It

saw Locke's *Treatises of Government*, the founding of the Royal Society, the experiments and holy meditations of Robert Boyle, the hysterical attacks on theaters from Jeremy Collier, and the pioneering of literary criticism from John Dryden and John Dennis. The period witnessed news becomes a commodity, the essay developed into a periodical art form, and the beginnings of textual criticism.

Restoration Comedy

The restoration comedy was critical comedy, bringing “the sword of common sense” to bear upon the extravagances of the period. Congreve’s works are perhaps as close to those of Molière as the English theater ever came; his plays brought an ironic scrutiny to the affectations of his age, with a style and a perfection of phrase that still dazzle audiences. He has been called the wittiest man who ever wrote the English language in the theater; certainly, his characters speak some of the wittiest dialogue. Without question, *The Way of the World* introduced a new standard of wit and polish to the theater. In *Millamant*, Congreve created one of the great characters of English drama, a comic heroine at once lovable and

laughable. The poetry of the courtly life of the Restoration is summed up in the duet between these two brilliant lovers, *Mirabell* and *Millamant*.

Wit

The Way of the World is carried forward by the witty speeches of the characters rather than by dramatic reversals. The play is all of one piece, a world of wit and pleasure inhabited only by persons of quality and “deformed neither by realism nor by farce.” The plot is confusing but almost irrelevant, and the situations exist really only for the conversation. Although Congreve seems almost above such concerns as careful plotting, he is surprisingly artful in some of his stage effects. By delaying the entrance of *Millamant* until the second act, he arouses intense anticipation in the audience. The fifth act, crowded as it is with activity, flows with continual surprises.

Some critics have held that *The Way of the World* is marred by the artificial contrivances of the plot, but most audiences pay no attention to the complications, relishing instead the characters and the dialogue. The design of the play is to ridicule affected, or false, wit. Possibly, the

play's original lukewarm reception was a result of its coming too close to the faults of the courtly audience to be wholly agreeable to them. The dialogue is, also, closely woven, and the repartee demands such close attention that it might have exhausted its listeners. *The Way of the World* is now one of the most frequently revived and enjoyed of all of the Restoration comedies.

Apart from the presentation of incidental wit, Restoration comedy had two main interests: the behavior of polite society and of *feigners* to polite society, and particular aspects of *sexual relationships*. The wit varied from a hard, metallic kind that seemed to exist for its own sake, with no relation to anything, to subtle satire. Occasionally, even Congreve falls into a pattern of easy antitheses, monotonously repeated until the sting of surprise is lost. His wit is never as blunt or as ruthless as that of William Wycherley. Considered fairly outspoken for many generations, the comedy seems primarily to consist of titillation, to suggest more than it delivers. However, the best of the Restoration playwrights, such as Congreve, did not rely entirely on titillation to get their laughs. There is also much feeling present in *The*

Way of the World, particularly in the battle of the sexes. Congreve could not view love merely as a gratification of lust, as some of the Restoration playwrights seemed to think of it.

Characters

The characters in *The Way of the World* are among the best drawn in any Restoration comedy, or perhaps in any play of the period, comic or tragic. The protagonist of the play, Edward Mirabell is a fashionable, intellectual, and clever man-about-town, popular with the ladies. He was Mrs. Fainall's lover before her marriage to Fainall and has broken his fair share of hearts usually unintentionally by not returning the sentiments of every woman who fancies him. Now in love with Millamant, he's ready to develop a mature and monogamous relationship. Though he wants to get married, he finds himself on the bad side of quite a number of other characters who concoct plans of their own to ruin his chances at doing so, particularly Lady Wishfort and the adulterous couple Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. However, he does have a number of loyal followers ready to assist him in his plan to

win Millamant, save her dowry, and defeat Fainall.

Spoiled, beautiful, and rich Millamant could have any man she wants and knows it too. She is very fashionable and popular in London. Though she can seem cruel and uncaring towards Mirabell, she does love him but is very guarded with her emotions. She is very independent and loves poetry. Before she gets engaged, she enjoys keeping Mirabell on his toes and tries to make him jealous by spending time with the fools, Witwoud and Petulant, even though she isn't romantically interested in them. She mainly supports her aunt Wishfort in all things and doesn't initially offer much resistance to her aunt's proposition to marry her off to first Sir Rowland and then her cousin, Sir Wilfull, in order to thwart Mirabell. When she does agree to marry Mirabell, she sets multiple conditions to assert her continued independence within the marriage, which Mirabell, after setting some conditions of his own, readily accepts.

The antagonist of the play, Fainall is a sneaky, insecure, and traitorous fellow with a not so good reputation around town—basically, he has all the negative qualities that Mirabell does not. He is the second

husband of Lady Wishfort's daughter, Mrs. Arabella Fainall. A kept man, he hates his rich wife and is having an affair with his wife's friend, Mrs. Marwood. Together, he and Marwood have developed a plan to cheat Millamant out of her dowry, Arabella out of her property, and Lady Wishfort out of her entire fortune. As the play goes on, it becomes clear that Fainall's hot-tempered personality is not compatible with effective scheming. Susceptible to intense jealousy, Fainall believes (correctly) that Marwood loves Mirabell and is unable to hide his anger. Once, he even lashes out at his lover, who almost reveals their affair to all their friends. However, he curbs his temper and expends more energy into ruining Mirabell. Fainall hides his dislike of his wife but many people around him suspect that their marriage is a sham and that he is having an affair with Marwood. Mirabell is one such doubter. By the end of the play, when it is clear that Mirabell has triumphed, Fainall unleashes all his rage on his wife, threatening her with physical harm.

Fainall's lover and Lady Wishfort's best friend, Marwood is cunning and manipulative. Likely in love with Mirabell, who doesn't love her, she is able to convince

Fainall that she only loves him, while making him feel incredibly guilty for doubting her. Marwood is an adept liar, particularly around her female friends, Mrs. Fainall and Lady Wishfort. But even despite having a questionable moral compass, Marwood also gives very candid advice to those who would rather follow fashion trends at the expense of following their hearts. In particular, she advises Millamant to stop pretending to be interested in other men and Witwoud to acknowledge his step-brother Wilfull, rather than treat him like a stranger.

Known as Mrs. Fainall through much of the play, Arabella Fainall is Lady Wishfort's daughter and Millamant, Witwoud, and Sir Wilfull's cousin. She was once married to a rich man named Languish who died and left her his fortune. While a widow, she began an affair with Mirabell. They ended the affair before she got married to Fainall and remained close friends. Mirabell trusts and admires the steady and clear-thinking Mrs. Fainall immensely and tells her every detail of his plan. Mrs. Fainall esteems Mirabell in the same way and still seems to have feelings for him. However, she never reveals that she still loves Mirabell and doesn't ruin

his plan, though she does encourage Sir Wilfull to propose to her cousin, Millamant, and is noticeably less patient with Millamant as the play develops. Mrs. Fainall hates her husband immensely but doesn't learn about his affair until Foible reveals it to her. She distrusts Marwood and suspects that she's in love with Mirabell, too.

A wealthy, old widow, mother to Arabella Fainall, and aunt to Millamant, Witwoud, and Sir Wilfull, Lady Wishfort is a vain and silly woman who tries to act younger than she actually is. As a result, she comes off as quite foolish and annoying. Lady Wishfort is eager to remarry and quickly falls in love with Sir Rowland. She wears a lot of makeup to hide her wrinkles, which calls attention to her age. Though throughout much of the play, she claims to hate Mirabell and seeks revenge against him for pretending to flirt with her, her hatred is really fueled by her unrequited love. She is the leader of "cabal-night," a club that consists of mostly women who gather at her house to gossip about how much they hate men, particularly Mirabell. Easily fooled, she trusts the opinion of her best friend Marwood, who is betraying her. Foible, her lady-in-waiting, is actually

working for Mirabell. As matriarch, she is in charge of arranging her niece's marriage and protecting her dowry until she gets married. This role, of course, is threatened by Fainall, who she later claims is not the man she wanted her daughter to remarry. Besides Mirabel and Millamant, one of the most perfect pairs of lovers in any comedy, the play boasts a parade of such personalities as Foible, Witwoud, Petulant, and particularly Lady Wishfort, who approaches the tragic in her desperate attempt to preserve her youth. No character in the play, not even Fainall, fails to surprise the audience with witty observations. In *The Way of the World*, Congreve penetrates deeper than any of his contemporaries into the mysteries of human nature; he possesses more feeling for the individual and is subtler in his treatment of human idiosyncrasies.

Adultery, Dowry and Marriage

The Way of the World reflects attitudes concerning sexuality that prevailed for centuries; above all, the play suggests, the most fascinating aspect of sexual relations is that of the chase. The pursuit, usually of the male for the female, although sometimes reversed, dominates Restoration comedy and is both glorified and satirized in *The Way of*

the World. The lovely and intelligent Millamant herself expresses her belief in the necessity for a period devoted to such pursuit if a woman is to attract and to keep her lover. By playing hard to get, a woman proves her eventual worth. Congreve takes these conventional attitudes and fabricates his comedy from them, weaving a complicated and fascinating satire that continues to delight audiences and readers after two centuries. 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, which very much prevailed to the our contemporary middle class. 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...

Deception

Deception is portrayed in several ways, and comes, for example, when Waitwell disguises himself as Sir Rowland, in Fainall's affair with Mrs Marwood and in Mirabell's attempt to trick Lady Wishfort into allowing him to marry Millamant

(which includes the plot of having Waitwell pretend to be his uncle).

Dishonesty is rampant and it is the means by which the plot functions. It is not until the final sections of the last act that this dishonesty is balanced by traditional morality and by the call to have no falsehood in marriage.

Infidelity

Unfaithfulness in marriage is a core strand to this work as several of the main characters are seen to either be in adulterous relationships in the present or have been in the past, or are pretending to be in one now (as with Waitwell in his disguise as Sir Rowland). The comedy of the play depends on these deceptions and on the ignorance of the cuckold. This theme is also intrinsic to a play such as this, which questions the piety of the marriage vows and offers instead a bawdy discourse on marriage, adultery and love.

Marriage

Marriages are central thematic concerns as Mirabell's machinations are fuelled by his desire to marry Millamant, and Fainall uses

his marriage to try to extract money from his mother-in-law, Lady Wishfort. The state of marriage is depicted as simultaneously desirable, and yet to be avoided as a trap should be. These aspects of marriage are used to comic effect, but the play ends finally with a warning against falsehood in the marriage bed and so reminds the readers and the audience that it is dishonesty in marriage rather than marriage that has been questioned here.

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.

Conclusion

In the play we find the characters which are very much similar to our contemporary world. Actually the characters are comparatively better than our post modern era. We find more trickery, cheating in this era. There is only love for money and vice versa. Friends and family cheat each other; there are showy relations, failure of marriages. People are no more loyal to each other. The rakehell people are praised and seen as heroes. No virtues and morals are anymore given importance. People with power and money are the true and right ones. In the restoration era at least the hypocrites acted to follow the morals but this era rarely follows the morals. The pompous upper class does show good

manners but all their follies show their true nature. Only the middle class seems to follow the virtues and the morals but again they try to act like the showy elite class, come up to their level and sometimes give up on their morals in order to earn money.

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