

***Love for Love* 1695**

William Congreve. 1670-1729

OVERVIEW

Language and dramatic strategy

Oscar Wilde once found occasion to say that 'language is the way we hide our thoughts from one another.' This witticism could apply to the language of Restoration Comedy, which generates itself from situation to situation—a gentleman decides to play eunuch, so he can catch the ladies—and a tale follows; a rake plans his strategies for conquest, and enlists his servant on a mission of investigation; a sulky youngster rebels at his dad's control over him, and sets out to find freedom and free minded friends. In each ground level instance a process of enrichment takes off—characters, conflicts, achievements and failures are added, until by the end of the 'play' a complex language structure has been completed. Language comes into its own as a self-sufficient fabric, which, though of course it also 'holds the mirror up to life,' fabricates more of itself out of each given situation. Language generates language, and in the end we the language users simply trade wondrous castles in the air, without, as Wilde says, leaving the enclosures of our language worlds.

Satire and the Fall

Congreve—like Wycherley in *The Country Wife* or Etherege in *The Man of Mode*-- is both serious-satirical and sentimental. Characters like Sir Flopling Flutter, Sparkish, or Mr. Foresight are parodies of the urban dandy, the insensitively aggressive womanizer, or the half-cracked country wise man, swimming in prophecies and predictions. The satire behind the making of such conspicuous figures is not the harsh satire of ancient Roman literature—say of Juvenal, with his vicious ridicule of literati around town-- or the satire we will later see, in Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1712), where we read satire of distortion, of eccentricity, or of vanity—rather than scathing portrayals of fallen man. The very reference to the fall, in the case of Congreve, will simply remind us that in Restoration comedy man is rarely worse than absurd, and rarely punished with the wrath of any god.

Wit and comic development

It is hard to imagine a body of literary works more clearly devoted, to the exploitation of pure language that is wit, than Restoration comedy. The characters in Congreve's *Love for Love*, for example, define themselves first by their habits of speech. Valentine is what we might call 'the main character,' which means that we grow particularly conscious of the way he builds his world in language. In the opening scene, Valentine is bantering sharply with his servant, Jeremy. Valentine is reading Epicurus, and has a stack of Latin tomes on a table beside him.

'And d'ye hear? Go you to breakfast. There's a page doubled down in Epicurus that is a feast for an Emperor.'

(The language tone, erudite but mocking, evokes a soon to be familiar counter -banter from the servant Jeremy)

'Was Epicurus a real cook, or did he only write receipts?'

(The sassy interplay of master and man will cast its spell over the play, defining in advance each of the two characters as they appear.)

At the end of the exchange, Valentine sums up the sorry state that has brought him, a ripe young gentleman, to his sorry impecunious state. Joking about Epicurus, who of course was par excellence the proponent of simple poverty, Valentine lays out the simple dilemma in which he finds himself:

'Well, and now I am poor I have an opportunity to be revenged on 'em all'—that is, on his former friends who have ditched him now that he is poor. 'I'll pursue Angelica with more love than ever and appear more notoriously her admirer in this restraint than when I openly rivalled the rich fops that made court to her...'

With this reply to his man, Valentine 'generates' the quest that will govern the play's development, his own quest to win Angelica—which in the end he does.

Language itself has in deft compass introduced us to the entire play; we and the theatergoers are at this point left to fill in the blanks. The whole play spins out from this nucleus.

The scope of the play: what gets filled in

The trick of the play is to get Angelica and Valentine together, within five acts, and on the other side of many obstacles: Sir Sampson, Valentine's dad, offers to pay his son's debts, if Valentine will renounce his claim on inheritance—letting it pass to his brother Ben, a sailor; Valentine has to accept the deal; Angelica must, however, be won over, which she has so far refused to do; Valentine must somehow convince Dad to give him some real money, and must convince Angelica, who has a lot of money of her own, to accept him as husband; the solution to his mounting challenge—which all stems from the dilemma made language in the first interchange between Valentine and Jeremy—is for Angela with her funds to accept Valentine—Love for Love—a deft wind up requiring that Valentine fake an extended madness, in order to avoid signing away his inheritance, for Angela to almost marry Valentine's dad, positioning herself to acquire and tear up Valentine's bond, and for Angela to emerge as the moral winner of the drama, selfless in acting out the deception of Valentine's dad, and faithful in her much enduring love for Valentine.

How to write a play: lessons from Congreve

Congreve is a master of buying choice literary real estate—that is, establishing in language the promissory developments which will in the end pay dividends in unity of perspective and jubilation. In the present play the author is amply rewarded by the opportunity to introduce, into the architecture of the play, the loopy man about town, Tattle, who makes all the love imbroglios more twisted; the back-to-the-brine sailor, Ben, and above all Angelica's uncle Foresight, a self-proclaimed astrologer, in touch with the stars and the wisdom of the ages. To the question why the stage might offer unique opportunities, for the exploitation of such strategies, Congreve shows us that the person to person of actor to spectator, the rapidity of scenic counterpoints on stage, and the dexterous changes of visual properties—scene changes, costumes, lighting—provide a Gesamtkunst totalty with unique capacity to become the spectator's world.

Who was this Congreve? What did he offer the theater?

Congreve was born to the middle class; his dad was a military man, and Congreve accordingly found himself in movement as a youngster, finally settling with his parents in Ireland, where he got his primary education. He eventually found his way back to studying Law in London, in the Middle Temple of the Inns of Court. The fact was, that even in his early twenties Congreve could not endure the confinement of legal studies, and felt himself drawn to the fashionable life of London. From his late teens, after his first theatrical publication—*Incognita*, or *Love and Duty*—he became a fixture in London theatrical circles, and a much admired protégé of John Dryden. (*W'ill's Coffeehouse*, be it mentioned, was the favored London gathering spot of these intellectual wits.)

CHARACTERS

Sir Sampson Legend, father of Valentine and Ben

Valentine, son of Sir Sampson, and in the doghouse for unpaid debt. The play will revolve around his way to solvency and love, two equally distant lodestars.

Scandal, Valentine's friend, and a free speaker, always expresses his opinion.

Tattle, a familiar figure of the Restoration stage; always proud of his love affairs, speaking freely of them, and yet considering himself the model of the secret keeper.

Ben, Sir Sampson's younger son, a home boy and yet, as it turns out, a sailor who makes his living on long mercantile journeys. His father succeeds, eventually, in persuading Ben to cozy up to Miss Prue, who like Ben lacks social savvy, but is ready to love, if the right man—her type—talks her into it.

Foresight, Angelica's uncle, an almost Dickensian odd bod, fascinated with the position of the stars, palmistry, omens, prophecies. This will be the kind of eccentric so dear from Homer to Shakespeare—Thersites, Theoclymenos, fool figures in Hamlet or Lear—who provide 'comic relief' or at best unexpected insight.

Jeremy, servant of Valentine.

Buckram, a lawyer. (A stiff board- like fabric. A good eponym for a lawyer?)

Angelica, niece to Foresight, young lady with a considerable inheritance, which in the end she frees up to render Valentine a free man. It is she who devises the trick proposal of Sir Legend, who is himself her gull. She is the one who destroys Valentine's bond and frees him—and who in the end binds him, by becoming his wife.

Mrs. Foresight, second wife to Foresight.

Mrs. Frail, a sister of Mrs. Foresight and a woman of style around town.

Miss Prue, daughter to Foresight, an awkward country girl.

Nurse, to Miss Prue

Jenny, maid to Angelica

Officers, Sailors, a steward

PLOT

Valentine, the unpredictable young son of Sir Sampson Legend, appears on stage reading from a pile of books, like the Greek text of Epicurus. The young man is erudite, but also impetuously anxious to get back to his buddies, and out from under the thumb of his dad, who is on top of him to pay his debts and get his career underway. Dad has in fact just struck a deal—acceptable or not?—with his son, by which he will give the lad 4000 pounds, enough to cover his debts, in return for his son's signing away his inheritance in favor of his younger brother Ben. In young person despair, Valentine signs the bond, and gives up his inheritance.

Valentine is in love with Angelica, who has not yet accepted his proposals. Meanwhile Sir Sampson has arranged a marriage for Ben, who is at sea as a sailor, with a country girl, Miss Prue, who is the daughter of Foresight, a local crackpot who considers himself an astrologer. Valentine, who sees his own world crashing around him, stages a series of mad fits by which he can avoid a final signature to the giving up

of his will. (These mad fits, feigned like those of Hamlet, become a trope in Elizabethan and later British literature.) In the end it is Angelica who solves the problem. She talks Sir Sampson into proposing marriage to her, pretends to accept, and in the preliminary stages of it gets hold of the papers involving Valentine's bond. Valentine is desperate when he learns that Angelica is about to marry his father, declares he is ready to sign the papers releasing his inheritance. At this point Angelica unties the Gordian knot, by declaring she is ready to marry Valentine. She declares her love for him—"All for Love"—and solves the lovers' dilemma.

SCENES

Rewarding Ben. Sir Sampson searches for a way to win Valentine over to a respectable middle class life.

Father decides to revoke the son's inheritance, while leaving him only enough to pay his debts.

The son gradually realizes how stripped down his life has become.

He decides to try to interrupt his dad's revocation plan. (The theme, of the suddenly money-deprived elder son of the nobility, is played to the hilt here.)

Valentine falls more deeply in love with Angelica, niece of Foresight, and realizes he is nothing in the relationship without money. A penniless guy will never make it to a girl of her level of style and in fact wealth.

Note: what we largely leave out here, because it is not precisely on the line of events, is the shenanigans which accompany all the wild thoughts, prophecies, and anxieties of Angelica's own uncle, Foresight. This is the kind of fascinating texture that makes the play what it is, in part a slice from the color of its time.

Valentine acts out into a series of mad episodes, through which he hopes to postpone the final revocation of his will. He is trying to prove his incompetence.

Angelica—this is partly what we learn from reading (or watching) between the lines—falls in love with Valentine, and sees that she must act to keep their marriage a possibility.

Angelica persuades Valentine's dad to propose marriage to her, he accepts, and in the preparation she gets her hands on the document concerning the revocation of Valentine's will.

She destroys the document. Valentine and Angelica marry.

THEMES

Coming of adulthood. We might say that Valentine, a love struck privileged child in his twenties, is still on the young side of adulthood. He has brains and learning—after all he is reading Greek and seems comfortable with it, but—but he can not figure out how to make love to his beloved Angelica. His problem is exacerbated by his financial situation; he has little money, and is steeply in debt. He owes 4000 pounds, and will only be able to pay it if he signs away his inheritance. This is his dilemma.

Patriarchy. Valentine's father is a classic paternal figure, willing to bargain with his debt ridden, Greek reading son, but only at the disadvantage of this young man. Not surprisingly he finds himself, at the end, gulled by Angelica, who cozens him into thinking he is ready for a late in life marriage.

Adolescence. Ben, the younger brother of Valentine, is on the brink of marriage only because of his Dad's pressure. Having been directed to an ocean going career, from early in his life, Ben is infatuated with the sea going life, with its independence and routine chores. Without further prodding, he seems a candidate for a permanent life on the waves, independent of the constraints of daily life on shore.

Revenge. Sir Sampson Legend is fiercely devoted to the elusive development of his sons, neither of whom seems on target to make big money or occupy a stellar position in society. We can see how sharply he distributes his dissatisfactions between the two young men, rightly spotting Valentine as the recusant and distant one, who needs punishing by means of the inheritance bond.'

Fear. When Valentine actually realizes that his dad is going to remove his inheritance, he is terrified. He has not fully understood, to this moment, how momentous this change will be, for his future. At this point, before he has signed away the bond, he reconsiders, stalls, and initiates a series of mad behaviors which terrify, and confuse, his father. He plays the fool or idiot, like Hamlet.

Deception. Angelica master plots the supreme deception of the play, by convincing Valentine's dad that she is in love with him. This, of course, is her way of getting her hands on the papers concerning Valentine's inheritance, and she knows that the key to marriage with Valentine, whom she really loves, is to put his inheritance into his hands.

Study guide

While all literature is a creation by social actors, drama appears to occupy a unique role, when contrasted, say, with prose narratives, lyric poetry, or epic poetry. Drama alone, of those genres, uses social beings as its means of expression—the characters in the play are real individuals drawn from society, actors. Drama alone offers back, to society, a replica of its own behavior and attitudes. Imagination, or invention, appears at the center of all literary work, but only the dramatic creation imagines with fellow humans as the means of signification.

What are the consequences of this distinctive procedure that makes the drama? Would you agree that the drama, uniquely, preserves a strong trace of its historical origins in religious rite? (I think here of the origins of western drama in rural Hellenic worship, the kinds of festival and/or sacrifice that the renowned Hellenist Jane Harrison (1850-1928) postulated a century ago.) If you see something in that perspective, would you buy the thought that the theater remains a kind of quasi-religious element in social culture? Would you explain the distrust of theater, in Puritanical cultures, as the fear of a substitute religion making its way into opposition against the established religious cult?