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 Language and Character in Congreve's *The Way of the World*

Readers of Restoration comedy have long been dismayed by a surprisingly hardy line of criticism which denies the moral and aesthetic significance as well as the variety and energy of "the first modern comedies."¹ Since such polemicists as L. C. Knights have been oddly influential, advocates of Restoration comedy must continue to demonstrate that such criticism is based on insensitive reading. There are many ways of countering these enemies of wit,² but I should like to suggest here that the moral and imaginative vitality of *The Way of the World* derives from its variety of comic languages, its *style*. The ways in which the characters of the play speak individuate their personalities quite clearly, create dramatic conflict, and establish a moral perspective within the play. When Congreve declares that there is some difference between a true and a false wit, he is calling our attention to the fact that his

¹ Reductionist criticism of Restoration comedy begins, not surprisingly, in the Restoration, but L. C. Knights's "Restoration Comedy: The Reality and the Myth," in *Explorations: Essays in Criticism Mainly on the Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1946), pp. 131-149, represents the most forceful and most influential modern attack. Restoration comedy, Knights argues, inadequately represents Restoration culture; it has no significant relationship to the best thought of that time. The much acclaimed "style" of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve is self-enclosed and betrays a "verbal pattern . . . completely unrelated to a mode of perceiving" (p. 136); moreover, "Not one of them has achieved a genuinely sensitive and individual mode of expression" (p. 137). Knights's radical devaluation was furthered by John Wain's "Restoration Comedy and its Modern Critics," in *Preliminary Essays* (London, 1957), pp. 1-35, and most recently by A. N. Kaul's "The Inverted Abstractions of Restoration Comedy," in *The Action of English Comedy* (New Haven, 1970), pp. 90-130. Kaul gives loving attention to Congreve in particular, and his line is familiar: *The Way of the World* is dull, the characters undifferentiated, there is no discernible point of view—no "alternative" to the way of the world. "Congreve represents a general dilemma experienced by many Restoration dramatists—by any writer . . . who would rise above the accepted values of his age but has no grasp of any alternative values; a writer who would assert a moral perspective without possessing one" (p. 103).

² One of the most interesting defenses of Restoration comedy is that of Aubrey Williams, who, in two essays, maintains that Congreve's works "are all, in their various ways, the beautifully carved images of a Providential justice that governs all human affairs, even those that occur in the most sophisticated and flirtatious drawing-rooms." See "Poetical Justice, the Contrivances of Providence, and the Works of William Congreve," *ELH*, 35 (1968), 540-565. Another version of this thesis appears in "Congreve's *Incognita* and the Contrivances of Providence," in *Imagined Worlds: Essays on Some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt*, ed. Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (London, 1968), pp. 3-18.

comedy is structured around a skillful counterpoint of voices—a medley that clearly reveals fools, true wits, and men of deep and irrevocable malice.

After the brilliant success of *The Old Bachelor*, Congreve turned away from the Etheregean drama of predatory wit to a more complex form. *The Double Dealer*, *Love for Love*, and *The Way of the World* take as their central concern the opposition of the individual to a potentially damaging milieu, a society made up almost entirely of knaves and fools. At the heart of this drama lies Congreve's ability to portray characters who, although they are derived from conventional types and often speak to apparently conventional subjects, nonetheless define thematic meaning and reveal a satisfying depth of psychological complexity.

In *The Way of the World*, each character is defined by an individual and distinct language, but five major characters especially reveal Congreve's stylistic achievement. Anthony Witwoud, like his forebears Brisk of *The Double Dealer* and Tattle of *Love for Love*, attempts the refinement of fashionable speech. Lady Wishfort's language reveals her as excessive, extreme in her passions, and socially aberrant—a prisoner of her own eccentric individualism. Fainall, in some ways the most interesting character of the play, is a malicious wit who speaks the language of gentlemen, but who reveals a destructive and perverse ill-will based on a cruel cynicism concerning the conditions of human existence. These three characters derive from, but are not entirely defined by, the older humours tradition, which Congreve reinvigorates and makes dramatically powerful. Mirabell and Millamant are truewits; their speech is informed by intelligence, irony, self-awareness. Although they are themselves laughable at times, in the main they are sympathetic, and by their awareness of the way of the world (and a certain degree of luck), they are able to escape its ever-present dangers.

As his label implies, Anthony Witwoud wishes to achieve the linguistic ease of the wits and thereby firmly establish himself within fashionable society. He is the comic descendant of the fop, who tried to achieve in dress what Witwoud attempts in speech. Both show an excessive awareness of the mechanics of their society. The laughter evoked by this character is Bergsonian, for we witness a self-conscious obsession with wit transform a human being into a wit-producing automaton; notice his hapless attempts at effervescence as he enters with Millamant in Act Two:

Mirabell: You seem to be unattended, Madam—You us'd to have the *Beau-mond* Throng after you; and a Flock of gay fine Perrukes hovering round you.

Witwoud: Like Moths about a Candle—I had like to have lost my Comparison for want of Breath.

Millamant: O I have deny'd my self Airs to Day. I have walk'd as fast through the Crowd—

Witwoud: As a Favourite in disgrace; and with as few Followers.

Millamant: Dear Mr. *Witwoud*, truce with your Similitudes: For I am as sick of 'em—

Witwoud: As a Phisician of a good Air—I cannot help it Madam, tho' 'tis against my self.

Millamant: Yet again! *Mincing*, stand between me and his Wit.

Witwoud: Do Mrs. *Mincing*, like a Skreen before a great Fire. I confess I do blaze to Day, I am too bright.³

The word “hovering” sets off an alarm bell in *Witwoud* and he automatically responds. We sense a certain helplessness about *Witwoud*; if he is the perpetrator of wit, he is also its victim. The human flexibility is gone, the response is all too predictable, and an unthinking mind is seen busy in the production of dullness. The quality of wit is inferior, of course; *Witwoud*'s similitudes are obvious, and they neither clarify nor advance the discussion. They are thrust in for their own sake and fail to display the acute discrimination that signalizes true wit. The mechanical quality is too apparent. *Witwoud*, as Martin Price suggests, “supplies the most brilliant epitome of wit without judgment.”⁴

But it is the self-consciousness of *Witwoud*, his half-prideful recognition of his own attempts at wit, that is the essence of the character: “I had like to have lost my Comparison for want of Breath.”⁵ We note his dull-witted delight in a linguistic *game*—the raillery with which gentlemen amuse themselves. The self-consciousness is fatal, however; he fumbles the elaborate negligence, the linguistic *sprezzatura*, of the truewit. While the latter conceals the artistry of his speech, *Witwoud*'s response is too exposed; there is a sense of linguistic strain. *Witwoud*'s surprising entrance line in the last scene of *The Way of the World* is significant, for it acknowledges the introverted theatricalism of his language: “Hey day! what are you all got together like Players at the end of the last Act?” (V.i.521-522). To *Witwoud*, society is a play, and one's whole duty is to fulfill the demands of its dramaturgy.

Congreve inherited and perfected the “witwoud” character; what the Restoration comic writers found funny and perhaps somewhat disturbing about the witwoud was his predictability. Given any situation, the witwoud must respond with verbal smartness. If the comic effect is Bergsonian, it is

³ II.i.328-344. All citations are to *The Complete Plays of William Congreve*, ed. Herbert Davis (Chicago, 1967). I place act, scene, and line in parentheses following the quotation.

⁴ Martin Price, *To the Palace of Wisdom* (Garden City, N. Y., 1965), p. 242.

⁵ Compare Brisk of *The Double Dealer*: “Oh, my dear *Mellefont* . . . the Deuce take me if there were three good things said; or one, understood, since thy Amputation from the body of our Society.—He, I think that's pretty and Metaphorical enough: I'Gad I could not have said it out of thy Company.—*Careless*, ha?” (I.i.33-39).

also Hobbesian: we are aware of our superiority to this rigid man. But what, thematically, does this character represent? A quality that Congreve perhaps saw, feared, and despised in his own society: sterility—human beings reduced to endless, machinelike repetition, productive of nothing.⁶ No human intelligence or resource is at work; Witwoud thrives parasitically on “some few Scraps of other Folks Wit” (I.i.225); he is the logical end product of a society that overvalues appearance. Intellectual sterility, moreover, symbolizes a deeper *malaise*: Witwoud, one is given to think, is sexually impotent; his wooing of Millamant is only a part of his fashionable pose. Impotence, in various forms, is a preoccupation of Restoration comedy; in *The Man of Mode*, *The Plain Dealer*, and *The Country Wife*, as well as *The Way of the World*, the concern with impotence becomes meaningful: the playwrights indict the sterility of a way of life, men who in conforming to a narrow and superficial set of conventions have made themselves barren and less than human.

Whereas Witwoud has repressed his passions in favor of a life-denying social system, Lady Wishfort exhibits an extreme of passion which separates her from society. She develops a language that is hyperindividualistic. Witwoud’s speech bears a direct relation to that of the wits; it is a failed imitation. The language of Lady Wishfort veers away from the linguistic norm towards a highly personal counterpoint to the norm. It marks the extent of her social aberration. She is self-absorbed, preoccupied with private, antisocial concerns.

Lady Wishfort recalls two comic types, the scolding hussy (Shakespeare’s Dame Quickly, Jonson’s Mrs. Otter, Congreve’s own Lady Plyant of *The Double Dealer*) and such lusty dames as Etherege’s Mrs. Loveit and Lady Cockwood and Congreve’s Lady Touchwood. Consequently, she has two main voices: the Billingsgate scolding of which Meredith speaks in *An Essay on Comedy*,⁷ with its persistent imagery taken from lower-class occupations, and a quite different voice, one of elevated if fumbling decorousness.⁸

Her first voice is impressive. Her images flow freely and steadily without hesitation or indirection: her invective is as fluent and powerful as the lan-

⁶ Herbert Davis suggests in his “Introductory Note” to *The Way of the World* that the play derives “from that world to which the poet and his audience alike belong” (p. 387).

⁷ George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, ed. Lane Cooper (New York, 1897), p. 101.

⁸ Norman N. Holland points out Lady Wishfort’s tendency to dehumanize others through language: “Part of her substitution of art for nature is suggested by her speech-tag, ‘As I am a person,’ which is, in turn, belied by her continually calling others by subhuman epithets: ‘Puppet, thou wooden thing upon wires,’ ‘Barachio,’ ‘Caterpillar,’ ‘viper,’ ‘serpent,’ and the like.” *The First Modern Comedies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 187.

guage of the wits; it expresses her abundant personality. Here she berates the traitorous Foible:

Out of my house, out of my house, thou *Viper*, thou *Serpent*, that I have foster'd, thou bosome traytress, that I rais'd from nothing—begon, begon, begon, go, go,—that I took from Washing of old Gause and Weaving of dead Hair, with a bleak blew Nose, over a Chafeing-dish of starv'd Embers and Dining behind a Traverse Rag, in a shop no bigger than a Bird-cage—go, go, starve again, do, do. (V.i.1-8)

Lady Wishfort's language is highly pictorial; her sense of scene anticipates Hogarth.

But when she addresses her pretended suitor, Sir Rowland, she attempts the high-style and becomes curiously false and absurd. Whereas her invective, we feel, authentically expresses her personality, her high-style belies her. Power is replaced by inflation, pomposity, and malapropism:

. . . But as I am a person, Sir *Rowland*, You must not attribute my yielding to any sinister appetite, or Indigestion of Widdow-hood; Nor Impute my Complacency, to any Lethargy of Continance—I hope you do not think me prone to any iteration of Nuptials.—

Waitwell: Far be it from me—

Lady Wishfort: If you do, I protest I must recede—or think that I have made a prostitution of decorums, but in the Vehemence of Compassion, and to save the life of a Person of so much Importance— (IV.i.528-537)

The elevated “high-style” parodies the romance debate, and Lady Wishfort is somewhat out of date in her “Platonicks.” Just as she insists on her “decorums,” here a linguistic decorum is attempted and badly fumbled. As Eugene Waith observes, “She doesn't utterly distort words like her descendant Mrs. Malaprop, but she seeks out the longest ones and piles them in tautological heaps.”⁹ Her misapplications have point; she is indeed suffering from an “Indigestion of Widdow-hood,” from a “Lethargy of Continance.” (Surely Congreve had in mind Almanzor's famous “I fear it is the lethargy of Love!”) Her “Vehemence of Compassion” and the stream of parody is too much for “Sir Rowland,” who collapses beneath its force:

Waitwell: Fie, fie!—What a Slavery have I undergone; Spouse, hast thou any *Cordial*—I want *Spirits*. (IV.i.556-557)

Lady Wishfort's eccentricity, resting on her superannuated “Carnality,” her “sinister appetite,” best reveals itself in the curiously abstracted quality

⁹ Eugene Waith, *Restoration Drama* (New York, 1968), p. 516.

of her set pieces, which, despite their having a nominal audience, take on at times the character of interior monologue. Here Lady Wishfort muses on how best to receive Sir Rowland:

Well, and how shall I receive him? In what figure shall I give his Heart the first Impression? There is a great deal in the first Impression. Shall I sit?—No I won't sit—I'll walk—aye I'll walk from the door upon his entrance; and then turn full upon him—No, that will be too sudden. I'll lie—aye, I'll lie down—I'll receive him in my little dressing Room, there's a Couch—Yes, yes, I'll give the first Impression on a Couch—I wont lie neither but loll and lean upon one Elbow; with one Foot a little dangling off, Jogging in a thoughtful way—Yes—and then as soon as he appears, start, ay, start and be surpriz'd, and rise to meet him in a pretty disorder—Yes—O, nothing is more alluring than a Levee from a Couch in some Confusion.—It shows the Foot to advantage, and furnishes with Blushes, and re-composing Airs beyond Comparison. Hark! There's a Coach. (IV.i.17-32)

The free-flowing, repetitious musing comes to be a third voice, and the indications of Lady Wishfort's thought, its hesitations and reversals held together by the Molly Bloom-like "Yes," show forth an eager indulgence in fantasy coupled with a practical sense of stage-management.

It is, perhaps, this penchant for interior monologue, for bizarre daydream, that provides Lady Wishfort, like all of Congreve's major figures, with a certain complexity of character. If her scolding voice seems to reveal her most scathingly, and her "high-style" to falsify her character, the inward voice gives us the image that Lady Wishfort holds of herself. And here she appears at once comic and pathetic: she is quite vulnerable. At the play's conclusion, when she must give up her power over the young people, she reverts to fantasy and pictures herself as a figure in—of all things—a pastoral landscape:

. . . Well Friend, [to Mrs. Marwood] you are enough to reconcile me to the bad World, or else I wou'd retire to Desarts and Solitudes; and feed harmless Sheep by *Groves* and *Purling Streams*. Dear *Marwood*, let us leave the World, and retire by our selves and be *Shepherdesses*. (V.i.131-135)

Earlier in the play Foible had remarked, "I warrant you, Madam; a little Art once made your Picture like you; and now a little of the same Art, must make you like your Picture. Your Picture must sit for you, Madam" (III.i.151-154). Lady Wishfort's grotesque daydreams reveal her dissolving into "art." It is her appetite, the desire for "iteration of Nuptials," that carries her back—with a vengeance—into nature.

Lady Wishfort, then, nurtures a private life and speaks a special language; while Witwoud is trapped within the necessity to ape the norm, she is trapped within her highly individualistic imagination, an imagination that carries her

beyond the bounds of good sense. In Witwoud we sense a deadness, a sterility. Lady Wishfort is alive with a vibrant energy, but we witness energy turned to the pursuit of the private, the aberrant, the antisocial. It is vigor in bedlam. These two characters are central to Congreve's definition of "the world," and it is the social and moral disorder represented by these mad people—a disorder defined by their language—from which the wits must escape.

The Way of the World has been misinterpreted or undervalued too often because some readers have failed to see the sharp distinction Congreve makes between two kinds of opposed "wits."¹⁰ The language of Congreve's wits, as he points out in his dedication to the Earl of Montague, is modeled on the language of gentlemen. The play's "action" is to a large extent that repartee which Dryden insisted was one of the chiefest graces of comedy,¹¹ a repartee thematically functional and dynamic. In framing his witty characters, Congreve sought to free them from the language of affectation or eccentricity. They speak incisively, and their cool, precise language sets them apart from the witwouds and grotesques of the world.

But the wits do not speak alike; there is abundant stylistic evidence to mark off the hero and the villain. Recently Eugene Waith has distinguished between two comic views of human nature, the hard view and the soft. The hard view, seen in the comedies of Etherege and Wycherley, reveals "social behavior as little more than animal instinct partly hidden by hypocritical morality." The soft view, Waith suggests, seen at times in Congreve and Vanbrugh, and predominant in the comedies after their time, "sees some basic goodness in humanity which can be made to prevail—a fund of 'good nature' to which appeal can be made."¹² This distinction defines precisely the difference between a Fainall and a Mirabell. Fainall, who embodies the hard view, is the libertine hero of the early Restoration—a predator whose

¹⁰ A disheartening recent example is that of A. N. Kaul (see note 1 above), who complains of *The Way of the World* that the proof of Congreve's lack of moral perspective is that he was unable to differentiate his hero and his villain: "One of the reasons that this is an insufferably dull play is that, except for the most trivial of variations, most of its principal characters—particularly the 'villain' Fainall and the 'hero' Mirabell—speak, think, and act alike" (p. 101). Kaul's inability to distinguish a decent from a malevolent man was anticipated by Norman N. Holland: "Given two lines from any person in the play, one can tell who the speaker is—with one possible exception, and that exception is the key to the achievement of the play. I do not think you can easily tell the hero from the villain." *The First Modern Comedies*, p. 176.

¹¹ "As for repartie, in particular; as it is the very soul of conversation, so it is the greatest grace of Comedy, where it is proper to the characters. There may be much of acuteness in a thing well said; but there is more in a quick reply: *sunt enim longe venustiora omnia in respondendo quam in provocando.*" Preface to *An Evening's Love; or, The Mock Astrologer*, in *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (1900; rpt. New York, 1961), I, 139.

¹² Waith, p. xxiii.

vision of society is one of man's animal instincts hidden under the veneer of "honor," or "reputation." Mirabell holds another view; although he must of necessity promote his pleasure and safeguard his interests in a hardheaded manner, he is the basically benevolent man who attempts, as far as it is in his power, to act honorably. This distinction between the man of malice and the benevolent man is absolutely crucial to the play and is defined by the language of these antagonists.

The power of Congreve, as Virginia Woolf noted, lies largely in his ability to suggest depths of emotional resonance behind the facade of polite conversation,¹³ and beneath the cool, measured language of Fainall we hear distinctly the malevolence, the emotional turmoil, the lust to dominate and "triumph" which Congreve detests as perverse and destructive—even though he knows it is all in the way of the world. The icy malice of a Fainall defines the serious conflict between the man of good will and his antagonist. The opening of *The Way of the World* reveals at once this opposition:

Fainall: No, I'll give you your Revenge another time, when you are not so indifferent; you are thinking of something else now, and play too negligently; the Coldness of a losing Gamester lessens 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 undervalu'd the Loss of her Reputation.

Mirabell: You have a Taste extremely delicate, and are for refining on your Pleasures. (I.i.4-12)

Fainall speaks the generalized, epigrammatical language of the wits, but it is essential to the understanding of the play to hear the emotional intensity only partially masked by the measured language. Here the seeming lack of emotion while talking of an emotion develops not only the sense of cynical detachment, but also a certain sinister quality of tone. The feline aggressiveness, the suggestion of a refined cruelty, are very near at hand; to Fainall's delicate sensibility, aggressive conquest in cards and aggressive conquest in love are pretty much the same thing. His tone defines him: there is malice, there is the distinct sense of sadism.

This note is heard again as Fainall confronts his mistress (and female counterpart) Mrs. Marwood. Here Congreve is able to imply the half-heartedness of their relationship, the mutual dislike behind the liaison of convenience:

Fainall: Your Fame I have preserv'd. Your Fortune has been bestow'd as the prodigality of your Love would have it, in Pleasures which we both have

¹³ Virginia Woolf, "Congreve's Comedies," in *The Moment and Other Essays* (London, 1947), p. 32.

shar'd. Yet had not you been false, I had e'er this repaid it—'Tis true—Had you permitted *Mirabell* with *Millamant* to have stoll'n their Marriage, my Lady had been incens'd beyond all means of reconciliation: *Millamant* had forfeited the Moiety of her Fortune; which then wou'd have descended to my Wife;—And wherefore did I marry, but to make lawful Prize of a rich Widow's Wealth, and squander it on Love and you?

Mrs. Marwood: Deceit and frivolous Pretence.

Fainall: Death, am I not married? what's pretence? Am I not Imprison'd, Fetter'd? Have I not a Wife? Nay a Wife that was a Widow, a young Widow, a handsome Widow; and would be again a Widow, but that I have a Heart of Proof, and something of a Constitution to bustle thro' the ways of Wedlock and this World. Will you yet be reconcil'd to Truth and me? (II.i.198-215)

The entirety of the first speech is permeated with talk of money, now the basis of their relationship. There is none of *Mirabell's* calm assurance here, but real malignance, the uneasy writhing in a self-made hell. *Fainall's* spite, his envy, his desire for revenge, is seen in the short choppy questions of the second speech, and the bitter repetition of "wife" and "widow." The echo of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in "bustle thro' the ways of Wedlock and this World" is surely intentional.¹⁴ *Fainall's* barely masked aggression, his desire to force the world to his conceit, is apparent, and *Mirabell's* good sense and detachment from a world he still must use are not seen in *Fainall*, who is committed to envy and malice.

Typically the truetype of Congreve's last three comedies must attempt to disengage himself from the way of the world, represented by the fools and malicious wits who surround him. His marriage, which follows the conclusion of the play, symbolizes his transcendence over the world and its pitfalls, although not an end to the "world" itself. The way of the world is, Congreve implies, a certainty. Each of Congreve's comedies after *The Old Bachelor* are variations on this theme. In *The Double Dealer*, *Mellefont* and *Cynthia* must avoid both the ill-will of the ostensible villains, *Maskwell* and *Lady Touchwood*, and the weak-minded and potentially corrupting way of *Brisk*, the *Plyants*, and the *Froths*. After observing the mindless banality of *Lord* and *Lady Froth*, *Cynthia*, alone for a moment, observes:

'Tis not so hard to counterfeit Joy in the depth of Affliction, as to dissemble Mirth in Company of Fools—Why should I call 'em Fools? The World thinks

¹⁴"... God take King Edward to His mercy, / And leave the world for me to bustle in!" (I.i.151-152). Congreve owned four editions of Shakespeare, and perhaps Dryden's notorious comparison of Congreve to Shakespeare in his commendatory verses to *The Double Dealer*, "Heav'n that but once was Prodigal before, / To Shakespeare gave as much; she cou'd not give him more" (*Complete Plays*, ed. Davis, p. 124, ll. 62-63),

better of 'em; for these have Quality and Education, Wit and fine Conversation are receiv'd and admir'd by the World—If not, they like and admire themselves—And why is not that true Wisdom, for 'tis Happiness: And for ought I know, we have misapply'd the Name all this while, and mistaken the thing: Since

If Happiness in Self-content is plac'd,
The Wise are Wretched, and Fools only Bless'd.

Exit (III.i.624-635)

The central danger of “the world” lies in a society in which “Happiness in Self-content is plac'd.” There men belie their “Quality and Education,” and their “Wit and fine Conversation” are summed up in the fooleries of the Froths and Plyants. Critics have noted an air of sadness in Congreve's plays; for the true and humane wit, society is quite inadequate, and only constant self-discipline and a personal sense of order saves him from the dance of fools.¹⁵

This same sense of the inadequacy of society is seen even in the more joyous and robust *Love for Love*. Valentine and Angelica engage in banter between themselves—as will Mirabell and Millamant—and yet the main tension is between the witty couple and their society, the society of Tattle, Sir Sampson, and Foresight, which threatens to engulf them in dullness. This is the implication of Valentine's “mad speech,” as he speaks as “Truth”:

Oh, Prayers will be said in empty Churches, at the usual Hours. Yet you will see such Zealous Faces behind Counters, as if Religion were to be sold in every Shop. Oh things will go methodically in the City, the Clocks will strike Twelve at Noon, and the Horn'd Herd Buz in the Exchange at Two. Wives and Husbands will drive distinct Trades, and Care and Pleasure separately Occupy the Family. Coffee-Houses will be full of Smoak and Stratagem. And the cropt Prentice, that sweeps his Master's Shop in the morning, may ten to one, dirty his Sheets before Night. But there are two things that you will see very strange; which are Wanton Wives, with their Legs at liberty, and Tame Cuckolds, with Chains about their Necks. (IV.i.500-513)

Valentine's picture is of a society deceitful and absurd; only through self-awareness, discipline, and a certain craft of their own can the truwits come to terms with such a world.

The fullest expression of this theme is, of course, *The Way of the World* where the focus remains throughout on the relationship of the individual to

should not be taken as simply the fondness of an older poet for a gifted protégé, but as a recognition that Congreve stands in a line of wit extending from Shakespeare, Jonson, and Fletcher through Etherege, Wycherley, and Southerne.

¹⁵ Kathleen M. Lynch, in a passage to which Knights devotes special scorn, suggests the restrictions of society on the expression of the truwit's personality. *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy* (New York, 1926), p. 8.

his society. The proviso scene of Act Four is a symbolic working out of a *modus vivendi* in a world of fools and knaves, a mutual guarantee of individual dignity and worth in a world where these qualities are always threatened. In Act Two, Mirabell suggests to Millamant the dangers, the potential corrupting power of their environment:

Mirabell: . . . You had the Tyranny to deny me last Night; tho' you knew I came to impart a Secret to you, that concern'd my Love.

Millamant: You saw I was engag'd.

Mirabell: Unkind. You had the leisure to entertain a Herd of Fools; Things who visit you from their excessive Idleness; bestowing on your easiness that time, which is the incumbrance of their Lives. How can you find delight in such Society? It is impossible they should admire you, they are not capable: Or if they were, it shou'd be to you as a Mortification; for sure to please a Fool is some degree of Folly. (II.i.429-440)

As in *The Double Dealer*, the central conflict is not merely between hero and villain (Mirabell knows that the deed in trust will dispose of Fainall), nor between the lovers themselves, but between the truwits and their society. At the play's end, the lovers have transcended an imperfect world; they have achieved their goal, avoiding the damage that awaits those, who, like the malicious wits and fools, are less aware, less disciplined.

The truwits, then, represent a *modus vivendi* that can counter an imperfect world. How is this awareness suggested through language? It should be evident that far from presenting a "verbal pattern . . . completely unrelated to a mode of perceiving," as Knights maintains, Congreve and, I think, the best of the Restoration playwrights demonstrate that the verbal pattern is an essential part of the total comic perception. Illustrations of this are not hard to find. Surely the self-awareness, the tolerance, the irony, that characterize the truwits' speeches are reflections of the moral qualities they embody. Against the excesses represented by the false wits, the central characters maintain a linguistic decorum that suggests their moral stance. Here, for example, is Mirabell reflecting on the faults of his mistress; we note the amused acuity of perception coupled with an affectionate generosity. There is a sense of irony, but there is no malice:

I'll tell thee, *Fainall*, she once us'd me with that Insolence, that in Revenge I took her to pieces; sifted her and separated her Failings; I study'd 'em, and got 'em by rote. The Catalogue was so large, that I was not without hopes, one Day or other to hate her heartily: To which end I so us'd my self to think of 'em, that at length, contrary to my Design and Expectation, they gave me every Hour less and less disturbance; 'till in a few Days it became habitual to me, to remember 'em without being displeas'd. They are now grown as

familiar to me as my own Frailties; and in all probability in a little time longer I shall like 'em as well. (I.i.163-174)

Fainall's reply is characteristic: world-weary, malicious, and cynical:

Marry her, marry her; be half as well acquainted with her Charms, as you are with her Defects, and my Life on't, you are your own Man again.

Mirabell: Say you so?

Fainall: I, I, I have Experience: I have a Wife, and so forth. (I.i.175-179)

But such cynicism is not seen in *Mirabell* even when he must act decisively to safeguard his legitimate interests. In a scene obviously intended to contrast with the quarrel of *Fainall* and *Marwood*, *Mirabell* answers his ex-mistress's cry: "Why did you make me marry this man?"

Why do we daily commit disagreeable and dangerous Actions? To save that Idol Reputation. If the familiarities of our Loves had produc'd that Consequence, of which you were apprehensive, where could you have fix'd a Father's Name with Credit, but on a Husband? I knew *Fainall* to be a Man lavish of his Morals, an interested and professing Friend, a false and a designing Lover; yet one whose Wit and outward fair Behaviour have gain'd a Reputation with the Town, enough to make that Woman stand excus'd, who has suffer'd herself to be won by his Addresses. A better Man ought not to have been sacrific'd to the Occasion; a worse had not answer'd to the Purpose. When you are weary of him, you know your Remedy. (II.i.265-277)

In this tense situation, *Mirabell*'s speech reflects his seriousness, his awareness of the world, and yet we see also his power of witty generalization.¹⁶ It is a speech informed by thought, yet qualified by irony. Congreve's heroes are all very much concerned with their world and the necessity both for using it to advantage and escaping its liabilities. As Dale Underwood points out, Congreve's heroes only play the Machiavel in order to survive.¹⁷ *Mirabell* must out-*Fainall* *Fainall*, but avoid his degrading malice and ill-will.

It would be quite wrong, then, to consider *Mirabell* as in any way a "sentimental" or "exemplary" character, as have certain recent critics. Congreve is a comic playwright and therefore none of his characters are portrayed as entirely perfect or as models for our emulation. Rather, Congreve quite

¹⁶ Clifford Leech notes *Mirabell*'s "sobriety of tone, a faculty for sage yet witty generalization." *PQ*, 41 (1962), 277.

¹⁷ Dale Underwood, *Etherege and the Seventeenth-Century Comedy of Manners* (New Haven, 1957), p. 75, n. 6. Underwood's observation is the necessary answer to those critics who find *Mirabell*'s actions towards Mrs. *Fainall* distasteful.

deliberately distances us from Mirabell, defining his limitations with a detached and amused irony. "Sententious *Mirabell!*" says Millamant at one point, and we see that indeed Mirabell tends to take himself too seriously. We do admire him within certain comic limitations, but Congreve's achievement is to allow us to see his relationship to an inadequate society and to understand the complexities of his life. We approve his skill in controlling his world, we laugh at times at the necessary intricacy of his maneuverings, but finally, I think, we may be sobered at the perception of a man forced to this strained and artificial way of life. Mirabell is exemplary only in the sense that he embodies Congreve's own awareness of the conditions of a life lived within the way of the world.

Critics, with a few exceptions, have never tired of praising Millamant; her charm, her brilliance, her vivacity. Her position in *The Way of the World* is somewhat special: she has no direct relation to the action of the play. She is set apart from the contest of Mirabell and his antagonists, Fainall and Marwood, by her nervous aloofness and mordant wit. F. W. Bateson has suggested that Congreve's characters are drawn quite deliberately without biographical background,¹⁸ but Millamant's removal from the play's conflict is thematically meaningful; she represents an ideal: poise, self-discipline, self-awareness, detachment. Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are drawn in deliberate contrast to her; they are tightly enmeshed within the action of the play. But Millamant's language distances her from the degrading social milieu while suggesting a civilized and "correct" attitude towards life.

She controls her situation through her verbal dexterity, and illustrations of her ability to remove herself from the malice and foolery of the world are many. Here she is asked why she has been delayed in coming to the park:

... *Mincing* what had I? Why was I so long?

Mincing: O Mem, your Laship staid to peruse a Pecquet of Letters.

Millamant: O ay, Letters—I had Letters—I am persecuted with Letters—I hate Letters—No Body knows how to write Letters; and yet one has 'em, one does not know why—They serve to pin up one's Hair. (II.i.356-362)

The ostensible subject, "letters," is the given, the necessary framework for the linguistic display. But the way in which the given is expressed is essential. Millamant's short, breathless phrases, "O ay, Letters—I had Letters—I am persecuted with Letters," defines her impatience with such impertinences. They are intrusions, they are irrelevant, and the gradual extension of her phrases

¹⁸ F. W. Bateson, *The Works of Congreve* (New York, 1930), p. xvii.

Letters
I had Letters
I am persecuted with Letters

shows her in the process of recalling the odious things in mock-irritation and gradually defining her feelings about them. She belabors the poor letters from all angles in a series of phrases and sentences seemingly unconnected to each other except that each ends in the hated word. The last sentence ends in an abrupt non sequitur that exactly defines the significance of letters to her: "They serve to pin up one's Hair."

What is the "mode of perceiving" here? It is implied through Millamant's manner of speaking. Presumably the letters in question are love-letters, and presumably Millamant is besieged with them. Through her exaggerated weariness, she affects irritation with all such trifles; yet we sense a certain satisfaction. She speaks, politely, as if every woman were in the same tedious position (hence the "one" rather than "I"), but of course she knows (as does the audience) that she is more besieged than anyone else. Millamant somehow manages to imply that it is the plain, sad duty of every woman to receive such pathetic stuff. She is annoyed, of course, but resigned.

Her attitude, then, is a delicate balance: neither too self-satisfied, nor too tediously self-deprecating; neither too serious, nor too blatantly frivolous; neither too complaisant toward her suitors, nor too contemptuous. She is playing a deliberate little game, for the fun of it mainly, because it frees her from engagement with the hostility and witlessness that surrounds her. Her breathless, impatient, half-abstracted, impersonal, yet perfectly stylish response is itself a perception—a perception of Millamant as an ideal within the play. Her character is defined dramatically and we begin to sense that she is to be employed in *The Way of the World* not merely as a "fine lady," but as the embodiment of a proper state of mind.

We find in Millamant's next speech a complete change of tone. The breathless, abstracted impatience is gone entirely, replaced by a dry, straight-faced elaboration of a fantasy:

Witwoud: Is that the way? Pray Madam, do you pin up your Hair with all your Letters? I find I must keep Copies.

Millamant: Only with those in Verse, Mr. *Witwoud*. I never pin up my Hair with Prose. I fancy ones Hair wou'd not curl if it were pinn'd up with Prose. I think I try'd once *Mincing*.

Mincing: O Mem, I shall never forget it. (II.i.363-369)

Millamant varies her tone like a virtuoso violinist; it is her command of linguistic resource that defines her *modus vivendi*, and her verbal skill provides a norm by which other characters in the play are measured: there is

some difference between "the character of a Witwoud and a Truewit," as Congreve points out in his prefatory epistle. The artifice needed for the truewits to retain their freedom in a society swayed by Lady Wishfort, Fainall, and Marwood demands the linguistic control of a Millamant or a Mirabell, and the variety of rhetorical abilities they command reflects the aesthetically perfect self-discipline they are mutually trying to achieve.

Millamant's dreamy apostrophe to her maidenhood in the proviso scene reflects the tension between her poised syntactical ability and the essentially girlish delights she describes:¹⁹

My dear Liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful Solitude, my darling Contemplation, must I bid you then Adieu? ay-h adieu.—my morning thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers, all *ye douceurs*, *ye Someils du Matin*, adieu—I can't do't, 'tis more than Impossible— (IV.i.185-190)

The regretful, languishing tone anticipates the mood of Belinda's awakening in Book I of "The Rape of the Lock." Both Pope and Congreve are able to admire their heroines while touching them very gently with satire. Here, within the framework of two rhetorical questions, Millamant bids farewell to Dear Liberty, Faithful Solitude, Darling Contemplation, and so forth. That these qualities should be heightened through personification is unexpected, and along with the linguistic foolery of the French phrases suggests irony: Millamant is aware of the girlishness of the *douceurs*, the *someils du matin*, and can smile at the picture of herself she creates. However, the abrupt shift of tone at the end, "I can't do't, 'tis more than Impossible," smilingly accents the validity of the vignette, of the pleasures Millamant must forego.

The total effect of this short speech is, then, to picture Millamant defining with great stylistic ease a girlish mood for which she feels both nostalgic affection and a sense of detached amusement. The verbal pattern has created for us a character of some depth, and this passage alone refutes L. C. Knights's curt dismissal of Millamant, whom he finds "never for a moment enlivened by the play of genuine intelligence."²⁰ Millamant must speak to the given subjects of Restoration comedy; it is in the way she speaks that we find her character defined and the play of, in this passage especially, a generous intelligence.

To summarize: self-awareness, knowledge of society, generosity, and amused irony—these qualities define true wit in *The Way of the World* and

¹⁹ Norman N. Holland sees a development in Millamant's character during the course of *The Way of the World*; the proviso scene shows "the enchanting Millamant brought from girlhood to maturity." *The First Modern Comedies*, p. 185. I think that it would be hard to show this development in any detail; we are to see Millamant's intelligence and maturity from her first appearance "full sail, with her Fan spread and Streamers out, and a shoal of Fools for Tenders" (II.i.323-324).

²⁰ Knights, pp. 146-147.

provide the play with a moral norm, a viable life-style. It is important to see that there is no "alternative" to the way of the world in the sense of an escape from it. The play's curiously uncomic dramatic atmosphere is world-weary, tristful, even bitter. Fainall, trying desperately to reconcile Marwood to their wretched fate, cries out: "I'll hate my Wife yet more, Dam her, I'll part with her, rob her of all she's worth, and we'll retire somewhere, any where to another World" (II.i.243-246). Such a retreat, such an alternative, is impossible, and when in the last act Lady Wishfort pleads with Marwood, "let us leave the World, and retire by our selves and be *Shepherdesses*" (V.i.134-135), the laughter is joyless.

This note of sadness is heard even in the hero and heroine; the triumph of the wits is a private triumph and the central concern in Congreve's last three plays is the absolute necessity of maintaining a guarded public self while maintaining the value of a private relationship. A perfect expression of this necessary double-self in Congreve's comedies is found in the well-known poem addressed to Congreve by Lady Mary Wortley Montague:

In public preserve the decorum that's just,
And show in his eyes he is true to his trust!
.....
But when the long hours of public are past,
And we meet with champagne and a chicken at last,
May every fond pleasure that moment endear;
Be banish'd afar both discretion and fear!
Forgetting or scorning the airs of the crowd,
He may cease to be formal, and I to be proud,
Till lost in the joy, we confess that we live,
And he may be rude, and yet I may forgive.^{2 1}

An adequate reading of Congreve must rest finally on the realization that the style, the verbal pattern, of his comedy is thematically significant and the key to the playwright's comic vision. This vision, revealed most fully in the last three comedies, is of the continuing and serious conflict of the truwit, civilized and self-aware, with those who would block his goals or threaten his integrity. The linguistic acuity of the witty couple reflects their achievement: a disciplined poise and integrity all the more remarkable when set against the way of the world. Contrary to Knights's assertion, Congreve was able to develop a "genuinely sensitive and individual mode of expression," one that

^{2 1} "The Lover: A Ballad," in *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (New York, 1893), II, 483.

differentiates and evaluates the various characters through the language they use. Through the clash of these complex characters—one might even say the clash of languages—Congreve develops the moral realism that makes him the most complex and significant comic playwright of the Restoration.

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