

The Way of the World as Restoration Comedy

Restoration as a historical period was a time when England was an established colonial power in the world. It was a time of materialism and commerce and the people of the period emphasized money, pleasure and sex. Love and marriage were judged in terms of money. Artificiality and immorality were the defining features of the age. People looked towards relaxation and pleasure and serious things mattered less to them. In the Restoration period there was a moneyed class with leisure. Pursuit of sexual pleasure and money was the main concern of the people. Marriage was not just like as an institution for procreation or for providing stability to social life. It was seen as a mercenary venture.

Main threads that made up the many-splendored "Restoration Comedy" may be listed in the following manner. There existed an English tradition of social comedy that treated the love game with lightness, humour, 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".

By highlighting these things, Congreve's *The Way of the World* exposes the issues of money, love, sex, marriage and in short the behavior of the people of the time in the language of prose. It is widely regarded as one of the best Restoration comedies and is still occasionally performed. Initially, however, the play struck many audience members as continuing the immorality of the previous decades, and was not well received. The rakes, fops, gallants and wits are the primary types dealt with in a language that is outwardly brilliant but lacking philosophical and emotional or psychological depth. This makes the play a typical restoration comedy of manners. The mode employed is satiric and ironic which befits the social reality of the time.

The Way of the World contains characters who resort to sexual innuendos and vulgar jokes. Humor and wit are the key ingredients of this play. The characters represent many aspects of the society of the time and the aristocracy in particular. None of the characters in the play can really be seen as 'good' and as such it is difficult to find a hero or heroine, or indeed anybody whom one would find deserving of sympathy or identification. The play is centred on the two lovers Mirabell and Millamant. In order for them to marry and receive Millamant's full dowry, Mirabell must receive the blessing of Millamant's aunt, Lady Wishfort. Unfortunately, Lady Wishfort is a very bitter lady who despises Mirabell and wants her own nephew, Sir Wilfull, to wed

Millamant. Meanwhile, Lady Wishfort, a widow, wants to marry again and has her eyes on an uncle of Mirabell's, the wealthy Sir Rowland. Mirabell and Millamant, equally strong-willed, discuss in detail the conditions under which they would accept each other in marriage at one point of the play which is otherwise known as the "proviso scene", showing the depth of their feeling for each other. Women's subjugation to their husbands under both law and custom at the time, and an attempt to improve the position of wife, underlie a scene where Millamant states her terms for a pre-nuptial agreement with Mirabell. Mirabell finally proposes to Millamant and, with Mrs. Fainall's encouragement (almost consent, as Millamant knows of their previous relations), Millamant accepts. Mirabell leaves as Lady Wishfort arrives, and she lets it be known that she wants Millamant to marry her nephew, Sir Wilfull Witwoud, who has just arrived from the countryside. Lady Wishfort later gets a letter telling her about the Sir Rowland plot. Sir Rowland takes the letter and accuses Mirabell of trying to sabotage their wedding. Lady Wishfort agrees to let Sir Rowland bring a marriage contract that night. Another character, Fainall, is having a secret affair with Mrs. Marwood, a friend of Fainall's wife. Mrs. Fainall, who is Lady Wishfort's daughter, herself once had an affair with Mirabell and remains his friend. In the meantime, Mirabell's servant Waitwell is married to Foible, Lady Wishfort's servant. Waitwell pretends to be Sir Rowland and, on Mirabell's command, tries to trick Lady Wishfort into a false engagement.

It is thus obvious that Mirabell is a wit and a great manipulator. He uses language in a very witty manner. The clever use of language makes his speech brilliant on the surface, but it has no psychological depth underneath. He pretends to love Lady Wishfort so that he can move closer to Millamant. His eyes are on her fortune. Love and marriage are guided by a desire for material gain. Finally, the villain of the play is intent on laying his hand on a Lady Wishfort's fortune. He marries Mrs. Fainall not because his love for her is true, but because he takes it as a mercenary venture. Millamant is a typical Restoration Coquette and Mirabell, a representative beau. Petulant and Witwoud are the typical fops of Restoration drama. They are more concerned with dress and appearance than with anything else. The love expressed in the play tends to be centred on material gain rather than the love of the partner.

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.

Use of wit is a remarkable aspect of Restoration Comedy. The characters use language in a very tricky and clever way. Use of repartee basically refers to quick replies while the report is related to sharp return in speech. Wit was a sharp weapon in the late seventeenth century, to be used for the amusement of those intelligent enough to follow the exchange. While talking to Mrs. Fainal, Mirabell provides an example of wit as he comments on early eighteenth century marriage. He says, "You should have just so much disgust for your husband as may be sufficient to make you relish your lover." The whole plot of the play revolves around the issues of adultery, marriage and fortune hunting. As we see the plot unfold, the characters reveal themselves through their pursuits and behavior. The way they behave makes laughter inevitable. Through this Congreve is satirizing the behavior of the people of then English society. It is a typical Restoration Comedy of Manners.

Since the age was not capable of feeling the intensity of tragic emotions, witty and light hearted dramatic stuff worked much better with them. The shallowness and vulgarity of the time are convincingly brought to light. The play is written in prose to depict the age of commerce and money. The language of money is the number and prose, not the poetry. The play does not end with everyone happy, but Mirabell and Millamant possess the advantage and look forward to marriage. Finally, all deception is revealed, the proper lovers are joined, and the complications are smoothed out. As the play carefully examines the relationships between the sexes and the impediments a sophisticated society throws between them the play transcends its age and becomes a timeless comedy. As it embodies the major features of the Restoration Comedy of manners, it is a representative play of the age. It is a brilliant comedy of manners. By holding up to ridicule the foibles and follies of the age, it shows ways to social reform which is what a comedy basically does.

Although there seems to be the usual happy ending to this comedy, *The Way of the World* leaves a number of loose ends that add to the confusion. It is difficult to see where Mrs. Fainall's future is satisfactorily resolved. It is not clear that Fainall is completely foiled. He could still demand control of Lady Wishfort's fortune or disgrace her daughter. Mirabell's statement that "his circumstances are such, he [Fainall] must of force comply" is hardly adequate. Some problems of motivation in the play are not clear: Why didn't Mirabell himself marry Mrs. Fainall when she was a widow? Is the affair between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall at an end? Why should she help Mirabell with his wooing of Millamant? Has he perhaps convinced Mrs. Fainall that he is marrying Millamant for money? There no real answers to these questions. They seem to be loose ends that the dramatist never bothered to tie together.

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