III

The theme is established straightaway by the title, and the phrase 'the way of the world', or its variations, is repeated several times in the course of the play. Fainall first uses it—'the Ways of Wedlock and this World' (II.i. 222). He repeats the phrase in the third Act—'all in the Way of the World' (l. 636) and in the last Act—''tis but the Way of the World' (l. 489), and finally Mirabell picks it and mockingly throws it back at him: ''tis the Way of the World, Sir; of the Widows of the World' (ll. 572–3).

Congreve thus makes it clear that his play is concerned with the problem of social living. The world provides man's terms of reference and since he has no way to live except within the way of the world his task is, firstly, to maintain the health of society by protecting it from disruptive forces and, secondly, to ensure that his own personality is not destroyed in the process. In this play the double challenge is met with, and answered, by Mirabell and Millamant.

People who endanger the well-being of society fall primarily into two categories—the sub-intellectuals or fools who, by pretending to be what they are not, spread the germ of affectation and artificiality, and the anti-socials, who exploit their environment and leave destruction in their wake. The fools in the play are Petulant and Witwoud, each outbidding the other in affectation. Mirabell has no patience with them and warns

Millamant not to indulge in their company (II.i. 447–9). Millamant also knows their worthlessness and does not hesitate to put them in their place (II.i. 347–8).

The serious business of the play is, however, concerned with the other category of human beings. In Fainall and Mrs Marwood we see a pair of unscrupulous lovers who are out to get what they can. They eavesdrop, dissemble, threaten, blackmail, and use every means in their power to gain their objectives. They expose Waitwell and confront Lady Wishfort with the threat that they will publicly expose her daughter's former misconduct if she does not part with the wealth of her daughter and her niece. It is difficult to decide who is the more despicable of the two—Mrs Marwood, with her pretence of friendship, pouring poison into Lady Wishfort's ears, or Fainall, whose bestial ferocity makes Lady Wishfort cry out: 'This is most inhumanly savage.'

If such predatory creatures were allowed freedom of movement, the world would become a dangerous place to live in. Duke Senior in *As You Like It* and Prospero in *The Tempest* had both retired from the world when they found they could not cope with its evils. But Congreve knows that all escape routes are closed and that Arcadia does not exist in real life, and the countryside is represented, not by idyllic scenes of pastoral charm, but by Sir Willfull Witwoud, gross, uncouth, 'ruder than Gothick'.

At the same time it is not possible to eliminate these undesirable characters altogether. There are too many Fainalls and Marwoods in the world for them all to be destroyed. To Shelley's romantic mind it had seemed an easy task to overthrow all the evils of society and create a new Hellas on earth, but the realists of the seventeenth century know that if a *modus vivendi* is to be found it will have to cater for the continued existence of such people.

The simplicist would suggest that they can be reformed by

virtuous examples of innocence and goodness of heart, but to hope that evil may be turned into good is to indulge in mere wishful thinking. Congreve, brought up on Hobbes's *Leviathan*, was aware that the egotistical instinct that drives man forward is too ingrained a part of human nature, and that as long as society lasts there will always be men and women whose perverted ego will seek self-aggrandizement at the cost of others. There are examples of goodness in *The Way of the World*, but Mrs Fainall's selfless generosity in promoting the love of Mirabell and Millamant brings forth from Mrs Marwood only a contemptuous 'I shall not prove another Pattern of Generosity' (III.i. 243–4). They have no pity either. Lady Wishfort, whatever her other faults, genuinely loves her daughter but her agony over her daughter's threatened loss of reputation leaves both Mrs Marwood and Fainall untouched.

A modern organized society has, however, two institutions whereby effective control can be exercised over every individual within it. One is the institution of wealth and the other is the institution of law. Money is power, the power to control. But since in the genteel society of the seventeenth century one did not work for one's living, money could only mean inherited wealth, and all the central characters of the play become vitally interested in acquiring it and the power that goes with it. The plot of *The Way of the World* is thus built, as Paul and Miriam Mueschke have described it, upon a 'legacy conflict'.[1] The three people who possess this wealth are Lady Wishfort, her daughter Mrs Fainall, and her niece Millamant; but control of this money rests entirely in Lady Wishfort and from the first scene we are aware of her presence presiding over the lives of the others. But though money is power, it becomes an *effective* instrument of power only if it is carefully

[1] Paul and Miriam Mueschke, *A New View of Congreve's Way of the World*, University of Michig[illegible]

protected and judiciously handled. A fool and his money are soon parted; Lady Wishfort misuses her power and ends up by becoming a helpless pawn in the hands of more clever personalities.

There is still the remedy of law left. The civilized society of the seventeenth century might indulge in many anti-social activities but its legal system held the community together, and was the one powerful deterrent that none dared ignore. Lady Wishfort's control over the fortunes of her daughter and of Millamant was a legal control, and all the plots and counter-plots revolve round the problem of the *legal* extraction of her wealth. Her *legal* consent to the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant is necessary if Millamant is to claim the 'moiety' of her fortune. A *legal* document has to have Lady Wishfort's signature on it before Fainall and Mrs Marwood can wrest anything out of her. And in the end a *legal* document is triumphantly produced by Mirabell to overthrow Fainall and bring all his scheming plans to naught. The 'black box' acquires a symbolic significance in the play; it represents *law in action*—the one force that can keep the Fainalls and Marwoods at bay.

Mirabell uses legal methods, but he also has to rely on his own shrewdness, practical foresight and worldly wisdom. Congreve has no idealistic illusions about life. If we live in the world, we have to accept the ways of the world and use the weapons of the world to protect ourselves. They are the only weapons that people like Fainall recognize, and such people must be met on their own terms, defeated on their own terms and defeated by their own arguments. But Congreve does not allow us to forget that Fainall, even with the sting taken out of him, will continue to live. The play ends, not to the tune of wedding bells, but with Mirabell handing over to Mrs Fainall the 'Deed of Trust' and advising her: 'it may be a means, well manag'd, to make you live easily together'. It is a sobering

thought that Mrs Fainall will have to live with her husband for the rest of her days.

Mirabell is the cohesive force that keeps society together, but the aberrants—both the fools and the villains—are factors of disintegration. There is no unity among them. Witwoud and Petulant form a pair, but they are constantly falling out with each other. More interesting is the disharmony between Fainall and Mrs Marwood, revealed in the passionate scene that takes place in St James's Park. Fainall is Mrs Marwood's lover but he has not hesitated to exploit her and rob her of her wealth. Mrs Marwood is Fainall's mistress, but when he accuses her of her secret love for Mirabell she attacks him, in the fury of guilty passion with: 'I hate you, and shall forever' (II.i. 225).

Mirabell, on the other hand, draws people towards himself. At the beginning of the play he and Millamant form a central unit and Mrs Fainall, though a former mistress, is his staunch supporter in whom he can safely entrust all his plans. He has a devoted servant in Waitwell and he has won the loyalty of Foible, Waitwell's bride. Towards the end of the play he and Sir Willfull have become 'sworn Brothers and Fellow Travellers', Petulant and Witwoud stand as witnesses to his legal document and even Lady Wishfort, his 'evil genius', has been won over to his side.

It is interesting that Mirabell and Millamant, however difficult their circumstances, never acknowledge defeat. They are the true realists of the play and they represent the real way of the world. But Fainall, lacking positive values, has no staying power and when the ways of the world become too much for him he unrealistically talks of escape to 'another world': '[We] will retire somewhere, any where to another World' (II.i. 254–5). Another instance of escapism is seen in Lady Wishfort. She has wrapped herself in self-delusion and when circumstances bear in on her she turns, with grotesque

incongruity, to thoughts of a false pastoralism: 'I would 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. 139–42). Of the two challenges that are faced by the Truewit of his age, only one has been discussed so far—society can, as Mirabell has shown, be protected from the destructive forces within it. The second challenge is much bigger—can the individual, while sustaining society, retain his own identity? The problem had been faced by Etherege in *The Man of Mode* where the unyielding characters of Dorimant and Harriet had faced each other with the hostility of a love that does not know how to surrender. Etherege found no satisfactory solution to the problem; Congreve analyses it from all angles and ultimately, through the characters of Mirabell and Millamant, shows how the conflict can be resolved.

The play revolves round the problem of marriage-relationships and Congreve gives an early indication of this in the quotations from Horace affixed to the title page: 'It is worth your while to listen, you who do not wish things to go well for adulterers' and 'she who is detected fears for her dowry. . . .' Significantly, the oft-repeated phrase 'the way of the world' is always used in the context of marriage and at the end of the play Congreve emphasizes the moral 'That Marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind'.

The story presents many pairs of lovers but at no point does it show the first stages of love. Mrs Fainall's amour with Mirabell is a thing of the past, and what we see is its aftertaste which is not very palatable. Fainall has already been married for some time; even his extra-marital affair has begun to show the effects of satiety and towards the end he and Mrs Marwood cling to each other more as joint conspirators than as lovers. Mirabell and Millamant are, from the beginning, acknowledged to be in love with each other and the play

only puts the seal of betrothal on their love. Only in Lady Wishfort do we see any of the anticipatory titillation of the sex-game as she rehearses to herself the various poses in which she will receive Sir Rowland. But her character is grossly exaggerated and the affair itself is a deliberately mocking travesty of love.

It is obvious, therefore, that Congreve in this play is concerned, not with the drama of falling in love, but with the more fundamental question of working out a permanent and satisfactory relationship between people who are already in love or have been in love. In other words it is a play about human adjustment and human responsibilities. One of the lessons that is driven home is that it is not possible to evade the consequences of one's actions and much of what happens towards the end of the play is shown to be a direct result of earlier acts of folly or wrong-doing. Mrs Fainall's past affair with Mirabell brings near disaster on her, and her husband's adulterous liaison with Mrs Marwood comes back full circle upon him. At the same time, Mirabell's responsible action of safeguarding his former mistress's wealth helps to save the situation.

With the need for responsibility is coupled the need for true adjustment. Fainall and Mrs Fainall are an example of a husband and wife who have failed to adjust; Fainall and Mrs Marwood are a pair of lovers who lack faith in each other. Against these ill-assorted couples, in whom we see the unpleasant consequences of incompatibility, is placed the ideal pair of lovers, Mirabell and Millamant.

The love of Mirabell and Millamant bears no relationship to the rest of the story. It pursues an independent course unconcerned with the general wrangle over property and wealth. The lovers are, it is true, directly involved in all the plots and counter-plots and Mirabell himself is the master-mind behind most of them, but all this is irrelevant so far as their personal

relationship is concerned. This is their private drama, for before their love can be sealed with marriage they must come to terms with each other on the basis of mutual honesty and reciprocal trust. The great moment when this takes place is in Act IV, the famous bargaining scene in which Congreve reaches the high mark of his art. There is nothing like its brilliance, its depth of emotion and profundity in the entire range of Restoration Comedy.

Millamant loves Mirabell but, like Harriet in *The Man of Mode,* she knows that admission will mean surrender and surrender may mean loss of identity. The fear that marriage may convert Mirabell into a complacent husband, and reduce her to a mere wife, guides her in all she says and does. She eludes Mirabell to a degree that leaves him in a daze: 'To think of a Whirlwind...were a Case of more steady Contemplation' (II.i. 499–500). She laughs at him when he is serious; she takes shelter behind 'a Herd of Fools' to avoid his presence; and when he dares to suggest that beauty is a lover's gift she replies, with superb arrogance: 'Lord, what is a Lover, that it can give? Why one makes Lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases: And then if one pleases one makes more' (II.i. 412–15). This is no coquetry, no feminine vanity. Millamant is fighting—fighting to gain time, fighting for herself and for the rights of every woman, fighting for the survival of the individual.

And so we come to the bargaining scene. Millamant has at last agreed to meet Mirabell, and though she tells him: 'I'll fly and be followed to the last Moment, though I am on the very verge of Matrimony', here the chase ends. This is no time for emotion, but the depth of their love for each other reveals itself by its very absence and it is only when Mirabell leaves the room that Millamant relaxes and admits: 'if Mirabell shou'd not make a good Husband, I am a lost thing;—for I

find I love him violently' (IV.i. 323–4). But first they must come to terms. They face each other not as lovers but as rational human beings, because it is only on the basis of reason, unclouded by emotion, that the firm foundations of marriage can be built. Congreve deliberately makes them use legal language, because in a society upheld by its legal system the personal equation of marriage must also be worked out in terms of a contract. Millamant bargains—she bargains for her privileges, for her liberty, for her right to privacy, for her freedom to meet whom she pleases. 'These Articles subscrib'd', she will agree to marry Mirabell.

If Millamant does not wish, by degrees, to 'dwindle into a Wife', Mirabell also knows that a marriage where the partners do not respect each other's liberty is no marriage, and he is equally determined not to 'be beyond Measure enlarg'd into a Husband'. But he also has his provisos. Using the same legalistic jargon, he lists his articles of contract so that he may be protected from the tyranny of the weaker sex.

The scene is brilliant in its artificiality, for no real man and woman have ever used such language on the eve of their betrothal. Congreve deliberately makes it so to stylize and distance the effect, for Mirabell and Millamant represent, at this moment, not merely themselves but all humanity. But the artificiality is more than a literary device. The mutual give and take, on the basis of which human relationships can survive, involves self-control, intellectual discrimination and the sense of decorum. Primitive naturalism does not lead to civilized social living and Congreve reveals the great human paradox that art and nature must unite to create the artifice that is life.