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Module No 32: William Congreve: *The Way of the World*

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Section 1 – Background: The life, work and times of William Congreve

The Restoration marks an important moment in the social and literary history of England. The return of King Charles II from his exile in France in 1660 signalled not only the restoration of monarchy in England but also the revival of theatrical performances which had been banned by the Puritans since 1642. In stark contrast to the puritanic norms of conduct and morality that were imposed during Oliver Cromwell's regime, the new king brought with him a taste for wit and gallantry and encouraged an atmosphere of hedonistic liveliness in his court. With the re-opening of the theatres, a new generation of playwrights came to prominence who catered to the courtly taste for witty dialogue, bustling plots and sexual innuendo and intrigue. Through the 1660s and 70s the English stage witnessed the evolution of a kind of drama that came to be known as the comedy of manners, which dealt almost exclusively with the lifestyle and social conduct of the leisured, fashionable, urban, upper classes. The most prominent practitioners of this kind of comedy were George Etherege, William Wycherley and William Congreve. The literary influence of Middleton and Shirley's intricate plots and intrigues, Beaumont and Fletcher's cynical worldview, Moliere's witty dialogue and Jonson's "humorous" characterization is evident in the works of these dramatists. By focusing on the superficial manners, faults and foibles of the upper classes, they represented their characters as being sensual, egoistic, predatory and immoral and adopted a critical, sometimes even cynical, view of human nature. These comedies often relied for their dramatic effect on common tropes like mistaken and disguised identities, sexual tension and intrigue between lovers and strife between the older and younger generations. Questions of decency and morality were given little importance as the main purpose of these comedies was to evoke laughter through the representation of the absurdities of behaviour of aristocratic men and women. This appealed to the taste of a courtly audience, whose major preoccupation was external, social conduct rather than inner, individual feeling. By the end of the century, however, a strong middle class was emerging in England (especially after the Glorious Revolution of 1688) and the open licentiousness and profligacy of the comedy of manners raised quite a few eyebrows. Already, dramatists like George Farquhar and John Vanbrugh were writing stage comedies that moved away from the sexual tension and detached cynicism that marked the works of the older masters like Etherege and Wycherley and were replacing the metropolitan glitter with a more intimate, domestic form of humour. This turn in popular taste was crystallized in Jeremy Collier's trenchant attack on Restoration comedy in his pamphlet *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698). This reflected the changing social structure and public ethos of England and clearly announced the decline of the comedy of manners. Comic drama was to follow the path of middle-class sentimentalism and genteel virtue for the next several decades.

William Congreve was arguably the one of the greatest English dramatists of the Restoration period. Born in 1670 in Bardsey, Congreve spent his childhood in Ireland and studied at Trinity College, Dublin. Here he met Jonathan Swift, with whom he maintained a lifelong association. Though he proceeded to study law at Middle Temple, London, he soon embarked on a literary career that was as brief as it was brilliant. His first play, *The Old Bachelor* appeared in 1693 under the auspices of John Dryden and was an instant hit. Though the play announced clearly enough Congreve's skill at writing witty comic dialogue, it lacked tightness of action. In his next comedy, *The Double Dealer* (1693), Congreve demonstrated significant improvement in characterization, plot and style. Congreve's rapid maturation as a comic dramatist became evident in his next play *Love for Love* (1695), which struck a fine balance between character, dialogue and action. In his next outing on stage, Congreve tried his hand at tragedy and produced *The Mourning Bride* (1697), a play written in the grandiose heroic mode popular during that period. He returned to comedy in 1700 with *The Way of the World*, which inexplicably did not meet with commercial success but has since then received considerable popular and critical acclaim and is now widely considered to be the acme of Restoration comedy. Congreve did not write any more plays after this as the popular taste of the English theatre-goers had turned towards the more middle-class, moralistic, sentimental comedies of the 18th century. He subsequently wrote a masque called *Judgement of Paris* and an opera called *Semele*. Congreve was a member of the Kit-Kat Club and held a few minor political positions till his death in 1729.

Section 2 – *The Way of the World*: Summary and Significance

Lady Wishfort, a wealthy widow, is opposed to the match between her niece, Millamant and Mirabell, a man who has previously flattered the aunt in order to secretly court the niece. This trick has been revealed to Lady Wishfort by Mrs. Marwood, who seeks revenge on Mirabell for resisting her advances. Lady Wishfort threatens to disinherit Millamant of her fortune if she gets married to Mirabell. In order to trap her into consenting to his marriage with Millamant, Mirabell hatches a plot with the aid of his servant Waitwell and Lady Wishfort's maid, Foible, who have married recently. Waitwell disguises himself as Mirabell's uncle "Sir Rowland", who supposedly hates his nephew and intends to disinherit him by producing a son of his own. Fueled by her desire for revenge and encouraged by Foible, Lady Wishfort accepts the addresses of "Sir Rowland". Mirabell schemes to blackmail Lady Wishfort into agreeing to his match with Millamant when she has been fooled into a bigamous marriage with a pretend aristocrat. But Mrs. Marwood comes to know of the plot and informs Lady Wishfort's son-in-law, Fainall, with whom she is having an affair. In the meantime, as Mirabell and Millamant discuss the terms and conditions of their marriage, Lady

Wishfort informs her niece that she is to marry her nephew Sir Wilfull Witwoud, who has just arrived from the country. Lady Wishfort also receives a letter informing her of the trick played on her by Mirabell. Fainall, who is a reckless rake, gets Waitwell arrested and tries to blackmail Lady Wishfort with his knowledge of her daughter's scandalous affair with Mirabell before she got married to him. He asks her to transfer all her fortune, her daughter's estate and half of Millamant's inheritance to him. Finding herself in a crisis, Lady Wishfort appeals to Mirabell and promises to let him marry Millamant if he rescues her from social disgrace and enforced poverty. At this point, Mirabell reveals that before her marriage to Fainall, Mrs. Fainall had made him her trustee so that her husband could not lay hands on her fortune. Thus, the play ends happily for the main couple.

Congreve's recreation of the English aristocratic society, so popular in the plays of the 1660s and 70s, is characterized by the standard features of the Restoration comedy of manners: witty repartee, sexual intrigues and deceptions, inter-generational conflict and a mercenary attitude to relationships. Yet, Congreve manages to infuse the general atmosphere of the play with a humorous spirit that exposes the follies and absurdities of human nature without entirely ruling out the possibility of love and romance. In fact, Congreve strikes a delicate balance between the harsh cynicism of his literary predecessors like Etherege and Wycherley and the tame sentimentality of later dramatists like Farquhar and Vanbrugh. His play has the usual cast of stock characters – the country bumpkin, the city rake, the intelligent heroine, the mischievous servant, the vain and foolish dowager – who are presented in situations that evoke laughter but do not lead the audience to a wholesale condemnation of the characters' behaviour. Instead, the play presents, as its title suggests, a matter-of-fact, gently satirical picture of urban, upper-class English society of the day where personal alliances are made and marred by considerations of wealth and social status. The characters exemplify the best and worst aspects of social conduct within the highly class-conscious, rather mercenary society of late 17th century England. The humour arises from the eccentricities or "manners" that such social tensions produce in the characters' conduct and dealings with one another. Whereas the main characters in the play, Mirabell and Millamant, represent a perfect balance between reason and emotion in their level-headed and refined approach to the complex and interrelated issues of marriage and inheritance, other characters like Fainall, Lady Wishfort and Mrs Marwood represent an excessive lust for money and an immoderate desire for revenge and are ultimately left dissatisfied at the end of the play. While Congreve presents a world where questions of morality seem to take a backseat as characters employ deceitful means in order to serve their own selfish purposes, their actions are shown as resulting in humorous situations that reveal the inherent weaknesses and flaws of human nature. Thus, in terms of its structure, characterization and ethos, the play represents the best of the comedy of manners.

Section 3 – Structure: Dramatic Irony and Sub-plots

Dramatic irony arises when the audience is given more information about the action of the play than one or more characters on stage. This is a literary device that dramatists commonly use to give the words and actions of particular characters greater significance than they themselves are aware of. Ancient Greek and Roman playwrights used this form of irony frequently, since the myths and legends they dramatized for the stage were part of common cultural knowledge. For instance, the words and actions of King Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* would have assumed a special tragic significance because of the contrast between the ancient Greek audience's familiarity with his story and the titular character's own ignorance of the real meaning of the events being enacted on stage. Dramatic irony can also be effectively used to create comic effect on stage. Thus, when Shakespeare introduces on stage two pairs of identical twins unaware of the existence of each other in *The Comedy of Errors*, the humour arises from the fact that the characters find themselves in situations where their identities are confused.

Congreve uses dramatic irony skillfully in his play to create a series of comic episodes where characters speak and act in partial or total ignorance of their actual situation. Throughout the play, the characters try to deceive one another by strategically using information they possess about others to their own advantage. Thus, the success of Mirabell's trick on Lady Wishfort, and consequently of his plan to marry Millamant, is dependent on the lady's ignorance of the fact that Waitwell is only a servant pretending to be an aristocrat and is also an already married man. The humour here arises from Lady Wishfort's ignorance of these facts and her vain acceptance of "Sir Rowland's" addresses. On the other hand, Fainall's plan to cheat Lady Wishfort out of her estate is also based on information that she does not have: the secret of Mrs Fainall's liaison with Mirabell before he married her. Thus, Fainall presents to Lady Wishfort and her daughter a very real threat of public humiliation. However, his plan is thwarted by Mirabell, again by means of information that he has hitherto withheld from everyone – that before marrying Fainall, Mrs Fainall had appointed Mirabell as the trustee of her estate. Thus, at this point, a double dramatic irony is at work: Fainall has information that he can use against Lady Wishfort, but Mirabell has a secret that he can spring just at the right moment to counteract Fainall's move and thereby also secure his own goal of marrying Millamant without forfeiting her estate. Thus, what could potentially turn into a dangerous and tragic situation for the central characters becomes a comic resolution through the effective use of dramatic irony.

Another dramatic device that Congreve uses adeptly is the sub-plot, a standard feature of romantic comedies. In Restoration comedy, sub-plots are typically used to complicate the main plot and offer an amusing foil to the main action of the play. The central intrigue of Congreve's play –

Mirabell's deception of Lady Wishfort by presenting his servant Waitwell as his uncle "Sir Rowland" – is, from the very beginning, in danger of being thwarted as both Mrs Marwood and Fainall seek to prevent the union of Mirabell and Millamant. Fainall correctly suspects that his wife had an affair with Mirabell before he married her, as well as that his current mistress, Mrs Marwood, is also in love with him. Thus, there is enough motivation for both these characters, driven by revenge and jealousy, to hatch a plot against Mirabell. This sub-plot is set into motion when Mrs Marwood overhears Mrs Fainall and Foible discuss Mirabell's plan; she also gets to know of Mrs Fainall's affair with Mirabell before her marriage and is incensed by the uncomplimentary remarks about her age the two women make. Seeking revenge, she passes on all this information to Fainall, thereby equipping him with a means of sabotaging Mirabell's plan. This sub-plot thus poses a complication and finally a crisis for Mirabell's marriage with Millamant at the climax of the play. On the other hand, Lady Wishfort's attempts to get her niece married to Sir Wilfull Witwoud constitute another sub-plot that is intended to prevent Mirabell from marrying Millamant but the plan is undone by Fainall when he gets the country squire drunk. Thus, the complication this sub-plot raises is not only resolved in a humorous way, it also indirectly clears the path for Mirabell to marry Millamant and ultimately leads up to his final confrontation with Fainall. Therefore, the sub-plots derive their dramatic force, in terms of both the psychological motivation of characters involved and the consequences of their actions, from the main plot of the play and propel it to a comic resolution that combines an element of surprise (Mirabell's final disclosure) with that of predictability (the union of lovers), which is the hallmark of romantic comedy.

Section 4 – Characterization

The hero of the play, Mirabell is a typical Restoration beau – clever, cynical and polished. From the very beginning, he comes across as someone who is capable of shrewd planning but who never trusts anyone entirely. Thus, he makes sure that Waitwell gets married to Foible before he embarks on the project of duping Lady Wishfort in disguise, lest the servant betray him under temptation. He is also quite unabashedly manipulative in his dealings with Lady Wishfort and her daughter: he flatters the former merely to court Millamant and impregnates the latter before marrying her off to Fainall to cover up the scandalous affair. Yet, he seems to be desirable to a majority of the female characters in the play, suggesting that he is charming in spite of his flaws. In fact, Mirabell is quite sophisticated in his manners and even has the capacity for ironic self-criticism, as is evident from the way he analyses his own feelings for Millamant before coming to the conclusion that he is truly in love with her. Despite being provoked by Millamant, he retains his dignity and wit in addressing her and is able to convey to her the depth of his feelings without

resorting to sentimentality. He is also a good judge of character, as is evident from his harsh but accurate assessment of Fainall. In addition, he has ample common sense and foresight, which he puts to use in ensuring that neither Millamant nor Mrs Fainall lose their fortunes to the greed of Fainall.

The heroine of the play, Millamant is a perfect match to Mirabell. She is as charming and witty as she is affected and flirtatious. In fact, what makes her character so attractive and likeable is her ability to use her feminine charm to hold her own in the face of Mirabell's refined gallantry. She is completely self-assured in dealing with her many suitors, yet not incapable of self-reflexive irony. Like Mirabell, she is pragmatic and level-headed, unwilling to part with her inheritance but at the same time also deeply in love without indulging in excessive demonstration of her feelings. In fact, the proviso scene, in which the two lovers negotiate the terms and conditions of their marriage, represents not only their strongly independent personalities but also their mutual understanding and respect. Together, in what is essentially a battle of the sexes, they represent the realization of the finest character traits on the Restoration stage.

Of the secondary characters, Lady Wishfort is perhaps most crucial to the plot. She is shown to be vain and lacking in common sense: she not only misinterprets Mirabell's flattery as love but also falls prey to his trick involving "Sir Rowland". She is somewhat self-delusional, unable to accept her age gracefully and believing she could tempt eligible suitors. She is a bad judge of character, since practically everyone she trusts betrays her. She is also high-handed in dealing with the issue of Millamant's marriage and tyrannical towards Foible, which provides both of them the motive to conspire against her.

The antagonist of the play, Fainall is essentially a corrupt version of Mirabell. He is suspicious of everyone around him and a ruthless, hypocritical opportunist who marries for money and aims to dupe his wife and mother-in-law out of their fortunes in order to finance his illicit relationship with Mrs Marwood, but also resents the fact that his wife was formerly involved with Mirabell. In his scheming, mercenary attitude to relationships, Fainall is Mirabell's distorted reflection – lacking both in the latter's outward polish and his depth of feeling.

In contrast to the rich and powerful protagonists, Mrs Fainall and Mrs Marwood represent the precarious situation women with no financial means of their own faced in the male-dominated English society of the times.

The servants, Waitwell and Foible, play a significant role in tricking Lady Wishfort. Their actions, like their masters', are guided by selfish motives: Waitwell wants to make enough money to be able to retire to the country while Foible wishes to escape from her oppressive service to Lady Wishfort. They are indeed as opportunistic as their social betters, offering a humorous mimicry of the ways of the world their masters inhabit. In addition, there are other secondary characters in the

play who are amusing "types" common in Restoration comedy: young Witwoud and Petulant, foolish men trying to imitate the rakish ways of their superiors but lacking in wit and sense, and Sir Wilfull Witwoud, the country aristocrat with quaint manners but rather honourable and sympathetic in his dealings with Mirabell and Millamant.

Section 5 – Themes: Class, Money, Love and Marriage

The social order that Congreve depicts in his play is one in which money is a very important concern for characters belonging to all classes. In the fashionable circles of the English society Congreve presents to his audience, alliances and affiliations are made more on the basis of monetary considerations and less in terms of personal or familial duty. Thus, from the very outset, the desire for money emerges as a primary force that guides the actions of most of the characters. The central intrigue of the plot involving Lady Wishfort's deception is driven by Mirabell's design of marrying Millamant without forfeiting the share of her inheritance that lies under the guardianship of her aunt. Thus, though he does feel genuine passion for Millamant, Mirabell is unwilling to marry her at the cost of her fortune. Romantic love alone is clearly not a strong enough motivation to tempt him away from the possibility of making a financially sound marriage. In fact, he is even willing to resort to cheating and blackmailing Lady Wishfort in order to lay claim on both Millamant's hand and her fortune. Similarly, Millamant herself is aware of the importance of having enough money for a comfortable existence. Thus, when threatened with the loss of half of her fortune towards the end of the play, she reconsiders the idea of marrying Mirabell. Fainall is only a morally corrupt version of the protagonists, acting out of pure greed in his attempt to trick Lady Wishfort, her daughter and her niece out of their fortunes. Unlike Mirabell, his actions are ruthless and are not tempered by a capacity for affection and dignity. In fact, Fainall's conduct exposes the ugly face of social ambition and lust for money that is inherent in all the characters within the world of the play. Even the servants, Waitwell and Foible, participate in the conspiracy against Lady Wishfort for monetary gain and to improve their social standing. In fact, Mrs Marwood and Mrs Fainall seem to be the least powerful characters in the play, in spite of their social class, because they have no financial means of their own.

The play's main plot is based on the theme of love and courtship. Both Mirabell and Millamant display superb control over their feelings in spite of their attraction for one another and conduct themselves with remarkable poise through their courtship. While Millamant enjoys teasing Mirabell before she finally accepts his proposal, Mirabell also reflects on his own feelings for her in an ironic, self-mocking way before he decides to go ahead with his plan of marrying her. Both of them also share an unsentimental, pragmatic attitude towards matters of love and matrimony, since

neither is willing to forfeit the part of Millamant's fortune under Lady Wishfort's guardianship. Thus, their mutual affection and attraction notwithstanding, Mirabell and Millamant are acutely conscious of how important money is for them to be able to make a comfortable and happy marriage. Their witty exchanges, especially during the proposal scene, also indicate a degree of mutual understanding and respect that promises to make them compatible as a couple. While the exchange of dialogue between them in the proviso scene is full of wit and vivacity, underlying the brilliant comedy are serious concerns about the state of matrimony in a society obsessed with frivolous excesses and tempting indulgences of the lifestyle of the English aristocracy of the day. While both display a strong desire to maintain a degree of personal freedom, they also seek to ensure sexual fidelity and domestic felicity for the success of their marriage. Within the context of the play, where marriages are based purely on monetary considerations and relationships driven by greed and jealousy, Mirabell and Millamant represent the ideal couple – capable of genuine love and admiration for one another but unwilling to let their emotions overtake their good sense or refined manners.

In contrast to this ideal match, Fainall's relationship with his mistress is based on little more than greed and mistrust. Not only is Fainall unconcerned about cheating on his wife, whom he had married only for her fortune, but he also does not care much for his mistress, Mrs Marwood. She, in her turn, is also inclined towards Mirabell and acts purely out of jealousy and vengeance. Thus, Fainall does not share love, respect or trust with either his wife or his mistress. The minor characters in the play, Waitwell and Foible, are also a married couple who are driven, like their superiors, by material considerations. Thus, while Waitwell aims to make enough money to buy a farm, Foible seeks to escape from Lady Wishfort's tyrannical service. Their match is, therefore, one that is based on mutual convenience. Lady Wishfort's craving for male attention is more a sign of her vanity than a sincere desire for love.

Section 6 – Conclusion

Congreve presents a glittering picture of late 17th century British aristocracy in a dramatic form that combines social criticism with light-hearted laughter. The play addresses the preoccupations of a courtly audience with manners and appearances as markers of class identity and determinants of personal and social relationships; at the same time, it also effectively uses the conventions of Restoration comedy to reveal the best and the worst aspects of the social order it represents. Though the action of the play is based chiefly on deceptions and intrigues, and the characters driven mostly by selfish motives, Congreve offers a glimpse of the possibility of romance within a dramatic and social context in which relationships are clearly under the strain of

moral corruption and financial avarice. In their capacity to reflect on the workings of their own minds and hearts, and their delightfully witty expression of the same, Mirabell and Millamant echo Beatrice and Benedick, two of the very best of Shakespeare's comic characters. Others like Fainall, Lady Wishfort and Mrs Marwood are exaggerated, parodic embodiments of the traits common to all characters of their class: obsession with money and disregard for others' happiness. At the end of the play, things end happily for the former and unhappily for the latter. The moral vision of the play is thus comedic insofar as the protagonists, who prove themselves capable of true love and respect, stand to be united in matrimony, but it is simultaneously also satirical in terms of the conclusion to which it brings the plans of those who act solely out of selfishness and greed. Congreve's supreme artistic achievement lies in his capacity to infuse the dramatic conventions of the comedy of manners with lively wit and humour as well as sharp social critique without resorting to either cynical misanthropy or dull sentimentality.

Critical estimate of the play has risen since the 19th century. Thus, William Hazlitt described it as Congreve's "most carefully finished performance" and especially praised the witty repartee between the characters as "the highest model of comic dialogue". Charles Lamb, emphasizing the need to separate moral judgement from appreciation of drama, called the fictional world inhabited by Congreve's characters "a Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is duty, and the manners perfect freedom". Leigh Hunt described the play as "the most complete, piquant, and observant of all the works of Congreve". George Meredith singled out Millamant's character for praise as one of the most admirable in all of British comedy and commended Congreve's style for its succinctness and polish. 20th century critics have also recognized the play as representative of the salient features of the comedy of manners. John Palmer suggests that in Congreve's dramatic world life itself is dealt with as an "agreeable pageant" rather than a philosophical problem and characters are "epicures in pleasure, exquisites in villainy". Martin Price identifies in the central characters' "peculiar balance of wit and generosity of spirit", of their "intense affection and cool self-knowledge", a rare equilibrium between social adaptability and personal integrity. Laura Brown detects in Congreve's dramatic vision a tension between the elements of stylized social satire and implicit moral judgement as a formal culmination of the transitional comedy of the age.

Storyboard

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- Restoration of monarchy and its impact on English drama

- Salient features of the comedy of manners
- Overview of Congreve's literary career

Section 2: *The Way of the World* as an illustrative instance of Restoration comedy

- Plot Summary
- Congreve's exemplary use of the typical features of the comedy of manners

Section 3: Dramatic Structure

- Dramatic irony – use of information as a device that drives the action of the play
- Sub-plots – the plot trajectories of the minor characters as devices that complicate the main plot as well as propel it to its resolution

Section 4: Characterization

- Main characters – Mirabell and Millamant as the perfect couple, representative of the wit and sophistication typical of the heroes and heroines of Restoration comedy
- Secondary characters – Lady Wishfort, Fainall and Mrs Marwood as humorous foils to the protagonists, representing extreme versions of their mercenary attitude to relationships
- Minor characters – Sir Wilfull Witwoud, Petulant and Foible as amusing character "types" popular on the Restoration stage

Section 5: Themes

- Class and Money as closely interrelated concerns that reflect the best and the worst aspects of the characters' conduct towards others and determine the power equations between them
- Love and Marriage as issues that are governed by material concerns and negotiated, at best, through a balance between intelligence and emotion, and at worst, through a selfish pursuit of greed, lust and revenge

Section 6: Conclusion

- Significance of Congreve's dramatic achievement in the play
- Overview of critical reception of the play