

The Way of the World

By

William Congreve

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William Congreve

William Congreve was an English Poet and Playwright of the Restoration Period in the 17th and 18th Centuries. After Shakespeare he has a great contribution to the Restoration Theatre.



William Congreve

- ❖ He was born in January of 1670 in Bardsey Grange, Yorkshire, England
- ❖ Young William attended Kilkenny College then Trinity College, Dublin
- ❖ After graduation became a disciple of John Dryden
- ❖ Entered the Middle Temple to study law
- ❖ Literary career started from 1692
- ❖ Influenced by Plato, Aesop, and Shakespeare.

Works published under the pseudonym "Cleophil"

- ▶ Incognita (1692), "an Essay"

The comedy

- ▶ The Old Batchelor
- ▶ Love for Love (1694)
- ▶ The Way of the World (1700)

The first poetic tragedy

- ▶ The Mourning Bride (1697)
- ▶ The Mourning Bride
- ▶ The Mourning Muse of Alexis
- ▶ The Tears of Amaryllis for Amyntas

Quotations of William Congreve

- ▶ Music has charms to sooth a savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak.
- ▶ Never go to bed angry, stay up and fight.
- ▶ Uncertainty and expectation are the joys of
- ▶ life. Security is an insipid thing.
- ▶ If this be not love, it is madness, and then it is pardonable.

Historical Context

The period in English history from 1670 to 1729, when Congreve lived and worked, was marked by a dramatic political event, which gave its name to the literary tradition known as Restoration drama. In 1660, Charles II came to the throne, and the monarchy, which had been in exile, once again ruled England. Although that restoration period was short-lived (Parliament regained power in 1688), it was important to western culture in that it provided a perfect milieu for the comedy of manners.

The English comedies of this time, Congreve's included, take the manners of high society and the aristocracy as material for satire, focusing their attention, as Henry T. E. Perry writes in *The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama* "upon the surface of a highly polished and fundamentally insecure civilization."

Setting of the Play

Chocolate-house

Chocolate-house. Setting for act 1. Such houses as Will's near Covent Garden and White's near St. James Park were the fashionable meeting places of young gallants and wits. Often gaming was associated with them.

London

St. James Park

Country

Plot Overview

- ▶ Mirabell, once a womanizer, seeks to marry a girl he loves, Ms. Millamant. Unfortunately, her aunt, Lady Wishfort, holds power over her 6,000 pound inheritance and despises Mirabell because he once pretended to love her. Mirabell and Ms. Millamant devise a plot in which his servant, Waitworth, will marry Lady Wishfort's servant, Foible, and then woo Lady Wishfort in disguise as Mirabell's uncle, Sir Rowland. The scheme proceeds as planned until Ms. Marwood, who unrequitedly desires Mirabell, overhears the plot when Foible fills in Lady Wishfort's daughter, Mrs. Fainall. Ms. Marwood tells the man to whom she is mistress, Mr. Fainall, about the scheme and the fact that Mirabell was also once romantically involved with his wife, Mrs. Fainall. Incensed by this situation, the two plan to foil Mirabell's scheme. Sir Wilfull, a nephew of Lady Wishfort's, comes to town before departing to go abroad, and Lady Wishfort desires for him, though a bumbling man, to marry Ms. Millamant.

Continued

- ▶ The situation comes to a head when Lady Wishfort, while visiting with "Sir Rowland," receives a letter from Ms. Marwood revealing Mirabell's scheme. Fainall attempts to use Lady Wishfort and her daughter's precarious social situation as leverage to gain Ms. Millamant's inheritance and all of Lady Wishfort's money through control of his wife's inheritance. However, he is foiled by Ms. Millamant announcing she will marry Sir Wilfull and Mirabell announcing that he has had claim to Mrs. Fainall's inheritance since before her marriage to Fainall. Once Fainall and Ms. Marwood leave, Ms. Millamant rescinds her offer to Sir Wilfull and she and Mirabell receive Lady Wishfort's blessing for marriage, her reputation having been saved by the two lovers.

Characters:-

- ▶ **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

Continued

- ▶ **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(A Servant who helps in adorning people). 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

Key Facts of *The Way of the World*

- ▶ Social comedy that treated the love game with lightness, humor, and some ribaldry
- ▶ Satire of social types: the fops, the pedants, and the vain women
- ▶ Strong French influence which led to elegance of plotting, characterization, and acting
- ▶ Plots and subplots, and generally an excess of action
- ▶ Treatment of love with an objective rationalism
- ▶ ideas - lovers preserve their integrity as individuals, love is not metaphysical, sentimental, or a form of sacrifice, not merely carnal; it includes trust, dignity, and mutual respect

The Restoration Comedy or The Comedy of Manners

- ▶ The action always takes place in London.
- ▶ There is always a contrast between the rural and the urban. For example in Congreve's "The Way of the World" Squire Witwoud is from the county of Shropshire and his arrival in London results in a lot of amusement and humour.
- ▶ The presence of at least one pair of very intelligent young lovers.
- ▶ Witty dialogue is perhaps the most important feature of the Comedy of Manners.
- ▶ All the other aspects of the play are usually sacrificed for the sake of contriving a situation
- ▶ which would give rise to 'witty' dialogue.
- ▶ The appeal of the Comedy of Manners is to the intelligence of the audience/reader and not to the emotions.

Continued

- ▶ The women in these plays were very emancipated and bold and independent, unlike the heroines of the Sentimental dramas.
- ▶ The 'witty' dialogue was usually obscene, for the theatres had just reopened after the Restoration.
- ▶ The institution of marriage was always held to ridicule. Both husbands and wives openly expressed their dissatisfaction of their spouses.
- ▶ These plays were mainly intended for the elegant and sophisticated audiences of London city. Hence the characters were almost always from the upper class society of London.
- ▶ These plays portrayed the lifestyle of the idle rich of London city very realistically.
- ▶ The plays were mildly satirical-the playwright could not afford to hurt his upper class audience.

The Restoration Theatre





"Fear comes from uncertainty. When we are absolutely certain, whether of our worth or worthlessness, we are almost impervious to fear."

William Congreve

Remarks of William Congreve

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