

Congreve – The Way of the World.

➤ *Contextualisation*

The Way of the World was first performed in 1700. The play is a depiction of high society in Restoration England. The Restoration refers to a specific date in English History, 1660, and to a period of time. It is named after the Restoration of the Monarchy. The English execute their king, Charles I, in 1649, after the Civil War. After Cromwell's Protectorate is dissolved, Charles II returns as a monarch. He signs an agreement granting more power to Parliament and returns on his 30th birthday to rule England.

English society had undergone several changes – the middle class was rising, becoming wealthy, and England was becoming a “nation of shop-keepers”.

Charles who had absorbed European culture in the course of his travels proved to be quite a tolerant monarch. He was very interested in fashion, theatre, entertainment and women. In this time of excess the fashion grew extreme – the men wore towering wigs, high-heeled shoes, cravats, cut away coats and swords. Women wore low cut gowns, high heels, and crinolines.

The same extravagance is found on stage. Restoration comedy is full of artifice, wit, clever word play.. Charles signs the law requiring women to play women's parts.

Indeed, many of the social preoccupations of Restoration England centred on women – women, from queens to actresses, had little legal power. Some progress was made but real change would take another century.

Marriage among the upper classes was seen as a business transaction between the families (dowry = price set for the value of a daughter). The woman's virginity was the property of the father up until her marriage day. Divorces were rare since the resulting scandal was not worth the price of freedom of either party. The social stigma attached to either the adulterer or the cuckold was often threat enough to cause both parties to remain quiet.

➤ *Restoration Play*

The Way of the World is a typical Restoration play displaying sophisticated repartee and knowledge of the exclusive code of manners in high society. The plot is based on the complex intrigue of the marriage market. The approach to marriage and sexual infidelity is highly cynical.

The social classes satirized in the play are represented by stock characters:

- 1) Rakes – Mirabell and Mr Fainall
- 2) The widow – Lady Wishfort
- 3) Fools (fops) – Petuland and Witwoud.
- 4) The Country Bumpkin – Sir Wilfull
- 5) The servants – Foible and Waitwell
- 6) The women – Mrs Marwood, Mrs Fainall and Millamant.

➤ Prologue and importance of Metadrama

The prologue is used to set the tone of the performance. Told by an actor rather than a character, it tells us about would-be poets and foolish characters, asking the audience to not take offense and to withhold quick judgement. Congreve does, however, slip in a sarcastic jab - “Should he by chance a knave or fool expose, / That hurts none here, sure here are none of those...”

Could it be an answer to Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* published in 1698?

In the pamphlet, Collier attacks a number of playwrights: , John Dryden, William Congreve... Collier attacks rather recent, rather popular comedies from the London stage; he accuses the playwrights of profanity, blasphemy, indecency, and undermining public morality through the sympathetic depiction of vice.

Collier begins his pamphlet with this conclusion: “[N]othing has gone farther in Debauching the Age than the Stage Poets, and Play-House”

To him, plays should have a moral agenda (see morality plays) – he explains that:

“Show, Musick, Action, and Rhetorick, are moving entertainments; and rightly employed would be very significant. But Force and Motion are Things indifferent, and the use lies chiefly in the application. These advantages are now, in the Enemies Hand, and under a very dangerous management. Like Cannon seized they are pointed the wrong way, and by the Strength of the Defence the Mischief is made greater.”

“One of the Fathers calls Poetry, Vinum Daemonum an intoxicating Draught, made up by the Devils Dispensatory.”

→ A danger for humanity = risk of animalization

“the danger of such an Entertainment is but part of the Objection: 'Tis all Scandal and

meanness into the bargain: it does in effect degrade Human Nature, sinks Reason into Appetite, and breaks down the Distinctions between Man and Beast. Goats and Monkeys if they could speak, would express their Brutality in such language as this.”

“ Here a man can't be a Sinner without being a Clown”

→ Women's Immodesty on Stage

“Do the women leave all the regards to Decency and Conscience behind them when they come to the Play-House? Or does the Place transform their Inclinations, and turn their former aversions into Pleasure? Or were their pretences to Sobriety elsewhere nothing but Hypocrisy and Grimace?”

→ The Stage's Faults:

1) Women talk dirty “**The poets make women speak smuttily.**” “**to bring Women under such misbehaviour is violence to their native modesty, and a misrepresentation of their Sex. For Modesty is the Character of Women. To represent them without this Quality, is to make Monsters of them, and throw them out of their kind.**”

2) Women are represented as free individuals:

“They represent single ladies and persons of condition, under these Disorders of Liberty, This makes the Irregularity still more Monstrous and a greater Contradiction to Nature, and Probability.”

3) The problem of Double-Entendres:

“They have oftentimes not so much as the poor refuge of a Double Meaning to fly to. So that you are under a necessity either of taking Ribaldry or Nonsense. And when the Sentence has two Handles, the worst is generally turned to the Audience. The Matter is so Contrived that the Smut and Scum of the Thought rises uppermost; And like a Picture drawn to Sight, looks always upon the Company.”

4) The immorality of Prologues and Epilogues:

“the Prologues, and Epilogues are sometimes Scandalous to the last degree.”

5) Religion is disrespected.

“That which might pass for Raillery and Entertainment in Heathenism, is detestable in Christianity.”

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

➤ *The War of the Sexes*

As the rules of the game are slowly stated to the spectator, we also learn about women's ensnarement in gendered stereotypes. The question of woman's role in society is brought to the foreground in the play. We are introduced to the two gendered factions of Restoration Society, men and women separately, before they are mixed all together. Men being introduced first, they seem to be the ones ruling over the chessboard. Indeed, through the use of generalisations they assert male domination and gender stereotypes.

See the quote “last night was one of their cabal nights; they have 'em three times-a-week, and meet by turns at one another's apartments, where they come together like the coroner's inquest, to sit upon the murdered reputations of the week”. p.4 The simile (“like the coroner's inquest”) and the metaphor are used to undermine's women's role in society. They are represented as shallow creatures merely interested in gossip and taking it as seriously as if it were a professional activity. This attempt at gender binarism is interesting in so far as we soon realise that men are just as engrossed in gossip and reputation-mongering. The latter imagery of “murdered reputation”is an important motif in the play since fear of social death is what keeps the characters coming up with schemes and secrets.

In the second Act, women use the same generalisations to refer to men.

➤ The Issue of Language

Language is not only a weapon, it is also a social marker and a revealer of characters' identity.

It is particularly used in order to debunk would-be rakes – see the use of double-entendre and irony.

Example:

The way in which the men describe Sir Wilfull emphasizes his lack of wit, thereby emphasizing their own wit and reaffirming their sense of superiority. They also remark on Sir Wilfull's inability to understand wit as a problem of translation: he doesn't understand London's culture.

It thus stresses their belonging to the same social strata. See their uses of the same expanded metaphor as they give a political dimension to Wilfull's situation turning his decision to tour Europe into a matter of national security. p.9 ("I wonder there is not an act of parliament to save the credit of the nation and prohibit the exportation of fools." / "By no means, 'tis better as 'tis, 'tis better to trade with a little loss, than to be quite eaten up with being overstocked."

In this comparison, Wilfull's dehumanisation is further achieved, his being a country bumpkin is clearly seen as a proof of his lack of sophistication.

➤ *Marriage Market / Business*

Finally, another important motif in the play is the tyranny of love. Indeed, the same imagery is used by Mrs Marwood in Act II scene 1, when giving her very own representation of the way of the world –“Love will resue his empire in our breasts, and every heart, or soon or late, receive and readmit him as its lawful tyrant.” Contrary to Millamant, Mirabell is brave enough to put his heart out on the line and recognise his lover's power over him. This is shown as love, this “lawful tyrant” is personified by Millamant.

At first, Millamant and Mirabell could appear on an equal footing. They stand for the *topos* of the gay couple. Even when they are arguing, they display great chemistry through the use of language –see the expanded metaphor of fools as medicine. (“to converse with fools is for my health...”). Fools are treated like mere commodities by both characters. A metadramatic dimension could be given to such analogies as fools really are mere objects (see their objectification p. “a herd of fools. Things that visit you” stressed by the epanadiplosis), ensuring the progression of the characters' plots, / of the play.

The same “physic” metaphor is expanded as fools are indeed used as a go-between the two lovers. When Mirabell persists in arguing after Millamant is ready to stop, however, she quickly cuts back to the real topic at hand, the possibility of their engagement, and uses it to coerce Mirabell into silence. The stichomythia clearly expressed the intensity and growing complicity illustrating their relationship.

Yet, the Proviso Scene reestablishes the rules of the marriage market and seems to put an end to Millamant's power. It was quite common for Restoration comedies to have Proviso scenes, that is,

scenes where the hero and heroine define a set of rules which they would like the other to follow in order to facilitate a balanced relationship. In a way they are setting the parameters of an equal marriage. Millament's provisos seem quite aggressive given the male-dominated society within which she is operating.

Mirabell quietly enters the room and begins to recite the next lines of the poem by Edmund Waller that Millamant is trying to learn from The Story of Phoebus and Daphne, Applied: "Like Daphne she, as lovely and as coy." He flirts with Millamant, asking her if she locks herself away to make his search more interesting or to signify that she's done running away from him. Millamant responds that she'll always run away, even on the day she gets married.

Sir Willful's failed visit offers a stark contrast to Mirabell's visit. Judging from his suave entrance, Mirabell is more than Millamant's intellectual match. Not only does he know she is reading poetry, he knows the poem by heart! Millamant, meanwhile, flirts with him but also reasserts her desire for independence.

The proviso scene opens, "-Like Daphne (Millamant) as lovely and as coy." alluding to a Grecian myth. becomes a tree that is sacred only to Apollo. Like Daphne, Millamant flees from commitment but ultimately falls victim to Mirabell's conquer. The two following paragraphs will describe instances in the dialogue where the play connects to the myth and how it relates to Mirabell's overpower of Millamant.

The first words from Mirabell's manipulative mouth question Millamant, "Do you lock yourself up from me, to make my search more curious? Or is this pretty artifice contrived, to signify that here the chase must end and my pursuit be crowned, for you can fly no further?" The word choice alone indicates a direct reference to Apollo's "chase" for Daphne and his "crowning" of the laurel wreath made from her branches. There is also a sense that Millamant has been "flying" away from his proposal but his words allude to a final capture despite her unwilling nature. Correspondingly, Mirabell treats Millamant as Apollo would Daphne: as a prize to be won, a woman to be caught. Mirabell sees her not as his equal, but someone he rightfully has control over once she is captured.

→ The function of the Fools:

They act as mere instruments in the play:

- 1) comic relief
- 2) go-between male and female characters
- 3) go-between stage and audience
- 4) pawns on Mirabell's chessboard