

STRUCTURE AS MEANING -
AN ANALYSIS OF CONGREVE'S
THE WAY OF THE WORLD

BY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Way of the World, the last play and acknowledged masterpiece of Restoration playwright William Congreve, has a firm place among the popular plays in English literature. In spite of many failings commonly attributed to it by dramatic critics, it still exercises its fascination over audiences, and still provokes a great deal of critical argument.

In undertaking an analysis of The Way of the World one has to bear in mind several considerations which might not be apparent at first glance.

The first consideration in this respect is justification for undertaking the analysis. This will emerge from the survey and assessment of the relevant literature in Chapter II. The survey provides ample proof that the play has long been a bone of contention among critics. Whether it was roundly condemned or highly praised is not as important as the fact that it has always been considered worthy of attention, even though some eminent critics (such as Harley Granville-Barker and L. C. Knights) have found themselves unable to account for the fascination the play allegedly has.

Critical approaches to this play have thus inevitably been many and varied. A division into three main categories was made for the purposes of the survey. In Chapter II the writings are set into the relevant categories and considered in historical sequence. These categories are:

1. Criticism based on moral premises (2.1).
2. Criticism based on the witty quality of
Congreve's work (2.2).
3. Criticism based on the structural attributes
of the play (2.3).

It emerges that criticism of the first kind is seldom concerned specifically with one play - it is rather a kind of blanket condemnation of Restoration comedy as a whole. Criticism of the second kind is more specifically concerned with the play in question itself. It is only when one comes to the consideration of the structural attributes of the play that the criticism becomes more specific.

The theme of this study is an exploration of the relation between structure and meaning in the play - an assessment of the extent to which structure is an inherent part of and contributes to the ultimate meaning of the play.

Chapter III therefore contains a definitive discussion of dramatic structure. This is a concept about which much critical discussion is possible. The term can be defined in a very narrow sense to indicate only plot-structure, but in this study it is taken to have a much wider application. The final part of the chapter is devoted to a consideration of the structure of a comedy in particular. A brief discussion of the nature of comedy, which is essential in determining comic structure, is also presented.

The analysis of the play is done on a scene-by-scene basis, and as certain issues are encountered they are commented upon. A recapitulation of the important issues is undertaken in Chapter V. In this last chapter there is also an assessment of the contribution of each structural element to the ultimate meaning of the play. It is demonstrated, finally, that the structure of the play can be said to embody and effect a convincing statement of the comic ideal, and thus reinforces the theme of the play to a considerable extent.

CHAPTER II

SURVEY OF LITERATURE

Critics of Congreve in general and The Way of the World in particular have touched upon widely different points in their criticism. The relevant critiques will be considered in this chapter in the categories into which they fall, and, as far as possible, the contribution of each critic towards the better understanding and appreciation of Congreve will be assessed.

The earliest criticism of Congreve, as well as of all the other Restoration playwrights, was of a severely moralistic nature. As this kind of criticism has remained common even up to modern times, this will be the first field of criticism to be considered.

2.1 Moralistic Criticism.

In his introductory passage to Collier's A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage¹⁾ Samuel Hynes said that Collier's book belonged to an old tradition concerning "the controversy over the relationship between art and morality".²⁾ The relationship between art and morality was

1) Hynes, S. Ed. English Literary Criticism, p.96.

2) Ibid., p.96.

one in which Collier was deeply interested. He attacked Restoration comedy mercilessly, and did not mince his words. He was a remarkably effective polemicist, and his pamphlet on the vicious practices of the playwrights abounds in telling phrases. The tone of his writing is severely disapproving - indeed, it borders on abusiveness in places. This publication was a general attack on all the playwrights, yet it assumes more significance with regard to Congreve in the light of the playwright's stung reaction to the attack.¹⁾

Collier states unambiguously that "The Business of Plays is to recommend Vertue and discountenance Vice; ... This Design has been oddly pursued by the English Stage."²⁾ He goes on to expound, with a great deal of righteous indignation, the infamous pursuits of the English playwrights, especially when measured against his uncompromising standards: "The Lines of Vertue and Vice are struck out by Nature in very Legible Distinctions."³⁾ This leads him to describe and define a typical Restoration gentleman in the following terms: "A fine Gentleman is a fine Whoring, Swearing, Smutty, Atheistical Man."⁴⁾

1) Cf. Jeffares, Introduction to *Incognita and The Way of the World*, p.13.

2) Collier, J. *A Short View*, (In Samuel Hynes, Ed. *English Literary Criticism*) p.97

3) *Ibid.*, p.98.

4) *Ibid.*, p.97.

Although Collier did not refer to Congreve in more than passing terms, this essay can be regarded as perhaps the first noteworthy criticism of Congreve. The Collier controversy, as it came to be called, had effect long after the active participants had died, and was often discussed by later critics.¹⁾ Collier was frequently invoked by later moralistically inclined critics to strengthen their own arguments.

The next critic to voice misgivings about the moral tenor of Congreve's work was the venerable Johnson himself. He called the Collier attack completely justified, because "... his onset was vigorous, the wise and pious caught the alarm, and the nation wondered why it had so long suffered irreligion and licentiousness to be taught at the publick charge."²⁾ Johnson was firmly convinced that drama should have an exclusively didactical purpose, and he regarded Congreve's position as not being tenable on the grounds that "whatever glosses he used ... the general tenour and tendency of his plays must always be condemned ... the perusal of his works ... will make no man better."³⁾

Johnson does not even take the trouble of criticizing The Way of the World at any great length. Apparently the

1) The most notable of these was T.B. Macaulay.

2) Johnson, S. Life of Congreve, (Napier, Ed. Lives of the Poets, Vol. II,) p.207.

3) Ibid., p.208.

public censure at the time of the first production of the play was enough to convince him that the play was worthless. His comments on the quality of the wit in Congreve's work will be discussed in the relevant section (2.1).

In the criticism of both Hazlitt and Lamb there is an escapist theme - they both seem to have read Congreve in order to break away from the tedium of duty. Their judgment of the moral content of the play serves more as justification for their having read the play at all than as discerning comment on the plays.

Apart from Hazlitt's appreciative comments on the style of Congrevian comedy, he makes the evasive judgment that these plays allow one to escape from the dull reality of the world to an age "that was all life, and whim and mirth, and humour".¹⁾ He calls this age a happy, thoughtless one when purely ornamental lives were led by the nobility, and lives were spent amiably and aimlessly in the pursuit of idle pleasures by rich and dissolute people. What Hazlitt finds only charming indolence to be regarded with tolerant amusement, is caustically attacked in the work of the modern critic L.C. Knights.²⁾

1) Hazlitt, William, *The English Comic Writers*, p.70.

2) Knights, L.C. *Explorations*.

Lamb's consideration of Congreve's comedies is primarily concerned with the aspect of morality, or the lack of morality to be found in these plays. Lamb very bravely confesses that he himself read these comedies - indeed, he was glad, " ... for a season to take an airing beyond the diocese of the strict conscience ... I come back to my cage ... the fresher and more healthy for it."¹⁾ Instead of slinging the usual charge of moral turpitude at Congreve, Lamb's contention is that Congreve actually made his plays amoral on purpose: "He has spread a privation of moral light I will call it, rather than by the ugly name of palpable darkness, over his characters."²⁾ Congreve could thus not be regarded as a very important playwright, for Lamb was firmly convinced that he could only be read as an escape from tiring moral questions. Lamb marvels at the power of The Way of the World, which, he says, could interest the reader even though he had no actual interest in the characters. The characters are not moral - because they are not real. "The great art of Congreve is especially known in this, that he has entirely excluded from his scenes ... not only anything like a faultless character, but any pretensions to goodness or good feelings whatsoever."³⁾ In the light of most modern criticism, this is a very naive

1) Lamb, C. The Dramatic Essays, p.151.

2) Ibid., p. 151.

3) Ibid., p.153.

statement. This view is diametrically opposed by modern critics such as Paul and Miriam Mueschke, who maintain that Congreve was not only extremely moral, but also that he actively moralized in The Way of the World. Their view is that there is a very definite system of justice in the Congrevian world, in the sense that the wages of sin (adultery) are death (social and moral disaster).¹⁾ This is in strong contrast to Lamb's statement that "... translated into real life, the characters of his dramas are profligates and strumpets, the business of their brief existence the undivided pursuit of lawless gallantry".²⁾ He concludes that "... the whole is a passing pageant, where we sit as unconcerned at the issues, for life or death, as the battle of the frogs and mice."³⁾

After Lamb, the threads of moralistic criticism are picked up by T.B. Macaulay.⁴⁾ After conceding that Greek and Roman dramatists were in their time rather coarse, he expresses the opinion that this should not be regarded as an excuse for Restoration dramatists, who were likewise inclined, and his hostility towards Restoration playwrights is unmistakable and very real: "The immoral English writers of the Seventeenth century are indeed much less excusable than those of Greece and Rome."⁵⁾ He proceeds to prove this allegation.

1) Mueschke, Paul and Miriam. A New View of The Way of the World.

2) Lamb, C. The Dramatic Essays, p.153.

3) Ibid., p.154.

4) Macaulay, T.B. Critical and Historical Essays, Vol. II.

5) Ibid., p.150.

He expresses the deepest perturbation about the effect of Restoration comedy on the impressionable minds of the very young and immature:

"But morality is deeply interested in this, that what is immoral shall not be presented to the imagination of the young and susceptible in constant connection with what is attractive."1)

This idea is developed even further - he feels very strongly that vice, which should be lashed, should not be presented as amiably as these dramatists presented it:

"... during the forty years which followed the Restoration, the whole body of the dramatists invariably represent adultery ... not as a peccadillo ... but as the calling of a fine gentleman, as a grace without which his character would be imperfect."2)

His agreement with Collier is not limited to this implicit agreement as to what the ideal gentleman was apparently like, but he accentuates the fact that the Collier attack was very timely, coming as it did in 1698, when the Court of William III had ceased to patronise licentiousness and when the theatres had become the last strongholds of the wits and fops. Collier was not merely venting dyspeptic ill-humour on the innocent fun of the playwrights - Macaulay stresses that Collier was in

1) Ibid., p. 151.

2) Ibid., p. 152.

reality echoing public opinion and cleansing the atmosphere in the theatres. This does not really concern The Way of the World, as this play was only published after this date, yet Congreve got himself drawn into the whole dispute by publishing an impassioned answer to Collier's attack - a foolhardy step in the light of further events, because Collier demolished Congreve's arguments. Macaulay comments on all these issues and succeeds in clarifying many details, but his view does not differ in any way from that offered by previous critics - indeed, he does little more than elaborate on what Collier said, making Collier's criticism more accessible to the modern reader by hacking away the verbose undergrowth of Collier's more ponderous style.

Thus the last nineteenth century critic of real importance to attack Congreve on moralistic grounds did so with a vengeance - deploring the immorality and licentiousness and taking an uncompromising stand on the side of the angels. At the close of this period very little had therefore been offered in extenuation of Congreve and his contemporaries other than grudging allowances that the quality of their wit was not deficient.

The prevailing attitude of moral censure changed during the early part of the twentieth century, and some of the modern critics did much to inculcate a greater sense of permissiveness

in readers and to clear away the strong prejudice against what was at worst vulgar and bawdy drama, but at best sensitive and compelling theatre.

Bonamy Dobrée can be regarded as the herald of the more permissive approach.¹⁾ He warns against the injudicious attitude of many people who condemn the whole period as completely licentious and immoral, and therefore put the comedies written during the period into this condemnatory category regardless of any other considerations:

"The most hasty student of history regards the quarter-century succeeding the Restoration as one of unbridled licence, in which everybody from the king downwards was corruptible."²⁾

Dobrée, with some reservations, considers the "immorality" of the Restoration theatre as being a manifestation of a troubled search for new and positive values by the people concerned.

"The times are those of rapid social readjustment and general instability, when policy is insecure, religion doubted and being revised, and morality in a state of chaos."³⁾

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- 1) Dobrée, B. Restoration Comedy, 1660-1720.
 - 2) Ibid, p. 17.
 - 3) Ibid., p. 18.

He further contends that the seemingly excessive use of the theme of the battle of the sexes is merely an attempt by the playwrights to establish a new relationship, and to clarify the position of both, in a world where marriage was "committed"¹⁾ and both partners apparently lived to rue it. This spirit of experimentation is seen to be allied to the general intellectual spirit of the time, when a great desire to experiment in the field of the sciences and the humanities prevailed. Dobrée therefore states that Restoration comedy "tried just as profoundly to reveal mankind and consider the effect of passions, but it dealt with everything more intellectually, more urbanely, more cynically, perhaps".²⁾ It must be remembered, however, that in most cases this drama was coterie-drama, intended for consumption by the frequenters of the Royal Court, and that the high purpose Dobrée ascribes to them does not apply to all the Restoration dramatists.

Congreve is regarded as a compassionate rather than a scathing writer, and in the final analysis, Dobrée does not find him morally contemptible.

Martin Ellehauge discusses Restoration drama as well as the preceding periods, and the morality of each kind is considered. In Pre-Restoration days he finds that a double standard is

1) Ibid, p.42.

2) Ibid., p. 32.

3) Ellehauge, M., English Restoration Drama,

operative - there is a marked distinction in class whenever the question of morals is considered. The idea of the higher classes being allowed more latitude in their social dealings is carried on into the Restoration Period. This is reflected on the stage, but he echoes Dobrée's conclusion that the new desire for knowledge prompted and influenced experiments on the stage, and he decides that "... the business of comedy is to show people what they should do, by representing them upon the stage, doing what they should not."¹⁾

This movement away from moral censure was given new impetus by Virginia Woolf in her discussion of Congreve's comedies. In her vindication of Congreve's morality, she contends that it constitutes immorality on the part of the author to superimpose any of his values on a work of art. She accordingly says:

"But if we have to admit that some of the characters are immoral, and some of the opinions cynical, still we must ask how far we can call a character immoral or an opinion cynical, if we feel that the author himself was aware of the immorality and intended the cynicism."²⁾

Congreve was thus not the vicious corrupter of morals some earlier critics made him out to be, for there was a thinking mind at work in all his ostensibly licentious plays. This gives

1) Ibid., p. 396.

2) Woolf, Virginia. Congreve's Comedies (In The Moment), p.35.

greater strength to the plays because so much more than a merely farcical content can be sought in them.

The most far-reaching development of this school of thought can be found in the work of Paul and Miriam Mueschke. They not only state emphatically that Congreve is moral, but strongly urge that he moralizes. They ascribe a forbiddingly strong moral purpose to Congreve's work, and this jars because the dominant impression one has after reading The Way of the World seems to be of compassion rather than righteous moral indignation. They regard Congreve as an uncompromising "whiplasher of vice"¹⁾, "the last and most illustrious of the sons of Ben".²⁾ According to them he emphatically and explicitly argues that the wages of sin (adultery) are death (social and moral disaster). In a sense this is true, for Congreve's justice, meted out quite generously at the end of the play, seems to consist of social disaster (in the sense of ridicule and loss of position), but this is tempered to a great extent by compassion. (In the case of Lady Wishfort in particular, compassion eventually replaces any other emotion one might have felt.)

1) Mueschke, op. cit., p. 82.

2) Ibid., p. 82.

This view can, indeed, make a depressingly virtuous piece of work of a play that is altogether lighter in tone than can be deduced from an account such as this.

The general movement of critical opinion as far as moralistic considerations are concerned, thus seems to have been in the direction not so much of permissiveness but of a complete and definite re-avowal of Congreve's apparent intention. Norman Holland calls Congreve a moralist in the sense that he exposes the lewd ways of the world, even while exhibiting some immorality.¹⁾

This movement in the direction of affirming Congreve's positive contribution to a strict moralistic creed seems to be checked and brought into balance by the approach of Paul T. Nolan.²⁾ He affirms that the play possesses the morality of "an ethical, but worldly, statesman, not of a saintly martyr".³⁾ Congreve did not, in his original audience, seek for either "idealistic convictions", nor an "easy amorality"⁴⁾ but rather for taste and a sense of discernment. This is an echo of the idea expressed by William Van Voris⁵⁾ that

1) Holland, N. The First Modern Comedies.

2) Nolan, Paul T. Congreve's Lovers, Art and the Critic.

3) Ibid., p. 332.

4) Ibid., p. 333.

5) Van Voris, W. Congreve's Gilded Carousel.

"the refined could discover in the curious carousel an image of themselves, an image which gathers together some of the best ethical and political thought of a violent and fascinating class which developed an enduring constitution and fine critical art to resolve a century of violence, extravagance and deceit."1)

In his dedication to the play, Congreve himself showed his awareness of what an ideal audience for his play would be like:

"That it succeeded upon the Stage, was almost beyond my Expectation; for but little of it was prepared for that general Taste which seems now to be predominant in the Pallats of our Audience."2)

Even though it means using extraneous evidence, the dedication does indicate part of Congreve's intention in writing this play. His further comments in this Dedication are an indictment of the easy credulity of the audiences, and their lamentable lack of discernment:

"Those characters which are meant to be ridiculed in most of our comedies, are of Fools so gross, that in my humble opinion . . . they are rather objects of

1) Ibid., p. 217.

2) Congreve, W. (In Jeffares, Ed. *Incognita and The Way of the World*), p. 17.

charity than contempt; and instead of moving our mirth, they ought very often to excite our compassion."¹⁾

Congreve thus presents confirmation of Nolan's idea that the play in question is essentially "a mature, civilized comment upon the forces which govern the way of the world in a leisure-class society for those who would live honorably, but comfortably, in a world of polished fools and well-mannered rogues".²⁾

L.C. Knights' approach to the question of morality in the plays of the Restoration Period is wholly different from those discussed above. He condemns these comedies as a class because they are, in his opinion, not even full-blooded enough to be immoral: "they are trivial, gross and dull".³⁾ His main point of criticism is that these comedies are less than great; not because they represent a limited culture, and one which he, on Marxist grounds, deplores anyway, but because they represent their contemporary culture so inadequately: "... it has no relation with the best thought of the time."⁴⁾ He thus repudiates Dobrée's idea that a sense of experimentation was the prevailing force behind these comedies. Knights deplores

1) Ibid., p. 17.

2) Nolan, op. cit., p. 339.

3) Knights, L.C. Explorations, p. 149.

4) Ibid., p. 133.

the disintegration of the cultural unity of the England of Elizabethan times. This is evident, he finds, in the fact that Restoration comedy was almost entirely dependent on the gentility for its patronage, and the exclusion of the lower classes seems to him to be the reason for the limited scope and effect of the plays. Knights is thus more intent on a complete disavowal of the intrinsic worth of Restoration comedy than on any censure or approval of its moral quality.

2.2 Criticism of the quality of wit.

Comment on the quality of wit in Congreve's work started early. The first example was published in his own lifetime. Dryden wrote some commendatory verses on The Double-Dealer in which he strove to teach the public the merits of the play: the reception of this play had been cooler than had been the case with The Old Bachelor, Congreve's first play.

Dryden unhesitatingly puts Congreve on a par with Shakespeare in commenting upon Congreve's use of wit in writing:

"Time, place and action may with pain be wrought,
But genius must be born and never can be taught.
This is your portion, and this your native store;
Heaven, that but once was prodigal before,
To Shakespeare gave as much, she could not give him more."¹⁾

1) Dryden, John, Preface to The Double-Dealer.
(In Ewald, A.C. William Congreve) p. 96.

Bearing in mind that Shakespeare was not quite so highly esteemed in those days as he had been before or has been since, it is quite conceivable that to Dryden, Congreve could seem to rival the great master of English drama at least in sheer elegance of expression.

Dryden thus singles out the aspect of wit in these comedies to comment upon:

"Thou shalt be seen
.....
High on the throne of wit; ¹⁾

This particular virtue in Congreve's writing was to be neglected for a long time - until the dust kicked up by the Collier controversy had subsided.

Dr Johnson had something to say about the witty quality of the plays, even though the tone of his criticism is predominantly moral. In spite of his criticism that the characters in The Old Bachelor are too artificial and the plot too improbable, and his complaint that the flow of wit is too incessant to be derived from nature, he still finds much to commend in the use of language:

1) Ibid., p. 96.

"... this comedy ... will still remain the work of very powerful and fertile faculties: the dialogue is quick and sparkling, the incidents such as arouse the attention, and the wit so exuberant"1)

Public censure of The Way of the World apparently convinced Johnson of the comparative worthlessness of the play, for he does not waste any time on a discussion of the sparkling wit of this play.

In the work of the most important nineteenth century critics there is again the suggestion of quick approval of the witty elements of Congreve's work, but a denial of real worth, implied by the omission of any really relevant discussions of his work. Hazlitt finds that, although these plays have a high standard of wit, they lack some of the other essential elements, such as humour (in the Jonsonian sense), character and incident. He does concede that Congreve presented a faithful version of the life of his day, and he commends his style warmly:

"Every sentence is replete in the sense and satire, conveyed in the most polished and pointed terms. Every page presents a shower of brilliant conceits, is a tissue of epigrams in prose, is a new triumph of wit, a new conquest over dullness."2)

1) Johnson, op. cit., p. 216.

2) Hazlitt, op. cit., p. 71.

He does, however, echo Johnson when, in discussing Millamant, he finds that, in spite of occasional brilliance, she is artificial, "... because the springs of nature, Passion or imagination are but feebly touched".¹⁾ This weakness extends to all the characters - "... all of them speak well, (yet) they are mere machines when they come to act".²⁾ This is in direct opposition to the idea of modern critics such as Jeffares,³⁾ who find that these characters assume a mask to help them live in the world according to the way of the world.

The artificiality that Hazlitt complains about is similarly interpreted though differently expressed by Lamb: "... translated into real life, the characters of his dramas are profligates and strumpets, the business of their brief existence the undivided pursuit of lawless gallantry".⁴⁾ They do not come alive as characters, on the one hand because of the lack of morality and on the other hand because of the quality of unreality pervading the plays: "... the whole is a passing pageant ..."⁵⁾

1) Ibid., p. 75.

2) Ibid., p.75.

3) Jeffares, N. Incognita and The Way of the World, Introduction.

4) Lamb, op. cit., p.172.

5) Ibid., p.173.

This idea of the plays being merely pageants, passing scenes of no great importance, is reiterated in the work of Thackeray, even though T.B. Macaulay had in the meantime called The Way of the World a brilliant and deeply meditated play.¹⁾ Thackeray, in his pleasantly familiar and impressionistic essay on Restoration comedy, regards the plays more as masques than as representations of real life:

"Reading these plays now, is like shutting your ears and looking at people dancing. What does it mean, the measures and grimaces, the bowing, shuffling and retreating, the cavalier seul advancing upon the ladies?"²⁾

In commenting upon Congreve's use of language, Thackeray makes an observation that is even today regarded as particularly applicable:

"I can't pretend to quote scenes from the splendid Congreve's plays - which are undeniably bright and adoring - any more than I could ask you to hear the dialogue of a witty bargeman and a brilliant fisherwoman exchanging compliments at Billingsgate."³⁾

Up to the end of the nineteenth century, then, even criticism on the quality of the wit in Restoration plays (as

1) Macaulay, op. cit., p. 153.

2) Thackeray, W.M. English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century, p. 45.

3) Ibid., p. 47.

compared with moralistic criticism) was still largely impressionistic, and consisted of incidental judgments rendered almost apologetically - the critics were at least on safe ground in commenting upon the wit, but there they stopped. They would not commit themselves any further.

Apart from John Palmer's Comedy of Manners, published in 1913, which contains a dissertation on the themes and conventions of this kind of comedy, the most significant Congreve criticism of the early twentieth century was that of Dobrée. He appeared at the turn of the tide of moral outrage against Congreve, and introduced not only a more tolerant approach, but made an honest re-appraisal necessary by his discussion and evaluation of the social and political climate of Restoration times.

He finds The Way of the World to be Congreve's masterpiece. He says of the play that it "... brings out the delicacies of the spirit against the dark murk of the way of the fashionable world."¹⁾ From this one can deduce the high purpose he attributes to the playwright, and he also credits him with achieving a great deal. Congreve endeavoured, he finds, to create characters full of delicacy, faithful copies

1) Dobrée, op cit., p.19.

from life, and succeeded in portraying these to form a contrast with their world, the fashionable world in which they lived. This contrast, a patterning of darkness and light, the more delicate opposed to the coarser side of character, is one of the considerations which will be analysed in this study.

Dobrée has the usual curt criticism of Congreve's plot and the unlikely ending it is supposed to have:

"This masterpiece had to be appreciated for other reasons; the depth and sympathy of its characterization where some of the persons are concerned, together with the general sense of what is precious in life, and the magnificent handling of language, 'purity of style'."1)

Unfortunately he stops short of actually saying what "purity of style" is. Thus, whereas he has improved substantially on the prevalent method of comment on Congreve, he has not yet given a full account of exactly how a Congreve play exercises its fascination on reader and audience alike.

Kathleen Lynch is another important critic of Congreve. She recognises an essential humanity in Congreve's work which does not suffer through his polite sympathy with the conventions of his social milieu.²⁾ Her discussion of

1) Ibid., p.20.

2) Lynch, Kathleen. The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy, p.183.

Congreve is to a large extent a consideration of Congreve's literary inheritance. She traces parallels between Congre-
vian character and situation and those of Molière, but finds, as Dobrée and Wilcox did before her, that it is "rather futile to attempt to support more than a moderate claim for Congreve's indebtedness to Molière".¹⁾ The real and pervasive influence on Restoration playwrights was undeniably Elizabethan - a point which was made by both Dobrée and Wilcox.

Miss Lynch concludes her study of Congreve with some thoughtful and well-presented comments upon Congreve's dramatic characters. For Millamant there is high praise, and a recognition of the fact that Millamant was severely restricted in all she did by the social decorums imposed upon her by the kind of society in which she lived.

With regard to the social background, Miss Lynch is particularly insistent upon the "précieuse" quality of the play which would indicate that a great deal of effort was used in patterning the elements of the play in accordance to the demands of theatrical tradition. The play

1) Ibid., p. 188.

is, indeed, called the "finis coronat"¹⁾ of the manners tradition by John Palmer, and Kathleen Lynch calls it "A brief, authentic record of the précieuse movement in comedy"²⁾.

This idea has now become a critical platitude - the play is now generally regarded as the concluding and crowning work of the age and school of manners. This is summed up by P.A.W. Collins when he says:

"..... The Way of the World is their quintessence, hardly an incident or character or dialogue being original. Congreve perfects the common mode, adding to it a nicety of feeling and phrasing."³⁾

This lack of originality is not necessarily a disqualification. Even Shakespeare was hardly noted for the originality of his plots. Collins casts some doubt on Congreve's "understanding of and concern for human values"⁴⁾ as well as on his ability to give his plays a strong structure, feeling that he did not accord enough attention to the construction of the component parts of his plays. Collins objects chiefly to Congreve's addiction to the "turning of a fine phrase" - to his mind Congreve was so set on using brilliant expressions in his dramatic dialogue that it became unnatural. In repudiation of this criticism one could of course, quote

1) Palmer, J. *Comedy of Manners*, p.141.

2) Lynch, *op. cit.*, p.212.

3) Collins, P.A.W. *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. III, p.170.

4) *Ibid.*, p.170.

Congreve's own dictum:

"I believe if a Poet should steal a Dialogue of any length, from the Extempore Discourse of the two Wittiest men upon Earth, he would find the Scene but coldly received by the Town."1)

Congreve himself here points out that onstage all effects should be heightened so as to have more impact, and this idea has a great deal of critical validity, with regard to both language and characters: "Besides, the Stage requires the figures represented, to be something larger than the Life; ... "2)

2.3 Structural Criticism.

In more modern criticism of Restoration comedy and Congrevian comedy in particular, there is more insistence on the structural attributes of the plays. Even a critic of the vintage of Thackeray speaks of patterns within the play (though he does not pretend to understand what is indicated by these patterns).

"Reading these plays now, is like shutting your ears and looking at people dancing. What does it mean, the measures and grimaces, the bowing,

1) Congreve, W. Concerning Humour in Comedy.
(In Jeffares, Ed. Incognita and The Way
of the World) p. 6.

2) Ibid., p. 6.

shuffling and retreating, the cavalier seul advancing upon the ladies? Without the music we cannot understand the comic dance of the last century, its strange gravity and gaiety, its decorum or its indecorum."¹⁾

Echoes of this idea of a set (dance) pattern within certain strict bounds can be found in the work of critics such as William Van Voris and Virginia Woolf. (This will be discussed more fully later on.)

Whereas Congreve's pretension to structural skill has always been dismissed on the grounds of his flimsy plots, he is being accorded more credit in contemporary criticism on the grounds of his ability to pattern the component parts of his comedies in such a way that a special kind of meaning is conveyed to the reader or audience as the final effect of his efforts.

Martin Ellehaug makes the point that in Restoration comedy there is a pattern of artificial symmetry of characters. This can be best illustrated by taking a look at The Way of the World as being representative of the genre.

1) Thackeray, op. cit., p.45.

Mirabell is the typical hero of Restoration comedy. Although he seems to be merely a philandering rake at first, he is triumphant at the end and is rewarded by being allowed to win the virtuous heroine, Millamant. Fainall, although at first apparently similar to Mirabell, proves at the end to be particularly vicious - and the woman with whom he ends up is Marwood, who is a particularly vindictive person. The question to be answered is what Congreve hoped to achieve by this juxtaposition of characters.

An assessment of what has been said so far on the aspect of structure in Congreve's plays is necessary to act as background to a fuller analysis of the play.

Earlier critics have commented upon Congreve's masterly use of language, his distinction as a creator of characters. Congreve distinguished his characters by giving them idiosyncratic habits of speech which set them apart from each other at once. This idea is continued and developed in modern criticism, and is, in many instances, closely allied to more important issues connected with structure, issues which have not traditionally been considered in discussions of Congreve's work.

Dialogue is now generally regarded as being more than merely witty repartee for the sake of "effect". In 1925 H.T.E. Perry stated that Congreve allows his characters to express personal feelings through fine and witty dialogue, and "for this expression of personal feeling under the mask of polished repartee, The Way of the World is, by all odds, Congreve's masterpiece...".¹⁾ This indicates that language is now acknowledged as a very significant factor in the structure of a play. In this comedy dialogue can be regarded as a device used to mask the true feelings of the people concerned, so that they will seem to conform to the conventions of the world in which they live, while still experiencing real feelings which they are not allowed to utter. Language was previously regarded purely as ornament by critics such as Hazlitt, Lamb and Thackeray. Now, however, it is regarded more as a device for reinforcing feeling and thus helping to communicate the total meaning of the play. W.P. Barrett regards idiosyncratic use of language as one of Congreve's chief virtues in creating distinctions between the

1) Perry, H.T.E. The Comic Spirit in Restoration Comedy, p.70.

characters.¹⁾ Both Davis and Jeffares regard the use of language as one of the most important issues to be included in a discussion of some of the relevant aspects of structure.²⁾

Davis's contention is that Congreve could succeed in creating the perfect atmosphere for any action he desired by his use of language, for he could anticipate the entrances of characters and evoke pictures of their characters before they even appeared on the stage. This method of evocation of character is a particularly effective one, but it is not within the scope of all dramatists to evoke character through this method. This is more specifically the method of the novelist, yet Congreve succeeds in this without sacrificing dramatic tension. Davis demands of dialogue that it must "... perform its dramatic purpose, getting us ready, putting us into the right mood, stirring our affections for those whom we are intended to admire and delight in".³⁾

Dialogue can therefore also to some extent be seen as a controlling factor - because it determines and shapes

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- 1) Barrett, W.P. Ed. The Way of the World, Introduction.
 - 2) Davis, H. The Complete Plays, Introduction.
Jeffares, N. Op cit., Introduction.
 - 3) Davis, H. The Complete Plays, Introduction, p.20.

audience reaction, which is indispensable for the complete functioning of a play. If a play is meant primarily for presentation in the theatre, the audience is also part of its existence.

Jeffares feels that

"... the essence of The Way of the World is its use of language. The quick wit of the brilliant proviso scene is comedy par excellence, as is the flow of Lady Wishfort's speech ... "1),

and he regards each character as typified by his "... own idiosyncratic mode of speech - and their names indicate something of their natures. "2)

Jeffares also holds to the contention of Perry that language serves as the smooth surface to contain and conceal emotion - although this does not imply that language is a barrier. It acts, rather, as an ironic device, for enough is revealed by the very quality of non-commitment to shake one into an awareness of the real and intense issues at stake (as in the confrontations between Millamant and Mirabell in particular).

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- 1) Jeffares, N. Ed. *Incognita and The Way of the World*, Introduction, p.26.
 - 2) This does not necessarily indicate, however, that "every Man to his Humour" was all that was intended, for Congreve's characters are essentially more than Humours.

Both Jeffares and Earl Miner¹⁾ have remarked on the kind of dynastic order that emerges from the resolved issues at the end of the play. This idea can, of course, be seen as a complete repudiation of every critic who has ever regarded Congreve as flippant and unconcerned, for a mind concerned enough to create this kind of order would surely not stoop to the indignity of writing a piece of frivolous nonsense. This order would only emerge from a play in which the playwright is constantly at pains to have every structural element under firm control. What has, however, been offered as evidence to regard the structure of this play as equal to the high purpose which is increasingly being ascribed to it?

Certain ideas have been emerging with increasing frequency. The idea of the dance-pattern is important, and has re-emerged since Thackeray commented upon it. This time it is to be found in the work of Virginia Woolf. To her mind, the world of Congreve's characters is "an enclosure surrounded with the four walls of the drawing room".²⁾

1) Miner, E. Ed. Restoration Dramatists.

2) Woolf, Virginia. The Moment, p.33.

In this enclosure, men and women have to act strictly according to certain rules - and what are these rules?

"Ladies and gentlemen go through their figures with their tongues to the measure dictated by common sense as precisely as they dance the minuet with their feet; but the image has only a superficial rightness."1)

This "superficial rightness" would imply that underneath all the drawing-room smoothness, more elemental passions exist and are waiting to be released. The ironic impact of the contrast between appearance and reality will be strong, because superficially there may seem to be no contrast in speech. Jeffares stresses the fact that the play is a slow change from appearance to reality, a gradual stripping of pretence and an accompanying revelation of reality. He finds a great deal of the "tragedy underlying life" in the play - and he finds that ultimately there is a fusion of all the elements of the play in the "ritualistic dance" which rounds off the play. "Ritualistic dance" it is, for at the end of the play Congreve rounds off the action with issues resolved according to a strictly formal pattern laid down by the tradition within which he writes. From a potentially chaotic scene he creates a world that reaffirms a basic order.

1) Ibid., p.33.

This brings one to the pattern of contrast within the play - the contrast between characters of a "high" and others of a "low" order. This is not the only contrast, however, as the contrast between seriousness and flippancy is also of considerable significance. This idea, proposed by Virginia Woolf, is developed more fully by F.W. Bateson. In discussing Restoration drama in general, he makes the point of the high-low contrast and he finds a dialectic between "inner desire and outward appearance" that is important in the creation of the texture of the plays. He also regards this as important in shaping the pattern of language peculiar to these plays. This dialectic is to be observed in the characters too - on the one hand there are the "natural" men, who in this play would be represented by Sir Willfull, and on the other hand there are the "social" men, such as Petulant and Witwoud, who are equally far removed from the ideal of what a man should be. In the centre, symbolizing a fusion of all that was most desirable in a gentleman of the period, are the rake-heroes. These gentlemen cleverly "... use pretence to conceal the free exercise of their natural desires".¹⁾ If The Way of the World

1) Bateson, F.W. L.C. Knights and Restoration Comedy, p.320.

were to be reduced to a single kind or strain of action, one would see it as the reformation of Mirabell into something more admirable than the slightly disreputable figure he cuts at the opening of the play. His forthcoming marriage to Millamant fits completely into the pattern of the typical Restoration play, and sets the seal upon his progression from being merely a rakish gentleman to the hero, the perfect gentleman of the times¹⁾, who is triumphant and at the same time unrepentant. He has used convention to gain what he wanted. It is a progression rather than a change, because a change would inevitably imply the loss of some of his characteristics which are attractive in spite of being disreputable. Bateson concludes that "These plays normally end in the hero's marriage, symbolizing the harmonious union of natural desires and conventional restrictions."²⁾ Mirabell thus marries Millamant, who is a perfect heroine, a "high" character, and virtuous. He is not unduly bothered by the memory of his affair with Mrs. Fainall, and he does not even feel indebted to this lady, for she falls within the category of "low" characters.

1) Cf. Jean Gagen on the ideal of the gentleman.

2) Ibid., p.320.

More support for the idea that the structure of The Way of the World is instrumental in determining the meaning can be found in Van Voris's article Congreve's Gilded Carousel. He maintains that "... although Congreve cast his final play as a carousel, my point is that his form is a dramatic device which enables us to see his posturing characters from several points of view".¹⁾ This idea would satisfy those critics who have felt that the play is only concerned with trivialities - the ostensibly trivial nature of the play, Van Voris feels, is intended to enable us to see the characters in many trifling situations, and in so doing gain a more enduring and comprehensive impression of them. The strongest motive Congreve could have had to use this form is the fact that it enabled him to reveal his complex characters more fully. Therefore, whereas many critics have found the plot-structure to be disturbingly and annoyingly episodic, Van Voris regards it as purposely thus. He finds no more triviality in the plot-structure than in a Picasso clown. The episodic structure so deplored by most critics contributes to the final effect of the play in the way of pieces set into a montage - all of them contributing to the final harmonious effect.

1) Van Voris, W. Congreve's Gilded Carousel, p.212.

Van Voris finds a consistent pattern of "high" scenes - scenes of controlled and formal elegance - and "low" scenes - raucous and vulgar scenes - in the play, which becomes more marked towards the end of the play, and which tends to set the tone of the play and the relationships contained in the fabric of the play. In his opinion, this technique is ultimately instrumental to leading to the play being "... an image which gathers together some of the best ethical and political thought of a violent and fascinating class".¹⁾

It now emerges that although many points have been touched upon in discussing the structure of The Way of the World, no single comprehensive study has been undertaken which assesses structural devices with regard to their significance in the rendering of meaning. Is the play as chaotic and unsatisfactory as some critics have led one to believe, or does it have as many positive qualities as other critics have been maintaining in recent times? This question remains to be answered after an analysis of the structural elements of the play.

1) Ibid., p.217.

CHAPTER III

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

3.1 General terminology.

In the analysis of The Way of the World, certain terms will be used fairly often.

The first term which has to be accounted for is the word play. A great deal of confusion is possible in the discussion of a dramatic work - when play, theatre and drama are used indiscriminately to indicate the same thing. Play will be used to indicate a dramatic work written for production on a stage. This term will be used in preference to the more ambiguous drama, since drama has tended to be used in a more specifically literary sense. A play is primarily intended for the stage, and should always be looked at from this point of view.

A clear distinction will also be made between the two dramatic types of comedy and tragedy, as the play under consideration is so clearly a comedy. It is not within the scope of the present study, however, to explore this aspect of drama exhaustively at all.

3.2 Dramatic structure.

The term structure is of great significance within the scope of this study. This term has been so variously interpreted that a definitive discussion is essential at the outset.

The term structure is used in preference to form. This is meant to indicate that structure is not regarded in the narrow sense of plot-structure only, but also in a much more comprehensive sense.

In determining what dramatic structure involves, it is necessary first to look at the essential nature of a play itself.

Dramatic art is one of the oldest forms of art to have a recorded history. Its beginnings were humble and usually connected with religious ritual. As an art form it doubtlessly arose mainly out of the natural human instinct for imitation. A play was regarded as an imitation of life by Aristotle, the first and by virtue of longevity of critical accord, one of the greatest of dramatic critics. The basic concept of mimesis has survived in the work of subsequent critics.

A play can be regarded as a representation of some aspects of life. In order to make a more vivid and

enduring impression upon his audience of what he wishes to communicate, the playwright has the task of reinforcing the meaning of his material by making use of certain devices peculiar to the stage. Francisque Sarcey says of this:

"The author who brings upon the stage the events of life, and who naturally desires to make them interesting to the audience, must find means to heighten and render more vivid and more enduring the impression he wishes to create."1)

Besides being a representation of life, a play must have the twin qualities of concentration and condensation, so that only relevant parts of life will be represented in a form suitably heightened to convey these as strikingly as possible to the audience. A play thus has to conform to certain conditions. These conditions are necessary in order to make the play intelligible to the audience. This brings one to the question of how a play should be constructed in order to comply with the requirements the stage sets.

1) Sarcey, F. Papers on Playmaking, (Brander Matthews Ed.) p.122.

In much older criticism there is a tendency to lay down harsh rules for the structure of a dramatic work. In this way the idea of the unities of time, place and action developed and many playwrights and critics conformed strictly to these rules, often to the detriment of their work.

Modern criticism, however, has introduced a welcome note of elasticity into dramatic theory. Wellek and Warren can now declare that form (structure) is not a matter of unremitting, hide-bound rules, but more a matter of convention and usage:

"The genre represents, so to speak, a sum of aesthetic devices at hand, available to the writer and already intelligible to the reader. The good writer partly conforms to the genre as it exists, partly stretches it."¹⁾

They further make the point that writers such as Shakespeare, Racine or Molière were hardly inventors of genres - they fitted, to a greater or lesser degree, into a genre developed by use. They did not subscribe to any rigid rules, nor did they discard a form which was familiar to the audience and which would make the play more intelligible to the audience.

1) Wellek, R. & Warren, A. *Theory of Literature*, p.235.

Sarcey says essentially the same in speaking of rules in the theatre:

"Rules do not render any great service in criticizing, any more than they do in creating. The best that can be said of them is that they may serve as directions or guideposts. Native taste sustained and purified by training, reflection and usage can alone help you to enjoy works of art. The first condition of having pleasure is to love; and we do not love by rule."¹⁾

In the work of Harley Granville-Barker there is a renewed insistence upon the significance of convention and usage in determining the rules that go toward the construction of a play. The playwright should fulfil the conditions imposed on him by the living theatre, and these conditions are the natural laws of the theatre, the medium in which the play exists.²⁾

This point was made equally succinctly by Elder Olson when he dismissed Aristotelian dogma.

"If we think about the things a dramatist must do, as a minimum, to make a play, it becomes clear that he must (1) devise some sort of action, together with characters who can appropriately carry it out, (2) contrive a scenario which shows

1) Wellek and Warren, op. cit., p.120.

2) Granville-Barker, H. On Dramatic Method.

what actions are to be enacted on the stage in what order, and (3) compose the dialog, or at least indicate roughly what sort of thing shall be said by the actors."1)

This almost curt statement would seem to hark back the tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte* - and would indicate the most basic components to be considered in the construction of a play.²⁾

As part of the process of defining dramatic structure, the point has to be made that a play exists fully only in the theatre, in at least being performed by reasonably accomplished and competent actors. A playwright does intend his play primarily for the stage, and many things can be lost when one reads a play in solitude. The dramatist has the obligation to imbue his play with meaning that will become accessible to the audience as soon as the play starts moving:

"Ideally, everything should be implicit in the record in this sense: set the play in motion and all the hidden things should come to light and life."³⁾

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- 1) Olson, Elder. *The Elements of Drama*, p.634.
 - 2) It might be stressed here that the *Commedia dell'Arte* was shaped almost exclusively by convention.
 - 3) Granville-Barker, H. *On Dramatic Method*, p.22.

Granville-Barker thus regards performance as the factor necessary to reveal all the potentialities of meaning of the play. When a play is presented upon the stage, there is at once a greater immediacy and a sense of urgency to be experienced - the utilization of more faculties than the merely visual will bring this about, even though the intellectual quality of the play might be somewhat neglected by the audience at the first viewing. This will be remedied if thought is stimulated by the issues raised during the performance.

Leading dramatic critics have commented upon this necessity for presentation of a play in the theatre - a number of these opinions can be quoted to stress Styan's opinion that "... an understanding of the processes of the theatrical experience is necessary for the full appreciation of the play." ¹⁾

Francisque Sarcey says:

"It is an indisputable fact that a dramatic work, whatever it may be, is designed to be listened to by a number of persons united and forming an audience, this is its very essence, this is a necessary condition of its existence." ²⁾

1) Styan, J.L. The Elements of Drama, p.3.

2) Sarcey, op. cit., p.122.

Sarcey thus joins Styan in his concept that the audience forms an essential part of the dramatic experience in shaping the play - by means of its reaction.

Eugene Labiche, after commenting on the need for effective planning, brings the audience into play as one of the elements not to be left out of consideration when a play is planned:

"A play is a thousand-legged creature which must keep on going. If it slows up the public yawns, if it stops, the public hisses." ¹⁾

Fred Inglis declares very emphatically that "plays belong in the theatre and not in the classroom or the library" ²⁾, and says very significantly that

"... as part of an audience, we take part in a communal activity - we sit with people, and we watch live people." ³⁾

This is echoed very concisely by Styan when he says "Drama is a social activity". ⁴⁾

The contribution of the audience is further stressed by Allardyce Nicoll when he says:

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- 1) Labiche, E. How to write a play. (In Papers on Playmaking, p.87.)
 - 2) Inglis, F. An Essential Discipline, p.122.
 - 3) Ibid., p.181.
 - 4) Styan, op. cit., p.2.

"The theatrical performance clearly exists in a different world. Here the spectators and auditors have the privilege, as it were, of watching and hearing an art-object being shaped and moulded."1)

There are a number of theories regarding comedy specifically which also demand the presence of an audience and a performance in order to extract from a play everything it has to offer. (These theories are important within the scope of the present study.)

Theodore Hatlen says of comedy:

"More than other forms of drama, comedy depends upon performance for its full effect."2)

This is qualified when he declares that the element of surprise, and therefore the creation of incongruous situations, is very important in the functioning of a comedy. The visual representation of these incongruities adds immeasurably to their impact - if the possibilities for significant action were inherent in the text.

"Comedy is a framework for action. The inanimate script is brought to life by the performer, but his skill is dependent upon the craftsmanship of the playwright."3)

1) The Theatre and Dramatic Theory, p.26.

2) Drama: Principles and Plays, p.50.

3) Ibid., p.51.

A demand to see Congreve's plays produced in order to gain the most comprehensive impression of the plays is made by Virginia Woolf:

"... to read them, silently and in solitude, is to do them an injustice"¹⁾,

and she pleads for submission on the part of the spectator to the magic the playwright has to offer:

"... let us submit ourselves to the dramatist in action."²⁾

F.W. Bateson's indictment of modern critics is perhaps a fitting conclusion. He eschews moral and sociological judgments if critics do not first fulfil the basic requirement:

"Modern critics of Restoration comedy have not helped the reader to understand these plays as plays ...".³⁾

The most basic point one has to keep in mind in determining dramatic structure has thus been established - that of the play being primarily intended for the theatre, and being shaped by convention and usage.

1) Woolf, *op. cit.*, p.30.

2) *Ibid.*, p.32.

3) Bateson, *op. cit.*, p.320.

Structure can, at the most elementary level, be defined as "... the sum total of the elements that make up a work".¹⁾ Dramatic structure is not merely a mechanical combination of certain elements, however, and Shipley's concept of form seems to be more comprehensive: "... it may indicate a particular framework or patterned structure of a work."²⁾

The obviously significant word in this quotation is patterned, for the claim will be made that literary and more specifically dramatic structure is a matter of careful patterning of all the relevant component parts of the work in question, of all the diverging elements that go towards the expression of the ultimate meaning by the dramatist, of what he had in mind at the inception of the creation of the work of art.

What are the elements that are used in the patterned structure of a dramatic work, and in what way are they patterned into the coherent whole of a striking play?

There are no hard and fast rules to determine the

1) Shipley, J. Dictionary of World Literature, p.396.

2) Ibid., p.94.

structure of dramatic works. There is rather the moulding effect of use and convention upon material acceptable and known to both the playwright and his audience - there are thus certain accepted potential patterns which the dramatist is free to use in his creation of a new dramatic work.

Granville-Barker says:

"Though there may be no fixed laws of construction, yet a play can have beauty of form. Every artist feels after form and fine proportion, if for no other reason than that they make for clarity of expression ... It is a question of harmony mainly, of just proportions, significant emphasis, congruities and arresting contrasts, of an ultimate integrity."1)

This line of thought will be considered later on when the structure of comedy is examined in more detail.

Elder Olson's very concise statement of what drama is, forms a convenient point of departure in defining dramatic structure.

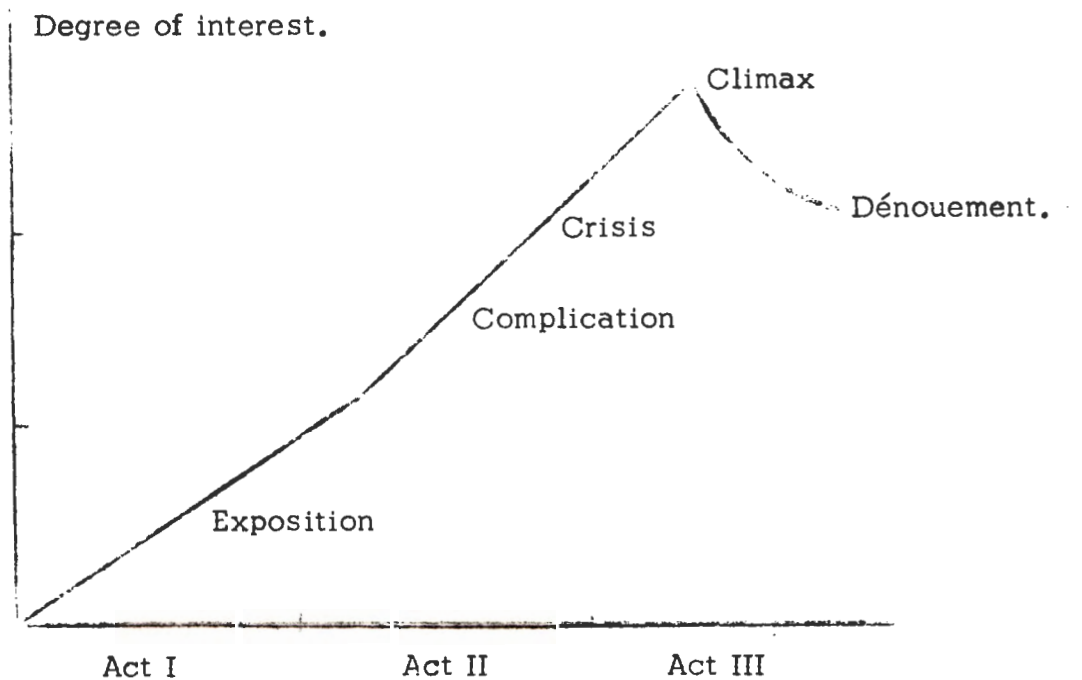
The first and most fundamental aspect of the total structure of a play is the plot-structure. This is the narrative part of the play and should be plausible and intriguing, for the narrative provides the framework, the pretext for everything that the playwright adds to his play.

1) Granville-Barker, H. On Dramatic Method, p.20.

The traditional elements of plot-structure are exposition, development, complication, crisis, climax and dénouement - and these are vital elements of the total structure, but rigid adherence to any pre-determined pattern cannot be enforced. The classical pattern of the "well-made play"¹⁾ does not suit all plays and should be applied with a great deal of caution.

After these bare outlines have been determined, a vast amount still needs to be filled in before the completed play assumes the rich and dense texture that makes it satisfying to the playgoer.

1)



"Well-made play"

Derived from J.L. Styan: *The Dramatic Experience*, p.73.

The next point that the dramatist will obviously have to consider is the grouping and patterning of action within the play and also within each scene. If he has contrived a good story - the first point of importance, as was mentioned above - he must now take great pains to present the story in as plausible a way as possible upon the stage, and also to present to the audience only the most relevant events, thus condensing actual time to time of convenience upon the stage.

Action in a play consists of conflicts or confrontations between characters. The playwright has to contrive a very careful scheme of action in order to effect these confrontations and thus to allow interpersonal relationships to develop to the fullest possible extent. (Even in modern existentialist drama, where, ostensibly, no contact is established, the playwright is still compelled to create situations where the lack of communication might be illustrated by the actions of the characters on stage at the time.) The dramatist thus has the task of creating fruitful encounters and of patterning his actions in such a way that the maximum effect will be achieved. The actions have to be planned in such a way that inevitability is effected. The dramatist wants his play to have a certain outcome, and this

outcome will only be plausible if enough situations are devised so that the climax will have been anticipated. In patterning action, the patterning of character is important too, for a sufficient number of confrontations have to be contrived between characters if the issues between them are to be resolved in a satisfactory way.

So far no consideration has been given to dramatic dialogue. Styan says: "Dialogue is the scaffolding inside which stage meanings are erected."¹⁾ Dialogue is the strongest animating force in a dramatic work, but to fulfil this requirement it also has to conform to certain dramatic demands.

In the first instance the language used by the dramatist has to suit his subject-matter. This prompted the Restoration playwright to use the witty and polished repartee which portrayed the mannerisms of his characters so strikingly, in preference to the more ponderous rhythms of Elizabethan blank verse.

In keeping with this, the playwright should also

1) Styan, J. L. The Elements of Drama, p. 48.

use his dialogue to advantage to create and maintain the tone or mood he wants to establish. In the bright and artificial world of Restoration comedy the hard and brittle tone of a scene could be shattered completely by language which was off-key in any particular scene.

One demand that can be made of dramatic dialogue is that it should be concentrated - this is in keeping with the nature of dramatic art.

"... dramatic speech, with its basis in ordinary conversation, is speech that has had a specific pressure put on it"¹⁾ - and this pressure is of economy, for dramatic dialogue cannot be allowed to wander and stray beyond the bounds of what is strictly necessary within the scope of the dramatic pattern. The words should go somewhere, there should be a specific dramatic purpose behind every utterance.

Once the playwright has achieved a fusion of subject-matter and the language he wishes to use, he is faced with the problem of differentiation of language (the language as spoken by different characters using the same idiom). This

1) Ibid., p.12.

can be done with equal facility in verse and in prose - although Shakespeare did resort to a marked distinction between verse and prose in order to indicate "caste". There is a strong contrast between the speech of Millamant and Lady Wishfort, although they are members of the same society and frequent the same places. Their idiom is the same, their individual attitude towards it varies significantly.

All these elements - or signals to the audience, as Styan¹⁾ calls them - will go towards the constitution of the final structural framework in which characterization and thematic and intellectual development can flourish.

The various dramatic elements can be described as the dramatic score²⁾ and the complex way in which they are put together can be seen as the orchestration of the parts. This is the process that finally gives the play its distinctive texture. The process by which these are put together is manifestly more than a mechanical one - it is a complicated and rewarding process of assimilation intended to imbue the end product with as much effect as possible. The playwright does not do this according to a fixed pattern, or

1) Styan, J.L. The Elements of Drama, p.2.

2) Ibid., p.3.

according to a set recipe, but he functions on an unconscious level, going about the process of creation quite unconsciously.¹⁾ Each playwright will put his own personal stamp on his play, even though he will have written a play in which the conventions of the theatre have been strictly adhered to. The process of putting together a play from all these elements does not concern the critic - he is concerned with the final dramatic effect that is the result of this.

3.3 Comic structure.

All the elements mentioned up to now are part of the total structure of any play. Yet when one comes to comedy in particular, there are additional considerations to be borne in mind. A further set of conventions seems to operate, and it dictates the critic's approach to a comedy in particular. These other conventions derive from the nature of the genre, and will now be discussed.

In looking at a comedy, one finds that it is essentially a form of dramatic art that has to do with the social behaviour of human beings. Comedy thus concerns itself with men

1) Granville-Barker, H. On Dramatic Method, p.14-15.

"There must be a certain order of things involved, but these will be found not to be the laws of playmaking, but only the natural laws of the theatre . . . an artist must so master his medium that it will be second nature to him."

and women in their social relationships. It is essential at this stage to take a look at the nature of the comic, as the traditional theme of comedy is important in determining the structure of a comedy.

Bergson declares that "... the first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human"¹⁾, and he contends further that "comedy begins, in fact, with what might be called a growing callousness to social life".²⁾ This callousness to social life leads eventually to rigidity³⁾ in human interaction and this in turn creates incongruity, which is a fundamental part of the comic attitude.

Freud also sees the comic as a manifestation of a large measure of unexpectedness and incongruity within the social relationships of people:

"The comical appears primarily as an unintentional discovery in the social relations of human beings."⁴⁾

Northrop Frye makes a distinction between comedy and tragedy by asserting that in all New Comedy there is a social as well as an individual theme - whereas in tragedy the individual theme might be all that is required to fulfil the conflict:

1) Bergson, Henri. Laughter (In Comedy, Martin Felheim, Ed.) p.214.

2) Ibid, p.214.

3) This is part of Bergson's basic conception of comedy.

4) Freud, S. Wit and its Relationship to the Unconscious, (In Comedy, M. Felheim, Ed.) p. 231.

"In all good New Comedy there is a social as well as an individual theme which must be sought in the general atmosphere of reconciliation that makes the final marriage possible. As the hero gets closer to the heroine and opposition is overcome, all the right-thinking people come over to his side. Thus a new social unit is formed on the stage, and the moment this unit crystallizes is the moment of the comic resolution. In the last scene, when the dramatist tries to get all his characters on the stage at once, the audience witnesses the birth of a renewed sense of social integration."¹⁾

He can thus conclude:

"The essential comic resolution, therefore, is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation."²⁾

The action of a comedy thus basically consists of the movement towards this resolution. This resolution then contributes substantially to the meaning expressed by the playwright. Susanne Langer relates this to the very basis of life:

"Comedy is an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings or initiations. For it expresses the elementary strains and resolutions of animate nature; it is an image of human vitality, holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence."³⁾

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- 1) Frye, N. The Argument of Comedy, (In Comedy, Felheim, Ed.) p.237.
 - 2) Ibid., p.238.
 - 3) Langer, Susanne. The Great Dramatic Forms, (In Comedy, Felheim, Ed.) p.244.

Comedy is thus concerned with the fundamental principles of life - with human beings in the most elemental relationships towards each other. The traditional pattern of a comedy is of such a nature that there is a movement if not towards marriage, at least towards some relationship being effected by the hero and heroine. In high comedy they find each other, if only after they have gone through a great many vicissitudes, and after many obstacles have been overcome. One essential distinction between comedy and tragedy can be shown at this level - in a tragedy the protagonist would not be allowed to overcome the obstacles in his way but would be forced to succumb to forces outside his control. It is the essence of a comedy that he is allowed to overcome and resolve his difficulties. The comic is contrived when the main characters are faced with many ostensibly insurmountable problems on this journey towards each other. The process of achieving solutions to these problems is often such that it evokes a great deal of hilarity in the audience. Incongruities abound, and the hero and heroine can both be the butt of mirth, but their redemption is inherent in the nature of the comedy and they emerge unscathed and triumphant at the end of the play.

What emerges from a look at the comic is that it is a form of dramatic art concerned with human beings in their social interrelatedness. The main action in a comedy usually centres on a man and a woman who are finally allowed to come to each other with all difficulties resolved. The plot of a comedy would thus basically resolve around two such characters and would lead ultimately to their happy union. Subsidiary plots may abound, but this main action serves as the cohesive factor of the structure of the whole play. This movement towards marriage (the archetypal social relationship) forms the basic pattern for a comedy, and thus the triumphant characters at the end of a comedy are the lovers - their triumph **arises inevitably from the development** throughout the comedy of a new social unit. The meaning of a comedy is thus ultimately concerned with the creation of this new unit, and this meaning arises from the way in which the comedy is constructed to allow this triumph.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

4.1 Historical background.

The Way of the World was produced for the first time in 1700. This was 40 years after the restoration of Charles II to the throne of England, and a great many changes had taken place in England from the start of Charles' reign, through the brief, discordant reign of James II and finally the reign of William of Orange.

When Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, the people of England welcomed him with open arms. Leaderless since Cromwell's son had stepped down only months after assuming control of the country, they felt the need to have a monarch in the country once more. In the latter part of Cromwell's reign, the form of government had been very like a monarchy, for the right of succession by birth to the position of Lord Protector had been established.

When Charles II returned from his exile in Italy, and court life was re-established, a new air of gaiety

settled on the capital - as far as the nobles were concerned, at least. Freed from the puritanical strictures of Cromwellian England, the people flung traditional moral concepts overboard and an era of great licence started - among the people connected with the Royal Court.

In contrast to the previous two decades when the Puritan Cromwell had closed down all the theatres for fear of moral corruption, there was now ample patronage of the theatre. Charles II was not called the "Merry Monarch" for nothing, and the theatres flourished under his unstinting patronage.

The new social climate was vividly reflected in the new comedy that soon became popular. What was to develop ultimately into the exquisite comedy of manners went through a most unfortunate stage of vulgar bawdiness which incurred the wrath of the churchmen, as the Collier controversy will confirm. All this vulgarity, this licentiousness, was, of course, greatly enjoyed by the people who thronged to the theatre.

In contrast to the age of Shakespeare, when all the populace flocked to the theatre, support of the new playhouse was largely restricted to the gentry. One gathers, too, that it was not quite the thing for a woman to go to the theatre, as some references in The Way of the World indicate.

A popular innovation in the Restoration theatre was the use for the first time of actresses to portray feminine characters. Shakespeare had been forced to use boys in these roles - in Restoration times the names of Nell Gwynne and Anne Bracegirdle were very well-known. In the case of Nell Gwynne there was the added notoriety of her being the mistress of the King. All these things added a great deal of incentive to patronage of the theatre, and the playwrights were quick to see and to exploit these advantages.

This state of affairs went on up to the death of Charles II in 1685, and even after the accession of James II. The Monmouth rebellion in 1688 brought about a great change. A new air of dignity pervaded the Royal Court and the playwrights had to seek elsewhere for patronage. This was still forthcoming from rich noblemen, but the social climate was beginning to change, and the theatres became the last strongholds of the wits and fops who had frequented the Court during the preceding reign.

Congreve's plays were written during the reign of William and Mary, and his circumstances were therefore substantially different from those of his predecessors. His work is also to a large extent free of the

licentiousness and bawdiness (often tasteless vulgarity) of the earlier Restoration playwrights. He was presumably not even guilty of the transgressions Collier imputed to the playwrights in his violent indictment in 1698.

The Way of the World, then, is not so much a typical Restoration play as a summation of the comedy of manners, or as one critic has put it, the quintessence of the comedy of manners¹⁾, as presented in England during the preceding four decades. Congreve's world was at once more settled and more sober, although the essential pattern of social behaviour had not changed altogether yet.

Within this society Congreve can present Mirabell as the ideal gentleman:

"... a gentleman beyond reproach - exquisitely well-bred, easy and affable in conversation, dignified and composed in every crisis and practised in the knowledge of the world."²⁾

(This was not the way Collier regarded the usual rake-hero of the Restoration comedy, but Mirabell is an altogether more refined man than the usual hero.) The world

1) P.A.W. Collins. In The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. IV.

2) Gagen, J. Congreve's Mirabell and the Ideal of the Gentleman.

in which the characters portrayed in Congreve's comedies move, is not the world of the "... elemental passions. It is an enclosure surrounded by the four walls of the drawing-room. Ladies and gentlemen go through their figures with their tongues to the measure dictated by common sense as precisely as they dance the minuet with their feet; but the image has only a superficial rightness"¹⁾ - and the superficial rightness resides in the fact that while people are severely restricted by all kinds of social codes as to behaviour, they nevertheless feel strongly, and desire just as strongly, to make these feelings known. This always has to happen within the confines of the social framework, and it is in this that Congreve's mastery lies in his last play. He sets his characters within the social framework as it exists, and then, by patterning the structure of action and speech, he creates deeper and more significant meaning.

These were the social conventions within which Congreve wrote. Besides these, he also inherited a number of theatrical conventions from his dramatic predecessors.

The round, roofless Elizabethan playhouse, with its lack of fittings and ^{its} intimate apron stage, had given way to

1) Woolf, Virginia. The Moment, p.33.

an indoor theatre in which a proscenium arch appeared over the stage, although some of the stage still extended in front of the enclosed stage area. There was now a space at the back of the stage which demanded scenery. No curtains were used as yet, and both stage and auditorium were lit by candles. This new theatre was usually quite small¹⁾, and this made for the preservation of some degree of intimacy in the theatre. The stage which still extended some distance into the auditorium allowed asides, which were frequently used by these playwrights, to be effective.

This was an intimate theatre in another sense too - all the patrons came from the same social milieu, and so the themes of the plays would be intelligible to all of them - they would not find it necessary, as Sir Willfull did, to learn the "lingo" of the civilized world first. The racy expressions used by the playwrights would doubtlessly have delighted them more than they delight modern audiences, because these expressions would have been more accessible, and would have had a greater immediacy for them.

1) A theatre such as Sir Christopher Wren's design for Drury Lane. (1674.)

4.2 Analysis.

A scene-by-scene analysis will now follow, with a recapitulation of important issues at the end, and an assessment of the contribution of these towards the ultimate meaning of the play.

Congreve divided his play into five acts¹⁾, but made no formal subdivision into scenes. In speaking of a scene-by-scene analysis it is therefore necessary to qualify by saying that a new scene begins whenever a new character or group of characters appears on the stage. The focal point is usually transferred immediately, and this focusses the attention upon a new situation at once.

The action of the play is confined to three locales - a chocolate-house, St. James's Park and a room in Lady Wishfort's house. This is structurally important, too - within the conventional society of the time, it was quite fitting that gentlemen should be found in the chocolate-house and that the ladies should make their appearance along the walks in the Park. When the action becomes more concentrated it is confined to Lady Wishfort's house, and this

1) References to the text: The text used for the analysis is the annotated version in *Incognita and The Way of the World*, edited by Norman Jeffares.

simplicity of setting is quite important to the spectator in view of the increasing complexity of the plot. It is important to have a stable and unchanging background.

The opening scene of the play is set in a chocolate-house, and the first two characters to be observed are Mirabell and Fainall, who have just completed a game of cards. At once the tone is set - these are two of the gentlemen of leisure typical of the age, who are indulging in one of the usual pastimes. Mirabell emerges as the loser, and from the first Congreve's gift for characterization is evident. Fainall upbraids Mirabell for his offer to go on playing even while not caring whether he won or not:

"... the coldness of a losing Gamester lessens
~~and~~ the Pleasure of the Winner: I'd no more play
with a man that slighted his ill Fortune, than
I'd make Love to a woman who undervalued the
loss of her Reputation." ¹⁾

This at once marks Fainall as a man of the Town - experienced, sophisticated and more than a little cynical. Mirabell's dry and ironic comment sets him apart somewhat from Fainall, even though they are superficially very similar:

1) Act I, l. 8-10.

"You have a Taste extreamly delicate, and are for refining your Pleasures."¹⁾

Mirabell shows himself to be manifestly out of humour by this curt remark, and Fainall comments upon it at once. This displays Congreve's flair for exposition, for in Mirabell's explanation of the reasons for his irritation one is introduced to all the important characters, and presented with vivid descriptions of them, the accuracy of which astounds one when the "originals" finally arrive upon the scene. One is thus prepared for the entrance of a character long beforehand, and this facilitates the process of placing him.

The first character mentioned is Millamant, who, one at once realizes, is linked romantically with Mirabell. Fainall puts his finger on the problem at once when he asks whether a coxcomb was well received by Millamant while Mirabell was also in the room, and this is enough to cause Mirabell to explode at once.

It will appear that Millamant constantly teases Mirabell - in the sense that she provokes and infuriates him

1) Act I, 1. 10.

by her seemingly affected ways. She does, however, know when to stop - usually just before his temper snaps. The very fact that she receives a coxcomb well points to "teasing", for it is revealed later that the one point where Mirabell and Millamant are heartily in accord is in their detestation of people of low or deficient wit. This pattern of behaviour is established from the very first, and is continued throughout, with the significant difference that the teasing style of conversation between Millamant and Mirabell becomes more and more ironic, and assumes more and deeper undertones as they sound each other out on the matter of marriage.

Lady Wishfort is the next person to be introduced in the general picture Fainall draws of the Cabal-nights held by the women - ("... where they come together like the Coroner's Inquest, to sit upon the murder'd Reputations of the Week")¹⁾. Two more characters are also mentioned and alluded to in very cutting terms - Petulant and Witwoud. They were both enrolled in the Cabal - after a motion had been passed that one member of the male sex would be allowed for the sake of propriety.

Lady Wishfort is mockingly described by Mirabell in the terms that one has now come to expect of him. Mirabell

1) Act I, 1.51.

laughingly says that she "... declares for a Friend and Ratafia; and let Posterity shift for itself, she'll breed no more".¹⁾ Implicit in this mocking comment is all the irony connected with Lady Wishfort. She is all in favour of a friend (a female one) and Ratafia (cherry-brandy, which the lady consumes in private) - and the callous attitude towards the increase of the population that she pretends to adopt, expresses more poignantly than anything else her sense of encroaching old age. This is illuminated further by Petulant in a much coarser vein when he remarks upon the old aunt who "... loves Catterwauling better than a Conventicle".²⁾ Lady Wishfort is thus revealed very unequivocally as being less than subtle in her relationships towards men. (When one finally meets Lady Wishfort, the picture that has been created is shown to be exact.) A contrast which is strongly accentuated even at this early stage is the contrast between the characters of Mirabell and Petulant as they emerge from this description of Lady Wishfort. Mirabell's comment has a quality of dry humour, while Petulant's has the bawdiness of a vulgar mind. The sharply

1) Act I, 1.59.

2) Act I, 1. 361.

contrasting tone to be found in their respective utterances is typical of the two men themselves, and will be developed further as the play proceeds.

One more introduction is effected by this conversation between the two men - that of Mrs. Marwood. From Fainall's reaction one gathers that everything is not altogether innocent in his dealings with the lady, as is shown by his hasty departure when Mirabell seems in danger of uncovering something he would prefer not to reveal.

The tone, which has threatened to become too heavy during the latter part of this conversation, now suddenly changes again with the pert exchange between Mirabell and the serving-girl, Betty. The servant, whom she ushers in, delivers a speech full of highly sensual images which provides some broad comedy through its sheer earthiness, and contrives a sharp variation in tone. This scene provides another step forward in the exposition of the play, even though one learns little beyond the fact that two servants have got married and that Mirabell is both pleased and amused by it.

Fainall's return signifies the start of another scene, and, after the diversion, a return to the conversation centring on Town life, wives and mistresses. Fainall's cynical attitude provides a foil for Mirabell's rueful

admission that he is in love with Millamant in spite of her faults. He reveals real insight when he says:

"They are now grown as familiar to me as my own Frailties; and in all probability in a little time longer I shall like them as well."1)

Fainall's attitude that marriage is a cure for this weakness is based on the fact of his being married - and one is reminded again of the difference between these two men who are superficially so very similar. Fainall's attitude represents the prevailing attitude towards matrimony - the one against which Millamant fights to desperately in the proviso scene - the idea that consummation means the end of love and could be regarded as the signal for the start of extra-marital intrigues.

The sudden gravity of tone is relieved by the entrance of a messenger, and this is once more the signal for a change of tone and some inspired commentary on the private foibles of the would-be wits, Petulant and Witwoud, and also acts as the introduction of Sir Willfull Witwoud. Sir Willfull emerges as the typical buffoon of the Restoration comedy - the country Squire - and becomes the butt for

1) Act I, l. 150-151.

teasing by both Mirabell and Millamant later on. He is very naive (despite the fact that he is already forty), and he means to travel, a fact which draws many hilarious comments from both Fainall and Mirabell.¹⁾

When they have completed their verbal picture of Witwoud, the original appears. He is best summed up by Mirabell:

"... he is not Exceptionous, for he so passionately affects the Reputation of understanding Raillery; that he will construe an Affront into a Jest, and call downright Rudeness and ill Language, Satire and Fire."²⁾

Mirabell's judgment on this "worthy" is soon proved true, for when Witwoud laments the coming of his brother ("A Fool") and hastens to assure the others that he is only a half-brother, Mirabell cannot resist a dig:

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- 1) Fainall: He comes to Town in order to Equip himself for Travel.
Mirabell: For Travel! Why, the Man that I mean is above Forty.
Fainall: No matter for that: 'tis for the Honour of England, that all Europe should know that we have Blockheads of all Ages.
Mirabell: I wonder there is not an Act of Parliament to save the Credit of the Nation, and prohibit the Exportation of Fools.

(Act I, 1. 13-23.)

- 2) Act I, 1. 199.

"Then 'tis possible he may be but half a Fool." ¹⁾

Witwoud loudly applauds this - even though it must have stung - and quickly changes the topic. The rest of this scene serves as an illustration of Mirabell's detestation of fools - something which will be echoed in Millamant's scenes with the fools. Mirabell's detestation is expressed in barbed remarks aimed at these two men, and from these unfortunate encounters the two emerge with every intellectual pretence stripped from them. They have now been firmly placed in the category of fools. Witwoud is directly characterized by his uncontrolled storm of "sympathetic" abuse on the head of the luckless Petulant. Petulant is indirectly characterized through Witwoud's malice. Mirabell's opening comment, in reply to Witwoud's hackneyed "despair":

"Afford me your Compassion, my Dears; pity me,
Fainall, Mirabell, pity me",

is suddenly startlingly true:

"I do from my soul." ²⁾

1) Act I, 1.224.

2) Act I, 1.202-203.

Petulant's appearance signals the start of another hilarious scene, with Witwoud and Petulant being mercilessly baited by both Mirabell and Fainall. Petulant and Witwoud are continually tearing at each other, though superficially they seem to be friends. Their personal insults and the really unforgiveable slights they sling at each other serve as a parody of the highly complex and stylized teasing that serves as conversation between Mirabell and Millamant. Their apparent friendship serves as a contrast to the enduring relationship between Mirabell and Millamant. The lovers use social conventions and practices as a means to an end highly desired by both of them - to find an enduring relationship based on real values. Petulant and Witwoud use social conventions to fill the void where their finer sensibilities should have been, but unfortunately are not.

Mirabell uses both these men ruthlessly to secure the information he wants about Lady Wishfort's arrangements for her niece's marriage - and then he cuts them to ribbons with a satire they are not subtle enough to counter if they noticed it in the first place. The last part of the act provides some scintillating farce - in a series of delicately barbed digs at Petulant which can perhaps best be described as "fool-baiting". On stage this should be very effective, and should serve to high-light the contrast between the

characters that Congreve intended - the utter and painful contrast between a Witwoud and a Truewit. This is important too in the sense that Mirabell can now legitimately be regarded as the pivot on which the play turns. He is evidently the author's mouthpiece in the sense that he embodies the ideal of the gentleman.

When he has shaken off the two fools, Mirabell can give vent to his wrath, which he would not do in front of them - he ends the act on a note that can be regarded as "sententious"¹⁾ but which should rather be seen as a comment on the whole act and on the practice of fools, and which underlines the basic impression made in the first act:

"Where Modesty's ill Manners, 'tis but fit
That Impudence and Malice pass for Wit."2)

In retrospect this act can be seen to have effected all the basic introductions - although sometimes at a slightly bewildering pace. One emerges after seeing this act, however, with a clear impression of this world peopled by wits and fools, with a clear impression of the dominant character, Mirabell, and with a good idea of at least what new characters to expect, especially as far as Millamant, Lady Wishfort and Sir Willfull are concerned.

1) Cf. Act II, 1.427.

2) Act I, 1. 481-482.

Some indication of an intrigue has also been given in the scene with the servant. Lastly, at the end of the act, everybody is preparing to go to the Mall to walk, and this provides a smooth transition to the second act where the major female characters will be introduced, with the notable exception of Lady Wishfort.

The tonal quality of the scenes up to now has not been sharply differentiated, although it has been tending to the bawdy, raucous and vulgar side in the scenes with the servant and Petulant and Witwoud. The variation in tonal quality is of increasing importance as the play proceeds, and will ultimately be one of the main determinants of the meaning attributed to the play. The scenes between Mirabell and Millamant will differ with increasing emphasis from those between the other characters. The Mirabell-Millamant scenes will be more stylized and elegant, as befits their stature as the main characters in this comedy of manners.

The second act opens in St James's Park. The scene has now shifted from the male world of the chocolate-house to the Park, frequented by all the inhabitants of this fashionable world.

Mrs Fainall and Mrs Marwood appear. Both have been hinted at in the previous act - and there is also the

indication that there is a relationship between Fainall and Mrs Marwood which should be kept in account and which would seem to belie the apparent innocence of their meetings in public.

These two women, who profess to be friends, are having a discussion on the subject of the dastardliness of the male sex. They both express their supreme disgust with the members of the sex, although Mrs Marwood can certainly be regarded as less than sincere in her protestation that she is "testing" her friend when she professes herself "a Libertine".¹⁾ What is significant about this scene is that these two women have vastly different reasons for expressing an aversion to men. As will be made clear in the fifth act, Mrs Fainall (daughter to Lady Wishfort) was brought up to flinch from the very sight of men and ultimately to detest them. This was apparently Lady Wishfort's only solution to the problem of how to instil a sense of maidenly modesty in her daughter (a quality she herself was remarkably short of). Quite apart from what could be

1) Marwood: I join with you; what I have said
 has been to try you.

 Mrs Fainall: Is it possible? Dost thou hate
 those Vipers Men?

Act II, l. 39-40.

made of this by Freudian psychologists, it is quite unnatural within the sphere of true comedy. In true comedy the main characters effect a marriage which is presumed to be potentially happy. To do this, a healthy relationship between the sexes should be assumed. These two women reveal an attitude that is a negation of all this, and therefore of the comic spirit too. They are therefore quite naturally not triumphant within the sphere of the comedy.

Whereas Mrs Fainall may be seen to hold to this opinion because she is ultimately a victim of upbringing, Mrs Marwood creates the impression of being a direct antagonist to the comic ideal. The ideal heroine of a comedy will have a positive attitude towards life and towards men and will also bring an attitude of honesty and integrity to bear on all her actions. Marwood is at the opposite end of the scale from Millamant. Marwood, who is in reality having an affair with Fainall, dissembles about her feelings towards men and in so doing strengthens the impression that everything about her is false and untrustworthy. This contrast adds to the general pattern of contrast within the play. Marwood's avowal that she would marry for the sake only of making unhappy a chosen victim of the male sex is not as false as she might pretend to herself, as Mrs Fainall

finds some discrepancy between her avowal of hatred and her apparent agitation at the mention of Mirabell's name. A threatening crisis is averted by the arrival of Mirabell and Fainall.

Congreve's technique of deliberate juxtaposition of contrasting qualities is brought into play again. Fainall and Mrs Fainall greet each other in a sickeningly sweet manner - which is another instance of an empty pretence that induces just the effect Congreve intended - an effect of emptiness and a feeling almost of tangible hatred passing between the two caught in wedlock, which seems to them an unbearable and inescapable prison.

Congreve then very adroitly sets the stage to strengthen the impression he has already created from the first. Mrs Fainall and Mirabell move off together, ostensibly to mull over some pleasant bit of gossip, and Fainall and Marwood are left together. This grouping is immediately effective, and one is therefore not surprised when it turns out that there is more than meets the eye in both cases. Mirabell's affair with Mrs Fainall has ceased to exist, but the affair between Fainall and Mrs Marwood still exists in all its tawdry reality. Fainall accuses his mistress of being in love with Mirabell, and he expresses his conviction that she is now dissembling her true feelings. Mrs Marwood,

stung and in angry retaliation, threatens to make public the affair between them. This would mean the destruction of all Fainall's financial hopes, and he quickly patches up the affair again. They hastily move away when Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall reappear.

One relationship is now quite clear to the audience - that of Fainall and Marwood. The reason why Mrs Fainall married a man whom she absolutely detests is still not clear - and her apparent tender regard for Mirabell is puzzling too. These little mysteries are dispelled by the discussion they have when they meet. It appears that Mrs Fainall married Fainall to save her reputation after she had had an affair with Mirabell. She was a widow at the time, and apparently, for that very reason, fair game. It is perhaps necessary to mention at this stage that Mirabell's morality was not regarded as defective within the sphere of Restoration comedy. It was rather to his credit that he should help a discarded mistress to find a husband to bear the blame of their amorous dalliance - if there was any blame to bear.

Mirabell still holds her in enough regard to make her "Privy to my whole Design"¹⁾ by telling her everything about his proposed plot to secure Millamant in marriage - with

1) Act II, 1.258.

her fortune intact. It appears that he wants to plant a bogus nobleman (his servant Waitwell is to masquerade as Sir Rowland) on Lady Wishfort. He has full confidence that her sensual appetites will make her immediately amenable to a proposal of marriage and he wishes to incur her eternal gratitude by seeming to unmask the imposter betimes and releasing her from an embarrassing position. Mirabell's natural shrewdness makes him safeguard his own position by marrying off the servant to a servant-girl beforehand.

The reason for this tortuous intrigue is that Millamant's fortune is in trust with Lady Wishfort, and may only be bestowed if Millamant marries with the full approbation of her aunt. This seems highly unlikely, as the lady has suffered in an affair with Mirabell, for whom she cherishes a violent though unrequited passion. It seems as if Congreve's dictum, presented in the earlier The Mourning Bride

"Heaven has no rage, like love to hatred turned,
Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorned"¹⁾

is still very applicable.

A further pointer to future action emerges when it becomes clear that Lady Wishfort desires a marriage between Millamant and Sir Willfull - which can only be construed as further evidence of her lack of insight in

1) The Mourning Bride, Act III, sc. viii, 1.42-43.

attempting to pair off the delicately intellectual Millamant with the rustic and uncouth Sir Willfull.

This is the background created up to the time when Millamant makes her triumphant entrance. One now knows all the important characters except Millamant and Lady Wishfort, and the background of the intrigue has been sketched.

Millamant's entrance is indeed triumphant. Her advent has been hinted at so often in the preceding scenes that one is quite impatient to see this girl who has won the heart of the redoubtable Mirabell. Mirabell announces her arrival with a flourish (which is as ironical as anything he says):

"Here she comes Ifaith full Sail, with her fan spread out, and a shoal of Fools for Tenders" ¹⁾ His apparently cool and ironical hailing of his mistress is the direct opposite of the mawkish sentimentality expressed by Fainall in his greeting of his wife. ²⁾ Mirabell's greeting, in spite of the quality of unconcern he strives to give it, expresses his real feelings, which can be regarded as the

1) Act II, 1. 299.

2) Fainall: My Dear.
Mrs Fainall: My soul
Act II, 1. 79-80.

direct opposite of the gushing greeting by the hypocritical Fainall.

Mirabell's image is taken up and developed by
Mrs Fainall:

"I see but one poor empty Sculler; and he
tows her Woman after him." 1)

This is, of course, another barb aimed at Witwoud.

Mirabell's first words contain an ironic reference
to Millamant's usual retinue, which is absent today:

"You us'd to have the Beau-mond Throng after you;
and a Flock of gay fine Perukes hovering around you," 2)
and Millamant shows herself to be charmingly aware of her
usual affectation when she archly replies:

"O I have deny'd my self Airs today ... " 3) and then
immediately snaps at Witwoud who is interjecting remarks
into the conversation which he regards as extremely witty.
Millamant, roused by his foolishness, resorts to
fool-baiting with as much zest as Mirabell has done - and
this at once puts her on a par with Mirabell. Mincing,
Millamant's woman, is introduced, and she is a delicious

1) Act II, 1. 300.

2) Act II, 1. 307.

3) Act II, 1. 310.

caricature. Her affected way of speech, coupled with her obvious servant's mentality, provides a great deal of fun.

Millamant now proceeds to tease Mirabell and at once another point of contrast with Mrs Marwood emerges. Millamant ostensibly revels in having caused pain to Mirabell by her obvious tolerance of the fools the previous night - but her real sensibility must have revealed itself to Mirabell, for he sees through her pretence of cruelty.¹⁾ In a spirited exchange on who bestows beauty on whom and in whose power it is to create a lover, Mirabell and Millamant are frequently interrupted by Witwoud who insists on firing off fatuous remarks. When Mrs Fainall draws him off, the two lovers get a chance to sound each other out, and they do so in a scene which seems to be a dress rehearsal for the proviso scene. In doing this they also provide some unexcelled high comedy. The tone of this scene is as breathless and exhilarating as Millamant herself - and there is a brittle touch of apprehension hovering around the edges, threatening to shatter this fragile world of convention in which they are hiding preparatory to

1) Mirabell: "You would affect a Cruelty which is not in your Nature; your true Vanity is in the Power of pleasing."

throwing themselves on each other's mercy in a world full of hypocrisy and baseness. A number of issues touched upon here will be looked at more fully when the proviso scene is analysed.

Millamant seems to be provoking Mirabell to the utmost at the end of this confrontation - but just as one gets the impression that she hasn't far to go to provoke him too far, she stops her teasing, and she seems to be gaining certainty about Mirabell's feelings towards her. By the time they come to the proviso scene they have both attained greater poise. This hesitant attitude can be seen as a deliberate structural device - Millamant's caution and deliberation can be seen as the direct opposite of the feverish and pathetic haste with which Lady Wishfort in the following acts seems to capitulate to the false importunities of the supposed Sir Rowland.

Millamant leaves like a whirlwind - leaving Mirabell gasping, and cursing himself for being so deeply in love with such a maddening woman. Millamant's: "What would you give, that you could help loving me?" must still be ringing in his ears - in the light of his very inadequate and very revealing reply: "I would give Something that you did not know I could not help it!"

To balance the weight of the emotional tension of the previous scene, Waitwell and his espoused Foible appear. At once one is plunged into some of the bawdiness which Congreve applies unflinchingly and yet very judiciously whenever it is necessary to lighten the tone of any scene. Against Foible's unrelieved embarrassment Waitwell appears smirkingly complacent. In reply to Mirabell's jocularly ironic "Excellent, Foible! Matrimony has made you eloquent in love," Waitwell's considered "I think she has profited, Sir. I think so," provides the broadest humour of this kind in the play.

The narrative importance of this scene is that one is now aware of the progress of Mirabell's intrigue. There is a hint of a complication in the smooth development when Foible gets into a panic at the sight of Mrs Marwood, who might wonder at what business a servant can have with Mirabell - and, as it emerges later, Foible's fears are well-grounded. Waitwell meanwhile ruefully contemplates his demotion after the closing of the affair to being plain Waitwell again. His closing comment is an ironic reference to the social structure, the way of the world, as it appears to a servant:

"Ay there's my Grief, that's the sad Change of Life;
To lose my Title, and yet keep my Wife."1)

The second act is important by reason of the introduction of Millamant, the heroine. She is confronted by Mirabell, and from this encounter one gains a preliminary impression of the enduring relationship that is about to develop between her and Mirabell.

Thus, after creating a generalized background in the first act, Congreve moves on to special relationships in the second. One has now seen Mirabell in society and in conversation with the woman he loves - he is emerging more and more clearly as a distinctive and distinguished character. Millamant seems a very real person, even on the relatively slight acquaintance one has made up to now. Her very posturing and affectation reveal much of her essential femininity. Her relationship with Mirabell has been tested against the one between Fainall and Mrs Fainall and also against the one between Fainall and Mrs Marwood. What now remains is to set it off against the false and base one of Fainall and his mistress and

1) Closing couplet of Act II.

the completely bogus one of Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland. Its triumphant emergence as the most enduring at the end of the action augurs well for her and Mirabell's future, and illustrates Congreve's attitude towards love and marriage more than adequately.

The serious issues are now set aside for a while, and a great deal of diversion is created by the introduction of "... her Aunt, your Wife's Mother, my Evil Genius; or to sum up all in her own name, my old Lady Wishfort ..."¹⁾. For sheer foolery and highly entertaining buffoonery this and some of the following scenes are supreme - but there is always the dark edge, the little voice nibbling at the edge of the conscience, that some of this is pathetic and to be pitied rather than to be ridiculed. This is where Congreve's essential humanity emerges, and where he is set aside from the playwright who merely recreates manners upon the stage.

Act III opens on a hilarious note. Lady Wishfort (still in "Dishabillè"²⁾) is berating her maid, Peg, for not being an adequate stand-in for the very absent Foible. Peg obviously knows her lady and she is not in the least perturbed

1) Act I, 1. 28.

2) Act III, 1. 40.

by all the rantings and ravings. Lady Wishfort fumes on, and when she finds that her rouge has been locked up and the key taken by Foible, she needs no more pretexts to ask Peg to produce the bottle of something to sustain her. Her sarcastic remarks about the size of the tumbler Peg brings in are very revealing as to the extent of her private tippling - and they also underline some of the pathos one experiences in looking behind the cracked mask of "White Vernish". One has heard so much about the old lady up to now that her actual appearance serves merely as confirmation of the impression one has already formed. The tone of this scene is definitely low - that is, it is of the same earthy quality observed earlier in the scenes with the servants and with the fops. It is in direct contrast to the controlled elegance of the scenes between Mirabell and Millamant.

The intrigue develops when Marwood appears in time to inform Lady Wishfort of Foible's meeting in the park with Mirabell - Marwood is now firmly established as a trouble-maker. There is a heightening of tension when it is suggested that Mirabell's plot may be detected prematurely, but Foible's native wit comes into the play. When faced with the evidence, she pretends that Mirabell detained

her on the sole pretext of finding out something about Lady Wishfort from her. She inflames the old Lady's temper to such an extent that Lady Wishfort is now ready to contract herself to Sir Rowland as soon as he appears, and this of course would suit Mirabell most admirably. Foible grows splendidly inventive when she enumerates all the supposed slights Mirabell has made her endure (her native wit no doubt somewhat sharpened by the thought of the generous offer Mirabell made for the success of the plot) and Lady Wishfort flies into her most splendid rage so far - indulging uninhibitedly in "boudoir Billingsgate":

"Audacious Villain! handle me, wou'd he durst - Frippery? old Frippery! Was there ever such a foul-mouth'd Fellow? I'll be marry'd to Morrow, I'll be contracted to Night." ¹⁾

This outburst does have the regrettable effect of spilling Lady Wishfort's carefully applied white varnish, and while Foible repairs the damage, she sits in a horrible travesty of Millamant's coquetry, and tries to calculate the best approach to captivate Sir Rowland at once:

1) Act III, 1. 53.

"A Swimmingness in the Eyes - Yes, I'll look so - My Niece affects it but she wants Features. Is Sir Rowland handsome?"¹⁾

She is visibly relieved when Foible remarks upon Sir Rowland's supposed importunities - she will thus be spared the indignity of taking the initiative, even though nothing will shake her determination to have the man at all costs.

This scene serves as a foil to the love-scenes of Mirabell and Millamant. The contrast is so utterly striking, the simpering coyness of Lady Wishfort such a scathing comment by Congreve on pretence and false baseness that the impact is very strong. The almost turgid tone of this scene forms a dark background for the bright and clear quality of the encounters between Mirabell and Millamant.

Congreve is careful not to let the tone darken too much, however, and now provides some brisk intrigue to further the story. Mrs Marwood is still in the small room adjoining Lady Wishfort's chamber where she was consigned when Foible appeared. She now eavesdrops on a conversation between Foible and Mrs Fainall in which the whole intrigue, so carefully planned by Mirabell, is revealed. When she

1) Act III, 1.110 ff.

appears on stage after the others have left, her satisfaction at having been given a weapon with which to hit at Mrs Fainall, Mirabell and Millamant knows no bounds. Her spite and disillusionment with men is further illustrated. Her allusion to a man as a creature who should only have a "Head and Horns" (the traditional symbols of cuckoldry) places her at once at the farthest remove from the real woman, the one who has a legitimate place in high comedy. Mrs Marwood lurks in the shadows while Millamant sparkles in the light, and Lady Wishfort hovers in the indeterminate area between the two extremes. She is not yet consigned to darkness. Mrs Marwood has also been given an additional weapon against Mrs Fainall - with the universal intimate knowledge of domestic servants, Foible is already fully informed about the affair between Mrs Fainall and Mirabell, and she reveals this fact, to the unholy glee of the hidden Mrs Marwood. What she does not reveal at this stage is the fact that she also knows of the affair between Fainall and Marwood - and so Mirabell will ultimately be able to turn the tables on both Fainall and Marwood.

The contrast between Marwood and Millamant is brought home startingly by the direct confrontation between the two women. Marwood's spite seems to know no

bounds¹⁾, and Millamant, while trying to cope with the situation in her usual light-hearted way (little knowing that the spite is activated by the fact that she is Mirabell's chosen wife) is puzzled but soon stung enough to retort sharply.²⁾ Her usual command of herself has deserted her to the extent that she falls into violent agitation - which is noted with malicious enjoyment by Marwood, who also seems to relish the thought that Millamant's involvement with Mirabell will soon be broken up.

Witwoud and Petulant now appear and provide some broad foolery to break the tension that has suddenly developed, and to prepare for the entrance of Sir Willfull, which is shortly to follow now. The scene is once more hilarious, by reason of the fops' pretended wit, Mrs Marwood's malicious interjections, and Millamant's obvious detestation of their lack of intelligence.³⁾

1) Marwood: "The Secret is grown too big for the Pretence: 'tis like Mrs Primly's great Belly, she may lace it down before, but it burnishes on her Hips. Indeed, Millamant, you can no more conceal it, than my Lady Stranmel can her Face, that goodly Face, which in defiance of Rhenish Wine Tea, will not be comprehended in a Mask."

Act III, 1. 279-285.

2) Millamant: "I'll take my Death, Marwood, you are more Censorious than a decay'd Beauty, or a discarded 'Toast'."

Act III, 1. 186-289.

3) Millamant: "Well, an illiterate Man's my Aversion. I wonder at the Impudence of any illiterate Man, to offer to make Love."

Act III, 1. 378-379.

Sir Wilfull falls in a certain category in the framework of the play. He occupies a position in the scheme of characterization in the play in which Mirabell, by virtue of being a "high" character and embodying the ideal of the gentleman, comes at the top of the scale. Fainall comes at the bottom of the scale by reason of his negative qualities and especially his lack of integrity. Sir Willfull and others of his kind fall in the middle of the scale, while the various gradations of fools come into the picture in a descending scale of stupidity and viciousness.

Witwoud, in an attempt to disown his brother, Sir Willfull, because of his lubberliness¹⁾, combines with Petulant to "smoke" Sir Willfull - a display of such excruciatingly bad manners that Congreve's satire of social convention is felt most scathingly. Mirabell's humanity is perhaps also revealed once more by the fact that he becomes quite friendly with Sir Willfull - he does not

1) Witwoud: "You think you're in the Country,
where great lubberly Brothers slabber
and kiss one another - 'Tis not the Fashion
here."

think it reflects discredit upon him to show good manners towards someone who is so entirely "natural". Congreve also allows his "natural" man to score off the fops - Sir Willfull's indignation is very real, and finally, in his wrath, he succeeds in flattening the two by the sheer robustness of his speech.¹⁾

Sir Willfull's lack of real wit is not allowed to go by without some ridicule, though - he is delicately satirized and some broad farce is supplied when Lady Wishfort is absolutely scandalized by his behaviour, while he is blissfully unaware of being any source of embarrassment.²⁾

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- 1) Sir Willfull: The Fashion's a Fool; and you're
a Fop, dear Brother.

Act III, 1.487-488.

Sir Willfull: Serve or not serve, I shan't ask
Licence of you, Sir; nor the
Weather-Cock your Companion.

Act III, 1.513-514.

- 2) Lady Wishfort: Fie, fie, Nephew, you wou'd
not pull off your Boots here -
My Nephews's a little unbred,
you'll pardon him, Madam.

Act III, 1.560-561.

From the farcical, one is plunged almost immediately into a world of intense malice and hatred. Fainall's rantings when he is informed of his wife's affair with Mirabell contain all the bitterness of one hoist with his own petard. He has been flattering himself that he is carrying on an affair about which his wife will have nothing to say. Instead he finds out that she has forestalled him and cuckolded him with the very man he regards as the last that should get the better of him. His speech is heavy with the imagery of foiled sexuality (just as the speech of Marwood when she is foiled by Millamant). This reflects Fainall's attitude towards life very effectively.¹⁾ Marwood is essentially unperturbed by this bitter display - this stream of abuse will allow her to get Fainall's acquiescence to her own proposed scheme more easily. At this stage one can see the way in which the intrigue is going to develop - except for the surprise contained in the ~~denouement~~[✓], when Mirabell, who has shown his superiority on all grounds, is allowed to turn the tables on everybody else and succeeds in turning everything to his advantage.

1) "Sure I was born with budding Antlers
like a young Satyr, or a Citizen's child."

Act III, 1. 569-570.

Meanwhile Fainall is left with the galling knowledge of what his wife has done to him, and, given some new confidence by the proposed intrigue of his mistress, he is sufficiently master of himself again to express all his rage and disillusionment in "a common motto to their common crest" - an epitaph addressed to all Husbands:

"All Husbands must, or Pain, or Shame, endure,
The Wise too jealous are, Fools too secure." 1)

On this note he leaves, obviously including himself in the company of the fools for not having been more jealous - he was so busy with his own affair that he underestimated his wife completely.

Act IV can be regarded as the climax of the play, equally as regards pure plot interest, clearer delineation of character by means of more marked contrast, and the fullest statement of the theme of human involvement to be made yet. The famous courtship scene between Mirabell and Millamant is preceded by a farcical one between Millamant and Sir Willfull - in which the knight is desperate for some wine to bolster his quailing spirits in a situation for which he has not aptitude or appetite. This scene is counterpointed by the harsh and sensual scene between Lady Wishfort and the supposed Sir Rowland.

1) Closing couplet of Act III.

Act IV opens on a scene completely different from the bitter and cynical one at the end of Act III. Lady Wishfort is anxiously checking on all the arrangements made by Foible for the reception of Sir Rowland. Her desperate dependence on what is fashionable and proper (hinted at in her agonised protests against Sir Willfull's uncouthness in the previous scene) is once more pointed up - she has had the Coachman and the Postillion added to her equipage to swell the ranks of the footmen, and she inquires of Foible:

"Have you pulvill'd the Coachman and Postillion,
that they may not stink of the Stable, when Sir
Rowland comes by?"¹⁾

Having been assured that all the trappings have been seen to, the lady then falls into a resumption of her earlier coyness by practising her approach designed for the luckless Sir Rowland in front of Foible. The broad farce inherent in this scene cannot but be appreciated - the aged fine lady smirking and preening in front of the real bride of the supposed gentleman - but at the same time there is a feeling of compassion at the sight of a woman come to this pass, where she, trembling on the brink of old age, tries desperately for the last time to ensnare a man. Her proposal to face her suitor in an attitude of carefully calculated disorder is cutting

1) Act IV, 1. 9 - 10.

comment when it is set against the background of the attractively flustered attitude Millamant strikes on occasion. Lady Wishfort leaves the stage in a flurry of hope - and not a little determination.

The scene is now set for Mirabell and Millamant, but Congreve allows the tension to increase by allowing Sir Willfull to blunder into the room where Millamant waits for Mirabell. Millamant is at her most intellectually aloof and the luckless knight falls into trap after trap of indignity. He has already avowed his inability to speak their "lingo" and when Millamant airily quotes some lines from Suckling and identifies the poet, Sir Willfull neatly steps into the trap:

Millamant:	"Natural, easie Suckling!"
Willfull:	"Anan? Suckling? No such Suckling neither, cousin, nor Stripling: I thank Heav'n, I'm no Minor." ¹⁾

In this scene there is a sense of exquisite dramatic irony, and the audience is made sharply aware of the deep and unbridgeable chasm between Millamant and Sir Willfull by the striking contrast between her innate breeding, refinement and scintillating intellectual awareness and his

1) Act IV, 1. 96-98.

leaden-footed blundering and confusion at the dainty but stinging barbs delivered by her. His rusticity ("ruder than Gothick") is brought into sharp relief and this provides the necessary background for the ensuing sparkling scene between Mirabell and Millamant.

The difference between the two men is at once sharply defined when Mirabell walks in on Millamant and neatly caps the quotation from Waller that she is speaking aloud:

Millamant: "Like Phoebus sang the no less
amorous Boy -

Mirabell: "Like Daphne she, as lovely and as
Coy."

This is a very significant structural device, for it points to a strong intellectual affinity between these two. Although both assume a bantering tone and appear to be sparring lightly and unconcernedly, there is an undertone of deep seriousness to these negotiations, a sense almost of reluctance to surrender, but there is also a quality of expectancy, an awareness of what will be gained by the ultimate surrender.

Millamant's agreement to Mirabell's proposal is implicit in all their sparring, yet she continues to provoke

Mirabell to further protestations of affection. She openly avows her intention in this regard:

"... tho' I am upon the very verge of Matrimony, I expect you shou'd sollicit me so much as if I were wavering at the Gate of a Monastery, with one Foot over the Threshold."¹⁾ She expresses her detestation of smugness on the part of a lover, and in so doing expresses a desire for complete commitment on the part of the lover to the union proposed by him. This does not mean a diminishing of the partners as much as an enrichment - for when she presents her demand it is at once evident that she wishes very much to retain her individuality and the right to act as a person in her own right. There is no question of subjugation - rather a matter of adaptation to another personality. Despite the apparent flippancy of her demands there is an undertone of deep seriousness²⁾ which is perfectly counterpointed by

1) Act IV, line 12 of proviso scene.

2) "Good Mirabell don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folk, like my Lady Fadler and Sir Francis: nor go to Hide Park together the first Sunday in a Chariot, to provoke Eyes and Whispers; and then never to be seen together again";

and

"Come to Dinner when I please, dine in my Dressing Room when I'm out of Humour without giving a Reason."

Mirabell's pretended levity. After having presented her full account, Millamant gracefully surrenders and confesses that, subject to these conditions, she might at last "dwindle into a Wife".

Mirabell's rejoinder carries some of the irony that marks the play as very subtle:

"Well, have I Liberty to offer Conditions - that when you are dwind'led into a Wife, I may not be beyond Measure enlarg'd into a Husband?"¹⁾ His knowledge that Millamant can never dwindle, and that he, in matching her, can yet never subjugate her, reflects on the current state of affairs, when a husband was a purely titular head, superficially acknowledged yet mockingly regarded as a potential cuckold. Thus, in Mirabell's ironic perception that he can never dominate Millamant there is also the seed of perception (and a rejoicing in the perception) of the more enduring relationship to be established with this enchanting young woman.

Mirabell's conditions are almost all concerned with demands for Millamant's retention of her femininity.

1) Proviso scene: 1. 95-107.

He does not want her to be inconstant, as it will mean a violation of the deepest principles of womanhood.

He follows this with an invective against falsity and deception - a condemnation of women's paints and other trifles.¹⁾ He also demands that, when she bears a child, she will not go to any unnatural lengths to conceal the fact and so produce a "crooked-billet" of a son. His last demand centres on her never presuming on male ground where drink is concerned - and this is concerned with the retention of femininity again. This points to a need for being true to her essential being - and thus also true to the man who wants to marry her and who wants the marriage to last and to endure as something fine.

What emerges from this sparkling scene is Congreve's essential concept of what men and women should be like. Millamant acknowledges Mirabell freely as the man, the head of the relationship, but she also extracts from him the promise of being considerate and respecting her as a human being as well as a woman. Undertaking not to become unfeminine through participating in many of the "fashionable" but unfeminine practices of the women of her day, she also makes her own stipulations. The match is thus contracted on a note of mutual satisfaction, and Millamant's subsequent

1) Proviso scene: l. 110-120.

flirting deliberation in front of Mrs Fainall is all in aid of showing Mirabell that she has no intention of dwindling just because she has promised herself to him.

From this scene of high comedy one is plunged progressively deeper into coarse farcical scenes. A drunken Witwoud staggers in, and announces his spluttering amusement at the drunken antics of Petulant and Sir Willful. When Petulant staggers in, there is a spirited and indiscriminate exchange of malicious ribaldries. Witwoud finally reveals the fact that the whole drunken orgy was organized by Fainall in order to get rid of the knight, and, on cue, Sir Willfull enters with Lady Wishfort who is frantically berating Sir Willfull for his drunkenness and subsequent uselessness in paying court to Millamant. Sir Willfull is quite oblivious to any finer sensibilities, and revels in his "natural" abandon. Lady Wishfort's efforts to convince Millamant of his intrinsic worth are made to look ridiculous and Millamant is shaken to the core of her fastidious being by the lewd suggestion of Sir Willfull:

"Aunt, Willfull will do't. If she has her Maidenhead let her look to't, - if she has not, let her keep her own Counsel in the mean time, and cry out at the Nine Months end." 1)

1) Act IV, 1. 380 - 383.

Sir Willfull, under the mellowing influence of liquor, suddenly becomes extremely fluent in invective. He berates every heathen on earth, qualifying his abuse by describing all non-drinkers as heathens. This inversion of the accepted code is used to indicate the extent of Willfull's drunkenness and the extent of his alienation from the refined members of the Society:

"To drink is a Christian diversion,
Unknown to the Turk and the Persian:
Let Mahometan Fools
Live by Heathenish Rules,
And be damn'd over Tea-cups and Coffee." 1)

This hilarious farce is finally broken up by Foible's announcement that Sir Rowland has arrived, and the luckless Witwoud is saddled with his boon companion.

Congreve now presents his audience with one of the most striking contrasts of the whole play. The effervescent scene between Millamant and Mirabell, in which sober reality is so evident despite the apparent pretence, is now darkly underscored by the scene between Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland, where Millamant's pretty flirtatiousness becomes sickening and depraved coyness in Lady Wishfort, and Mirabell's decisiveness becomes tasteless importunity in "Sir Rowland".

1) Act IV, 1. 399 - 403.

Lady Wishfort, in her agitation over Sir Willfull, is even more impatient than she would normally have been to "unbend the Severity of Decorum - and dispense with a little Ceremony". "Sir Rowland" is very willing to fall in, seeing that it might lessen the ardour he might be required to show in order to win the lady and so collect his reward from Mirabell. The scene has a complete lack of subtlety, a horrible, fawning eagerness, which seems to embody all the ways of the world: pretence in various forms (pretended passion on the part of Sir Rowland, pretended decorum by Lady Wishfort, and a complete absence of real feeling and emotion on the part of both, if one discounts disgust on the part of Waitwell and hag-ridden anxiety on the part of Lady Wishfort). Lady Wishfort's imagery is strongly based on physical qualities: "But as I am a person, Sir Rowland, you must not attribute my yieldings to any sinister Appetite, or Indigestion of Widowhood; nor impute my Complacency to any Lethargy of Continence."¹⁾ She is reassured by Waitwell with heavy irony: "Dear Madam, no. You are all Camphire and Frankinscence, all Chastity and Odour."²⁾

1) Act IV, 1.469-471.

2) Act IV, 1.486-487.

A situation that is fast becoming dark-toned is suddenly relieved by Foible's entry, and when Lady Wishfort leaves, Waitwell lets go of his pent-up emotions and exclaims expansively to his real wife: "O, she is the Antidote to Desire. Spouse, thou wilt fare the worst for it. - I shall have no appetite to the Iteration of Nuptials - this Eight and Forty Hours." Foible does not have a great deal of sympathy with him: "What a washyRogue art thou, to pant thus for a Quarter of an Hours Lying and Swearing to a fine Lady?"¹⁾

Lady Wishfort's return heralds a heightening of the tension, and the intrigue is given impetus. She has with her a letter from Marwood disclosing the whole intrigue and exposing Mirabell and Mrs Fainall. Waitwell, prompted by Foible, covers up with some breathless improvisation, but the sense of urgency that has been introduced promises a quick unravelling of the intrigue. Waitwell promises, after extracting Lady Wishfort's promise for an immediate marriage, to go for proof of his identity. His closing speech to Lady Wishfort embodies all her fondest hopes, and his sincerest revulsion -

1) Act IV, 1.495 - 500.

"Ere long shall you substantial proof receive
That I'm an arrant Knight - 1)

Foible: Or arrant Knave."

Spoken by Waitwell arrant means real - spoken by Foible it means false - and the idea the playwright wanted to express in this scene is explained in these simple terms. This couplet contains the essence of the act, and when this contrast between appearance and reality has been resolved, the whole contrast between appearance and reality within the confines of the play will be resolved.

Up to the end of the fourth act the audience has been given comprehensive portrayals of all the important characters. They have appeared in various situations, under various circumstances, and "postured" before us. The way of the world has been abundantly illustrated and the intrigue presented to animate the characters and give purpose to their "posturing".

The last act represents in essence a dissolution of the fashionable way of the world, a falling out of thieves. In the midst of this chaos Mirabell and Millamant form the only still point of integrity; they triumph over what has gone on

1) The concluding couplet of Act IV.

around them, and around them is built the "dynastic order" that Jeffares sees emergent from this dissolution of a world.

The act opens on Lady Wishfort and Foible. Lady Wishfort is berating the luckless servant-girl in her choicest "boudoir Billingsgate", and threatening to turn her out. She flares up even more when Foible seeks to justify her own actions:

"What to betray me, to marry me to a Cast-serving man; to make me a Receptacle, an Hospital for a decay'd Pimp? No Damage? O thou frontless Impudence, more than a big-belly'd Actress."¹⁾ The old lady has now gone beyond reasonable bounds, and has been plunged into the darkness she has been moving towards ever since the play started. Her language grows progressively coarser: "I am brought to fine Uses to become a Botcher of second-hand Marriages, between Abigails and Andrews! I'll couple you. Yes, I'll baste you together, you and your Philander."²⁾

This dark-toned sexual imaxery is continued by Marwood when she sees that the whole of Mirabell's intrigue collapses. Before that happens, however, one is informed of the adultery

1) Act V, 1.33-35.

2) Act V, 1.48-50.

committed by Fainall and Marwood, and there is a sharp reminder of the general pattern of contrast between appearance and reality. The hypocrisy attendant on everything done by Fainall and Mrs Marwood is stressed when one learns that the servants were sworn to secrecy about the affair between Fainall and his mistress upon a book of poems. Even the taking of an oath is thus subject to inversion within their scale of values. At this stage, however, Fainall and Marwood are riding on the crest of their evil and gloating triumph. Lady Wishfort, her self-esteem severely shaken, is becoming a pathetic figure. She enjoins Marwood to retire with her "... to Desarts and Solitudes; and feed harmless Sheep by Groves and Purling Streams. Dear Marwood, let us leave the World, and retire by Ourselves, and be Shepherdesses".¹⁾ This sham of an escape from the iniquities of a world she has helped to create points once again to the basic dichotomy between appearance and reality in the play, and highlights the difference between the happy lovers on the one hand and the luckless flounders on the other - Mirabell and Millamant seek and find a way to live in the fashionable

1) Act V, 1.118-120.

world on their own terms, and their triumph is that they succeed in this. The others fall about helplessly, and because they are deceived by appearances, they do not participate in the final harmony effected by the playwright.

By the time one comes to the confrontation of Lady Wishfort and Marwood, one has formed a firm impression of the characters of both. Lady Wishfort's painful reiteration regarding the blameless upbringing of her daughter intensifies to a painful degree the falseness of her premises. One is aghast at what she did to her daughter, and this is the absolute antithesis of the essence of pure high comedy: "... for I chiefly made it my own Care to initiate her very Infancy in the Rudiments of Virtue, and to impress upon her tender Years a young Odium and Aversion to the very sight of Men."¹⁾ Millamant says "Odious Men" and does not mean a word of it, Mrs Fainall says "My Soul" and shrinks within herself with revulsion at her lot. Millamant removes all vestiges of pretence completely by accepting Mirabell while Mrs Fainall can only say, with bitterness: "This is the last Day of our Living together, that's my Comfort."²⁾

1) Act V, l.165-166.

2) Act V, l.73.

Fainall's demands make Lady Wishfort squirm, and Mirabell's astute planning pays off. Millamant and Sir Willfull pretend to be engaged, so that Fainall is robbed of the marriage portion belonging to Millamant. Foible and Mincing disclose their knowledge of Marwood's dalliance, and, as a death-blow, Mirabell reveals the fact that Mrs Fainall had, before marrying Fainall, delivered her whole fortune in trust to Mirabell, so that Fainall is now proved to be truly destitute. While a grateful Lady Wishfort bestows Millamant on Mirabell, Sir Wilfull bows out gracefully by retaining his desire to travel, and stating his determination to take Witwoud and Petulant with him. Mirabell points out the possibility of a reunion between the Fainalls - but this will be a purely mercenary arrangement, and as such still the antithesis of the ideal of high comedy, which should be a happy and spontaneous uniting of people with integrity:

"From hence let those be warn'd, who mean to wed;
Lest mutual Falsehood stain the Bridal-Bed;
For each Deceiver to his cost may find,
That Marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind."¹⁾

1) The play is concluded with these verses.

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This, from *Mirabell*, forms the final and crowning statement of the play, and contains Congreve's basic statement on marriage and love.

CHAPTER V

STRUCTURE AS MEANING

The whole of the action of The Way of the World takes place within the strict bounds of the social conventions imposed by the members of the society themselves. The characters are truly confined within the four walls of the drawing-room, and as such all actions are restricted to those sanctioned by society and accepted within the code of strict adherence to social convention demanded of the characters. Language is also bound into this inflexible pattern and has to be severely patterned to fit into the rigid predetermined framework of social convention.

To arrive at a final assessment of the meaning of this comedy, one has to look at the elements Congreve used in the construction of the comedy, to see each in its proper perspective and then explore the way in which he orchestrated these elements in order to convey meaning.

The plot-structure is rather episodic - the playwright was very much concerned with presenting and resolving

the basic problems of his very human characters and paid more attention to this than to constructing a tightly-knit plot. This has always been accounted the greatest weakness of the play, but a case can be made for the plot on the grounds that it allows the characters to posture before the audience so that they are shown from several angles in order to reveal themselves fully. The main story-line is the intrigue, framed first by Mirabell and later twisted to their own use by Marwood and Fainall. This intrigue is responsible for the events that occur among the "lower" groups of characters - Fainall and Marwood, Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland, and Waitwell and Foible. This link places the intrigues at once into a very definite category as far as tonal quality is concerned - it places all these characters into the lower regions of the world of the comic and makes them incapable of ultimately triumphing.

On the level of personal relationships there are a number of plots too - such as those between Mirabell and Millamant, Fainall and Mrs Marwood and Lady Wishfort and Sir Rowland. All these plots, as well as the central intrigue, are resolved at the end of the last act. Witwoud remarks:

"Hey day! What are you all got together, like
Players at the end of the last act?"¹⁾

They are indeed at the end of the act, the end of one cycle of human life and the beginning of another, symbolized by the triumph and marriage of Mirabell and Millamant.

The patterning of types of character within the play is done according to a set scale. Certain types of character are used to fill certain niches, and as such they run true to type (as known within the scheme of a typical Restoration comedy), but this does not mean that these characters are not also perfectly differentiated as individual human beings. They are distinguished in the first place by their use of language and then set into the total pattern to fulfil their dramatic function in the creation of comic meaning.

The encounters between the characters are contrived in such a way that their true colours are revealed inexorably. The "low" and vicious characters are all directly connected with the intrigue instigated by Mirabell. There is a clear-cut differentiation between the various categories of character.

1) Act V, l. 471 - 472.

Mirabell and Millamant, who are the obviously superior characters, are not as directly concerned in the intrigue as the lower echelon of characters - Millamant, although she is the reason for the intrigue being perpetrated, stands aloof from it. Mirabell has a controlling interest in the intrigue, but he is not dismayed by any setbacks - his poise is more than equal to any crisis. The two lovers are thus set apart even by their type of involvement in the action.

After viewing the play, one can set these characters into a scheme in which they represent certain values. Congreve's characterization reveals great consistency, and his characters are also true to certain types popular in this kind of comedy. He impresses one by the way in which he makes these character types fit naturally into his comic statement. The characters come to represent certain values - and the values to which they adhere ultimately determine their fate within the comedy.

The tone of each scene is also dependent on the characters participating in the scene and the topics they are discussing at the time. There is a consistent pattern in this too - certain characters keep to certain topics and this reinforces the impression of contrast. A sliding scale of values, as represented by certain characters, can be drawn up:

Quality	Characters	Tonal Quality	Outcome
Intellect	Mirabell and Millamant	"High" - scintillating	Triumph
	Appearance →	→	Reality, integrity.
	Sir Willfull and Lady Wish- fort.	"Low" - farcical, earthy	Ridicule.
Folly	Witwoud and Petulant	"Low" - bawdy	Insignificance.
Spite	Fainall and Marwood	"Dark" - vicious	Ruin.
	Appearance →	→	Deception, hypocrisy

The dialogue used in the play is perfectly differentiated to allow the characters to gain individuality. There is a difference in speech rhythm as well as in habitual topics of conversation. Millamant remains fastidious in speech even though one is aware of the fact that she is not prudish. Her speech is thus a manifestation of her innate good taste and refinement. This is in strong contrast to the vulgarity of Lady Wishfort's speech. Mirabell's cutting speech is counterpointed by the inane conversation of the fops, and Sir Willfull's earthy habits of conversation balance these two kinds of wit and would-be wit.

The traditional theme of high comedy is used in this play and at the conclusion of the comedy a triumphant re-assertion of the enduring quality of the deepest involvement between a man and a woman is made. The two main characters should overcome all the difficulties in their way and contract a marriage to form a new social unit, to effect a reconciliation on a social level of all the conflicting elements that could be found in the comedy. Comic structure embodies the development of this reconciliation, and this comedy meets all the requirements.

The comic ideal is implicit in the structure on the following levels:

The way in which action is patterned leaves no doubt as to who should be regarded as the main characters. The characters who are excluded from real comic triumph engage in the intrigue and they all come off badly in the end. In contrast to this there are the hero and heroine, who are faced with apparently insurmountable problems, who yet triumph because they succeed in outwitting the lesser characters, and because they do not become completely embroiled in mundane issues. They move on a higher level of sensibility altogether, and this is revealed by their essential mode of action.

In the patterning of character the same consistency is observed. Mirabell and Millamant are both allowed to overshadow the lesser characters completely, and in any direct confrontation their superiority is at once obvious. They have a real sense of humour whereas some of the other characters have a sham sense of humour and some do not have a sense of humour at all. Mirabell and Millamant are intended to triumph and the intention is given force and vitality by the consistent pattern of confrontation in which they prove worthy of the anticipated triumph.

In the development of the theme of love and marriage structure and meaning are harmoniously related. The theme

is developed on several levels at once, but these levels are so well integrated that the meaning is reinforced even more.

The development of the theme is effected mainly through ingenious use of contrast. On the first level there is the very obvious contrast between intellectuality and rusticity. Millamant and Mirabell are contrasted sharply with Sir Willfull, who represents the typical country squire and is ignorant of the finer points of town life. Their teasing of Sir Willfull is in sharp contrast, however, with the rude "smoking" Witwoud and Petulant subject him to.

This leads one directly to the next contrast - the one between intellectuality and superficiality. This is the traditional contrast between the Witwoud and the Truewit as Congreve himself expressed it in his Dedication to the play:

"... this Play had been acted two or three days, before some of the hasty Judges cou'd find the leisure to distinguish betwixt the Character of a Witwoud and a Truewit."

On a lower level is to be found the contrast between the Witwouds and the "natural" men - and such was Congreve's aversion to the affected fops that he allows Sir Willfull to score off the fops decisively.

The two intellectually superior and occasionally intellectually aloof characters are allowed to show up in sharp relief, and they appear as eminently suitable to each other.

The contrast between intellectuality and rusticity leads one directly to a strong contrast in the tonal quality of the various scenes. The "high" characters are very obviously set aside from the others because the scenes in which they appear on their own have a distinguished tone of formal elegance that at once sets them apart. The "lower" characters appear in scenes in which the tone varies from the highly farcical to the most raucously bawdy. This is usually a manifestation of their attitude and being - and this sets them apart at once as incapable of triumph on the level of the comic.

The contrast in the attitude towards life as manifested in the women especially also distinguishes the comic heroine from the other characters. Millamant has an attitude of seriousness and sincerity which augurs well for her future. The vicious and depraved attitudes revealed by the other characters express the degree of redemption they can hope for, which is very low.

The contrast in attitude can be extended in the final analysis to the contrast between appearance and

reality which pervades and permeates the whole play. Mirabell's deceptions are finally resolved and become part of the truth, Fainall's deceptions deepen and become hypocrisy. Mirabell and Millamant use appearance to hide reality until they choose to reveal the truth, when one gets a strong and positive impression of integrity. Fainall and Mrs Fainall, and Fainall and Mrs Marwood, use a pretence of truth and reality to conceal truth, and their inverted scale of values cannot give rise to integrity at all. Mirabell and Millamant are the characters who can logically be expected to triumph because they are set apart and are distinguished throughout the play on all levels. They ultimately form a new social unit - which has been the basic pre-occupation of the playwright throughout.

The structure of the play can thus be said to embody and effect a very convincing statement of the comic ideal. The dominant theme of the play, and its development within the confines of the play, is reinforced and borne out throughout the action by the structural devices employed by the playwright. The final impression is that structure and meaning have become indivisible elements of the playwright's statement.

The ultimate meaning of the play can only be described in terms of its total impact. This impact derives as much from the rhythmically patterned structure of character, action and dialogue as from any other source.

It would therefore be a grave injustice to the play if one were to judge it exclusively in terms of a set scheme of social or moral values. To interpret it in terms of any single consideration extracted from the totality of its being would be to deny its aesthetically satisfying complexity - the complexity that is the result of the complete interrelation of structure and meaning.

"O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?"¹⁾

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