

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Way of the World (1700)

William Congreve (1670-1729)

OVERVIEW

As we watch the potential of English theater unfold from a mid-sixteenth play like *Roister Doister* 1567, through such airy comedies of Shakespeare as *Love's Labors Lost* (1594) or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6) to rather dark post comedies like Jonson's *The Silent Woman* (1609) or *The Alchemist* (1640) to, finally, the bubbly and urbane and intricate city dramas of Etherege or Congreve--as we watch this parade of dominant styles we have to reflect both on the speed with which in-styles succeed each other in the theater, and on the extreme sensitivity of those styles to events transpiring around them. It is perhaps not surprising, this rapidity of style change, for the theater is the supreme mirror of the inner volatility of social change, and that change is the way the dramatist nourishes himself. Scratch the theater at some point, and you are sure to find intimate traits of society showing through, pressing this or that societal issue to the max. As in *Love for Love* (1695), which we looked at earlier, the present play encapsulates salient traits of Restoration society--traits, of course, which are partly established by the Restoration playwrights themselves. (Plays also create the life they depict.) It is important, to this point, to specify the level of social interaction a given play represents. Shakespeare thrives on courts and their monarchies; Berthold Brecht establishes a lyrical reconstitution of the voices of workers; Eugene O'Neill moves through a dark mythical language-space full of threats and memory; while Congreve moves through the spaces of language that characterize the capital-based upper classes of early modern England. Wit and cynicism flow from the mouths of such as *Petulant* and *Witwoud*, and in their language flowers a palpable scorn for language users for whom speech is above all a simple tool for moving and affecting among daily objects and relationships.

CHARACTERS

Mirabel. A young man-about-town, in love with Millamant, but unable to win permission for the marriage without the consent of Mrs. Wishfort, who greatly dislikes Mirabel, and wants her niece to marry Sir Willful, a wealthy fixture in the city.

Millamant. A young, very charming lady, in love with, and loved by, Mirabel. (Their love is the only unsullied emotional drive in the play.) She is the ward of Lady Wishfort because she is the niece of Lady Wishfort's long-dead husband. Thus she is dependent on the desires of her aunt, for the release of her dowry. She is a first cousin of Mrs. Fainall.

Fainall. A man-about-town. He and Mirabel know each other well, (The play opens with the two of them playing a card game in a fashionable chocolate house.) However, they do not really like each other. Fainall married his wife for her money, and is carrying on an affair with Mrs. Marwood (who is also in love with Mirabel—a typical plot tangle, indicative of the instability of love relationships in this social milieu.)

Mrs. Fainall. Wife of Fainall and daughter of Lady Wishfort. As a wealthy widow she married Fainall, accumulating all the more money in this small corner of London society. She is Millamant's cousin and was once Mirabel's mistress, joining thereby the rats-nest of former wives and mistresses which in this case are part of the way of the world.

Mrs. Marwood. Fainall's mistress, perhaps still in love with Mirabel. This love is not returned, and Mirabel retains his position as faithful, to his beloved Millamant.

Young Witwoud. A fop. He came to London from the country to study law but, like other men in this drama, apparently found the life of the fashionable man-about-town more pleasant than the life of the

courts He fancies himself a wit, and imagines that social life is where he is. He courts Millamant, but not seriously; she is merely the fashionable belle of the moment, and is in any case serious about Mirabel.

Petulant. A young fop, a friend of Witwoud's. His name is true to his character, a spoiled child of society, always preferring a bon mot to a thoughtful response. One can imagine the best of his witticisms in the mouth of an Oscar Wilde character, sharp and empty at the same time. He is behind much of the marital plotting in the play.

Lady Wishfort. A mean spirited fifty five years old dowager type who still thinks of herself as beautiful. She is the mother of Mrs. Fainall and the guardian of Millamant, whose dowry she controls. Lady Wishfort is herself in love with Mirabel, although she is now spiteful because he once repelled her advances.

Sir Wilfull Witwoud. The elder brother of Young Witwoud, but less gifted in the realm of wit. He is forty years old and is planning the grand tour of Europe that was usually made by young men to complete their education. He is the nephew of Lady Wishfort's nephew, and a distant relative of Millamant, in a social milieu where proximity of relationship is of great, often financial, importance. Wilful is Lady Wishfort's choice as a suitor for Millamant's hand.

Waitwell. Mirabel's valet. At the beginning of the play, he has just been married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. He masquerades as Sir Rowland, Mirabel's nonexistent uncle, and woos Lady Wishfort. However he is palpably lower class, and therefore fits the plot to draw Lady Wishfort into an impossible marriage, thereby securing the full dowry for Millamant.

Foible. Lady Wishfort's maid, married to Waitwell.

Mincing. Millamant's maid.

Peg. A maid in Lady Wishfort's house.

PLOT

Mirabel and Fainall complete a round of cards in the chocolate shop, when a footman enters with the news that Waitwell (Mirabel's male servant) and Foible (Lady Wishfort's female servant) have just gotten married. We have no way, as audience, to suspect the import of this marital event, which will play a central role in the development of the play. To avoid being coy at this point in plot narration, let's make clear that the thwarting of Lady Wishfort's own marital plans is the end reason for the marriage of these two servants. In any case Mirabel goes on to tell Fainall about his love of Millamant, and hears Fainall encourage him. Mirabel learns that, if Lady Wishfort is able to marry, he, Mirabel, will lose half of the dowry awaiting him from Millamant. It is of high importance to prevent Lady Wishfort from marrying. The intertwining of wealth and marriage, important throughout Congreve's work—and his social milieu—becomes a play theme at this point.

The second act moves to St. James' Park, where Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are discussing their scorn for men. We learn by overhearing that the two ladies are planning to trick Mrs. Wishfort into giving her consent to the marriage of Millamant and Mirabel. Mirabel and Millamant are the interested parties, and at the act's end the newly wed servants are reminded of the forth-coming plot in which they will play important roles.

Planned arrangements are made, to induce Lady Wishfort to marry the supposed Sir Rowland, who is in fact Waitwell, who as we know is already married to Foible. The idea is that by marrying Waitwell, Lady Wishfort will be committing bigamy, annulling her own marriage. The underlying idea is that Mirabel will offer to get Lady Wishfort out of her marital predicament, if she consents to his own marriage to Millamant, plus to release the full dowry. Lady Wishfort persists in her desire for Millamant to marry Sir Willful Witwoud, a fop and wit just in from the countryside. Mirabel and Millamant confer on their own preferences as they proceed toward marriage. (Noticeable here, even at this stage the two lovers have their eyes on the cash register; no Romeo and Juliet business here.)

In the end Lady Wishfort understands the trick that has been played on her, and Waitwell, as one of the conspirators, is arrested by Fainall. Adducing a former contract of marriage between Mirabel and Millamant, Fainall jacks up his criticism of Mrs. Wishfort, who offers Mirabel a consent to marry Millamant, and to collect her dowry, if he, Mirabel, will rescue her honor and what remains of her fortune. Mirabel calls on Waitwell to bring forth an old contract, by which Mrs. Fainall gives all her property in trust, to Mirabel. This action nullifies the blackmail action against Lady Wishfort, enables Mirabel to restore Mrs. Fainall's property to her, and sets himself free to marry Millamant, recover the full dowry owed him, and put Lady Wishfort at ease.

SCENES

Congreve knew the world of his time--first in Ireland, where he was born, then in London—and in the intricacies of his plotting testifies to his ready sense of the materially self-interested human beings who composed his social cruising level. From the first chocolate-house scene we are made aware of the world that defines Mirabel-- and the wealthy coterie of women who make up the background of his existence-- working toward a marriage with his love, Millamant, and at the same time trying to stay on the good side of a selfish midlife dowager, Mrs. Wishfort, whom Millamant has the misfortune to have as a guardian.

Every play starts somewhere, and this one opens, with utter naturalness, onto a word scene in which everybody is plotting, under the high tension wires of society, to manipulate his or her world. The way of the world, we come to realize in this master satire, is a highly sublimated form of dog eat dog social life.

The play proceeds to work out the marital brouhaha that surrounds the love of Mirabel and Millamant. The basic problem is not amour, but the assurance to the lovers that Millamant's dowry of 12 000 pounds will reach the marital pair, especially the hands of Mirabel. It becomes necessary, in order to assure this outcome, to put Lady Wishfort in a position in which she has to give her consent to the marital pair, as well as to guarantee the dowry to Mirabel and Millamant. The actual trick, which is to entangle Lady Wishfort in a non-viable marriage, one that would be illegal because bigamous, is intended to force the lady to beg Mirabel's aid in extricating herself from her illegitimate marriage. Loosely put, these shreds of events provide the structure of the play, which enriches itself—and complicates itself—by the interplay of Fainall and his wife with the central action around Lady Wishfort. It might be said that this kind of lateral involvement is also at the heart of Restoration drama, which tends toward viewing social life as a game show.

THEMES

Wealth and Love The case of Mirabel and Millamant. What do they want of each other? Love drives them but they are deeply interested in the dowry due Millamant, on which the pair counts. The love they want from one another is different from the love of money—that slavering passion for gold which Ben Jonson embeds in the beginning of *Volpone*—for the proximity of the two loves is guaranteed, throughout these plays, by the centrality of financial dealings in the formation of a capitalist family central society. The present money-love theme is sure to insert itself on all social levels, in a society where power and value are valued as highly as amorous feeling.

The Fool and the Wit The pairing of the fool and the wit is ubiquitous in World literature, where society thrives on mocking itself, but at the same time, like all of us individuals, enjoys the power of humor to transcend absurdity. The witty fool is of course sharply different from the wise fool, that Falstaffian figure intermittently present in world literature, wherever corruption requires a biting antagonist to keep it in line.

Intrigue: the way of the world The way of the world is the way of deceit. It is not the world in which integrity and reliability are modelled, but the world in which the frank search for one's benefit and power is put before all other drivers, but in which, given the ubiquitous taboos against pure self-interest, that frank search must invariably be cloaked in shining beneficent garments.