The Way of the World

William Congreve

Study Material by

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The Restoration Period

The term *Restoration drama*, usually applied to the plays written during the period from 1660 to 1700 or 1710, is not really satisfactory. Charles II was restored to the English throne in 1660. By 1700, Charles II had died, his brother James had reigned for five years and had been deposed in the "glorious revolution," or "bloodless revolution," of 1688, and William and Mary had reigned for twelve years. Congreve was not born until ten years after the Restoration; *The Way of the World*was first presented when he was thirty. By that time, some of the most obvious and most notorious features of the period no longer existed or existed only in much weaker forms.

The easiest way to grasp the particular tone of the Restoration period is to think of it as a reaction against the Puritanism of Cromwell and the period of the Commonwealth. The dissolute court of Charles II is well known in history and legend. It was the result of a blend of world-weariness, cynicism, and debauchery, dominated by a group of exiles who returned to their country determined to make up for the lean years history had imposed upon them. In general, the people of England welcomed the change. But such a reaction had only a limited life; the court gradually shifted from undisguised dissipation to the pattern of covert intrigues, political and domestic, and the clandestine adulteries that always existed in English courts.

The relations between the court and the theater were more than merely casual. Among Charles II's first acts after he returned to the throne was the reopening of the playhouses that had been closed by the Puritans. He was a patron of the theater, attended frequently, and was fond of "a very merry play." Since, in fact, in the early years of the Restoration the theater depended very greatly on the support of the nobility and its hangers-on, it reflected the taste of the court and its activities. For the courtiers, "tis a pleasant, well-bred, complaisant, fine, frolic, good-natured, pretty age; and if you do not like it leave it to us that do," as one of Wycherley's characters says. Many characters in the comedies were based on well-known figures in the court; many episodes echoed scandals that were known.

By the 1690s, if not earlier, a change in the court's attitudes occurred that inevitably affected the theater. William and Mary did not follow in the footsteps of the queen's uncle, Charles II. The over-reaction to Puritanism had run its course, and respectability was reasserting its importance in the life of the upper and middle classes. A Society for the Reformation of Manners was organized; laws were passed to suppress licentiousness. At the same time, the audience changed. In the 1660s and 1670s, the solid and wealthy middle class had ignored or deliberately avoided the theater; they now became an important part of the audience. This was due to their increased sophistication, but inevitably they imposed their values on the playwrights as well. And the English merchant was not prepared to condone a cynical acceptance of loose behavior.

Influences on Restoration Comedy

The nature of the audience is a very important influence on all art forms, theatrical arts especially. But it is only one factor. Attempts to explain — if such a thing is possible — Restoration drama must consider other threads of influence as well. Because the theaters were closed between 1642 and 1660, there was at one time a tendency to treat the Restoration drama as if it had no connections with the main stream of English drama. This was, on the face of it, inaccurate. People had seen Jacobean plays; the plays were there to read; and Jacobean plays formed the bulk of the repertoire of the two theatrical companies after the Restoration. At the same time, the courtiers, returning after varying lengths of time spent in France, had seen French plays. We might, therefore, list the main threads that made up that many-splendored thing, Restoration comedy.

There existed an English tradition of social comedy that treated the love game with lightness, humor, and some ribaldry. Such comedies are associated with Beaumont and Fletcher, among others. The plays included satire of social types: the fops, the pedants, and the vain women. At the same time, the English comic tradition included a different comedy of character types, Ben Jonson's comedy of "humours," which emphasized the way in which people's characters would be strongly bent in one direction. Jonson's plays were also intensely satiric, attacking above all the sins of avarice, lechery, and hypocrisy.

There was a strong French influence which led to elegance of plotting, characterization, and acting. The French emphasis on correctness was probably a salutary antidote to the casual attitude to structure of many Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. However, one characteristic of French comedy, unity of plot, was never adopted; English comedies had plots and subplots, and generally an excess of action.

The third most important influence on the comedy was the patronage of the court. Very often what occurred in the play had to be thought of as a private joke, comprehensible only to those "in the know."

The ways in which these various threads of influence showed themselves varied from dramatist to dramatist. One dramatist, Wycherley, might borrow a plot from Molierè but then add subplots and make the sympathetic characters coarser and their antagonists more crudely vicious to intensify the satire: *Le Misanthrope*is a brilliant French comedy, and *The Plain Dealer*is a brilliant English comedy based on it, but very different indeed. Some comic writers attempted to follow in the footsteps of Ben Jonson, and Congreve himself professed an occasional dependence on the Jonsonian "humour." Other dramatists, whose works are not generally anthologized, for their plays are not among the best, depended on scandal, bawdry, and the mirroring of their narrow world's activities.

Congreve represents the attitude of the period at its best. The rakehell was no longer a hero; Mirabell is a descendent of the rakehell, but compared with earlier specimens he displays urbanity, grace, and decorum. Congreve's love passages can be graceful and dignified; he treats love with an objective rationalism that is quite apart from the concept of lechery. His comedies are concerned, as comedies have been through the ages, with love and money, frequently complicated by parental opposition. His approach, however, is balanced: Love without money would be a problem, but money without love, the cynic's aim, is not the goal. Likewise, Congreve abhors the sentimental attitude that love will result in the individuals' somehow being submerged in each other; he insists that lovers preserve their integrity as individuals. Love is not metaphysical, not sentimental, not a form of sacrifice. On the other hand, within this context, it is not merely carnal nor a thinly disguised lust; it includes trust, dignity, and mutual respect.

## Character List

**Mirabell**A young man-about-town, in love with Millamant.

**Millamant**A young, very charming lady, in love with, and loved by, Mirabell. She is the ward of Lady Wishfort because she is the niece of Lady Wishfort's long-dead husband. She is a first cousin of Mrs. Fainall.

**Fainall**A man-about-town. He and Mirabell know each other well, as people do who move in the same circles. However, they do not really like each other. Fainall married his wife for her money.

**Mrs. Fainall**Wife of Fainall and daughter of Lady Wishfort. She was a wealthy young widow when she married Fainall. She is Millamant's cousin and was Mirabell's mistress, presumably after her first husband died.

**Mrs. Marwood**Fainall's mistress. It does appear, however, that she was, and perhaps still is, in love with Mirabell. This love is not returned.

**Young Witwoud**A fop. He came to London from the country to study law but apparently found the life of the fashionable man-about-town more pleasant. He has pretensions to being a wit. He courts Millamant, but not seriously; she is merely the fashionable belle of the moment.

**Petulant**A young fop, a friend of Witwoud's. His name is indicative of his character.

**Lady Wishfort**A vain woman, fifty-five years old, who still has pretensions to beauty. She is the mother of Mrs. Fainall and the guardian of Millamant. She is herself in love with Mirabell, although she is now spiteful because he offended her vanity.

**Sir Wilfull Witwoud**The elder brother of Young Witwoud, 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 Lady Wishfort's nephew, a distant, non-blood relative of Millamant's, and Lady Wishfort's choice as a suitor for Millamant's hand.

**Waitwell**Mirabell's valet. At the beginning of the play, he has just been married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. He masquerades as Sir Rowland, Mirabell's nonexistent uncle, and woos Lady Wishfort.

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

**Mincing**Millamant's maid.

**Peg**A maid in Lady Wishfort's house.

Play Summary

Before the action of the play begins, the following events are assumed to have taken place.

Mirabell, a young man-about-town, apparently not a man of great wealth, has had an affair with Mrs. Fainall, the widowed daughter of Lady Wishfort. To protect her from scandal in the event of pregnancy, he has helped engineer her marriage to Mr. Fainall, a man whom he feels to be of sufficiently good reputation to constitute a respectable match, but not a man of such virtue that tricking him would be unfair. Fainall, for his part, married the young widow because he coveted her fortune to support his amour with Mrs. Marwood. In time, the liaison between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall ended (although this is not explicitly stated), and Mirabell found himself in love with Millamant, the niece and ward of Lady Wish-fort, and the cousin of his former mistress.

There are, however, financial complications. Half of Millamant's fortune was under her own control, but the other half, 6,000 pounds, was controlled by Lady Wishfort, to be turned over to Millamant if she married a suitor approved by her aunt. Unfortunately, Mirabell had earlier offended Lady Wishfort; she had misinterpreted his flattery as love.

Mirabell, therefore, has contrived an elaborate scheme. He has arranged for a pretended uncle (his valet, Waitwell) to woo and win Lady Wishfort. Then Mirabell intends to reveal the actual status of the successful wooer and obtain her consent to his marriage to Millamant by rescuing her from this misalliance. Waitwell was to marry Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid, before the masquerade so that he might not decide to hold Lady Wishfort to her contract; Mirabell is too much a man of his time to trust anyone in matters of money or love. Millamant is aware of the plot, probably through Foible.

When the play opens, Mirabell is impatiently waiting to hear that Waitwell is married to Foible. During Mirabell's card game with Fainall, it becomes clear that the relations between the two men are strained. There are hints at the fact that Fainall has been twice duped by Mirabell: Mrs. Fainall is Mirabell's former mistress, and Mrs. Marwood, Fainall's mistress, is in love with Mirabell. In the meantime, although Millamant quite clearly intends to have Mirabell, she enjoys teasing him in his state of uncertainty.

Mirabell bids fair to succeed until, unfortunately, Mrs. Marwood overhears Mrs. Fainall and Foible discussing the scheme, as well as Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall's earlier love affair. Since Mrs. Marwood also overhears insulting comments about herself, she is vengeful and informs Fainall of the plot and the fact, which he suspected before, that his wife was once Mirabell's mistress. The two conspirators now have both motive and means for revenge. In the same afternoon, Millamant accepts Mirabell's proposal and rejects Sir Wilfull Witwoud, Lady Wishfort's candidate for her hand.

Fainall now dominates the action. He unmasks Sir Rowland, the false uncle, and blackmails Lady Wishfort with the threat of her daughter's disgrace. He demands that the balance of Millamant's fortune, now forfeit, be turned over to his sole control, as well as the unspent balance of Mrs. Fainall's fortune. In addition, he wants assurance that Lady Wishfort will not marry so that Mrs. Fainall is certain to be the heir.

This move of Fainall's is now countered; Millamant says that she will marry Sir Wilfull to save her own fortune. Fainall insists that he wants control of the rest of his wife's money and immediate management of Lady Wishfort's fortune. When Mirabell brings two servants to prove that Fainall and Mrs. Marwood were themselves guilty of adultery, Fainall ignores the accusation and points out that he will still create a scandal which would blacken the name of Mrs. Fainall unless he gets the money.

At this point, Mirabell triumphantly reveals his most successful ploy. Before Mrs. Fainall married Fainall, she and Mirabell had suspected the man's character, and she had appointed her lover trustee of her fortune. Fainall is left with no claim to make because Mrs. Fainall does not control her own money. He and Mrs. Marwood leave in great anger. Sir Wilfull steps aside as Millamant's suitor; Lady Wishfort forgives the servants and consents to the match of Mirabell and Millamant.