

WILLIAM CONGREVE'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION AS REVEALED
IN HIS MAJOR CHARACTERS

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I hereby recommend that the thesis prepared
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PREFACE

This thesis presents a study of the major characters in Congreve's comedies of manners. The sketch of Congreve's life with which it begins is here to reveal the personality of the man who created the excellent comic portraits herein analyzed and to show the conditions under which he wrote. The study of Congrevean criticism from its beginning to the present time, with particular emphasis upon what the critics have said concerning Congreve's characterizations, is given here to indicate how each succeeding age has viewed the ability of this greatest of the writers of comedies of manners. Through these studies, in so far as possible, I have arrived at my critical approach in the ensuing chapters which analyze Congreve's witty lovers and his husbands and wives, the main characters in each of his plays. The critics' comments I have supplemented with observations of my own.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Autrey Nell Wiley, whose encouragement, wise guidance, and infinite patience have made this work possible.

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CHAPTER I

WILLIAM CONGREVE: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William Congreve has been recognized by many students of the drama as the greatest of the English playwrights who expressed themselves by means of the comedy of manners. As a writer, he has received enthusiastic acclaim, not only by the critics of his own day but also by critics of succeeding generations. As a man, he was the leader of a small select group, and he claimed as his personal friends John Dryden, Joseph Keally, Jonathan Swift, Lady Mary Wortley Montague, Alexander Pope, the Duchess of Marlborough, and many of the great actors and actresses of the Restoration stage. In spite of his popularity during his lifetime, and in spite of the approbation given his plays since his death, knowledge of his personal life has been both vague and inaccurate.

Sir Edmund Gosse wrote the first complete biography of the dramatist in 1888 and revised his book in 1924, without significant additions to the already-known facts. In 1941, a new biography appeared under the title, William Congreve, The Man, a Biography from New Sources. Professor John Hodges, the author of this book, has presented the most complete study of the life of William Congreve yet made. It is from his work that most of the following biographical information is taken.

I. The Life of William Congreve

The mother of William Congreve was Mary Browning, daughter of Mary Bright and Walter Browning, a young clergyman. Mary's father died in 1636, leaving her, his youthful and only daughter, the whole of a small fortune for her education and care. Thus she became the recipient of an unusual bequest, because, in her time, ordinarily women were not educated.¹ A few years after the death of Browning, Mary's mother married Dr. George Roe of Doncaster. The dramatist's father was William, the second of Richard Congreve's twelve children. Richard, the squire of Stretton Hall, was a prosperous man whose staunch Royalist patriotism subjected him to many raids by the Cromwellians but whose steadfast loyalty to the Royalist cause was not broken by hardships.²

Like many other younger sons without inheritance, William Congreve entered military service. When or how he met and courted Mary Browning is not known, nor is the marriage date of the young couple known. When their son was born, they were living in Bardsey on a part of Sir John Lewis's Yorkshire estate.

William, the dramatist, was born on Sunday, January 24, 1670, and was baptized by the Reverend John Fentiman, the

¹John C. Hodges, William Congreve, The Man, A Biography from New Sources (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1941), p. 2.

²Ibid., pp. 3-4.

rector of the Church of All Saints. Concerning the date of his birth, Mr. Hodges says:

The exact date of Congreve's birth has been hitherto unknown. The date here given is that painted by the artist Clarea at the lower left corner of the portrait of Congreve at the age of twelve. The eighteenth century opinion that Congreve was not born until 1671 or 1672 was corrected long ago by Malone's discovery of the record of baptism. Recent biographers, however, are not satisfied that the baptism indicates the approximate time of the birth. They hold that the birth occurred in 1669, the year before the baptism.³

A young sister of William, Elizabeth, died in London, September, 1672. Whether there were more children is not definitely known, although Congreve once hinted that there might have been several who died young.⁴

Early in 1674, Congreve's father was making plans to go from London to Ireland to serve in the Irish army. For the next fifteen years, young William Congreve was far away from the London life about which he was later to write in a brilliant manner. The older William Congreve was not the first of the Congreves to enter the Irish army. Four of his uncles had served there; perhaps one of them, Christopher Congreve, helped his nephew secure the commission of lieutenant in the infantry, a commission which was granted March 19, 1674, when Lieutenant Congreve was told to report to Youghal, an Irish seaport, rich in tradition and rich in the beauty of

³Ibid., p. 6, n. 11.

⁴Ibid., p. 7.

the Irish landscape.⁵ There with the Boyles, its leading citizens, the Congreves soon became friends; Congreve dedicated his first play to Charles Boyle, out of a feeling of friendship. The Congreve family left Youghal late in 1678 and went to Carrickfergus, another busy Irish seaport on the northeastern coast.⁶

In the latter part of 1681, Lieutenant Congreve and Major Christopher Congreve joined the regiment of the Duke of Ormond at Kilkenny, Ireland. In the beautiful town of Kilkenny, famed as the most polite and well-bred of all Irish towns, the Duke of Ormond kept an excellent preparatory school. There, too, the Duke kept a court which had something of the air of the court at Whitehall or St. James. Many fine ladies and gentlemen came to Kilkenny Castle to wait upon his Grace. There the nobles enjoyed such popular entertainments as bull baiting, tennis, and bowling; often players from the Smock Alley Theater of Dublin came for special performances at the Duke's court. All these things were likely to be very interesting to a young boy. Certainly, Kilkenny Castle was impressive in its magnificence. The Duke, whose annual income reputedly exceeded the income of several European rulers, was at the peak of his power in 1681.⁷

⁵Ibid., p. 8.

⁶Ibid., pp. 11-12.

⁷Ibid., pp. 13-14.

Since young Congreve was now twelve, he was entered in the Duke's school, Kilkenny College, soon after the family settled in Kilkenny, and he attended school for four and one-half years. School lasted for twelve months, and the students spent eight hours each day in the schoolroom, having only Thursday and Saturday afternoons free. There were very few holidays. No information is known about how the young boy spent his leisure hours, nor is it known whether he made the acquaintance of Jonathan Swift, who was in school at Kilkenny during the first half year of Congreve's attendance.⁸ It is known, however, that at Kilkenny Congreve began a friendship with Joseph Keally which was to be a lasting one. The two had much in common--the love of good books, the love of eating and drinking too much, and a tendency toward obesity. Both men also dabbled with translations, but Congreve was the superior translator.⁹

Part of the school's activities included the production of its own miracle plays, interludes, and "folk plays and romantic medleys."¹⁰ What part Congreve took in these dramatic productions is not known, but perhaps it was in Kilkenny that he gathered his first knowledge of dramatic technique, a knowledge which was later to procure fame for him.

⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 19 - 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

Congreve, as was usually expected of Kilkenny boys, entered Trinity College, Dublin, on April 5, 1686. According to the Buttery Book, "a weekly list of all students with records of purchases and class attendance,"¹¹ young William Congreve was habitually tardy for classes, but he never missed commons, "repeatedly ordering up 'sizings,' additional food from the kitchen. He drained the Trinity Cellar of much of its beer and wine; he bought of the buttery clerk just six times as many mugs and glasses as frugal Swift."¹² Not only did the Buttery Book record chapels missed; it also shows that Congreve was repeatedly absent from Saturday afternoon catechism.

It is unfortunate that the Buttery Book does not explain the absences. Mr. Hodges suggested a very likely explanation for these Saturday afternoon absences, pointing out that there were plays in the Smock Alley Theater on Saturdays, where the "gentlefolk" gathered. Congreve would not have been the first college student of his day to go to this excellent theater instead of attending catechism class, for records show that many students spent the afternoon watching the actors backstage and then attended the theater at night.¹³

Besides hobnobbing with actors and watching the comedies of Etherege and Wycherley and Shadwell, Congreve read about dramatic technique. He bought three books

¹¹Ibid., p. 23.

¹²Ibid., p. 25.

¹³Ibid., p. 26, n. 8.

on the subject, all in the editions of 1684. There was Roscommon's translation of Horace's Ars Poetica, Dryden's Essay of Dramatic Poesy, and two volumes of François Hadelin's Whole Art of the Stage. That he read them to some effect is shown by his calling attention to observance of the dramatic unities in his own novel, written, it is said, during his college days. In the preface to his novel he blazes out: "All Traditions must indisputably give place to Drama."¹⁴

During the turbulent years from 1686 until 1689, Trinity College felt the impact of James II's Catholic program. Finally, in September, 1689, the college closed its doors and advised its students to seek security elsewhere. Many students went to London. Congreve, however, went first to Stretton Manor and spent the spring and summer of 1689 on his grandfather's estate. He was with his grandfather at the time of Richard Congreve's death in August, 1689. It is at Stretton Manor that Congreve is supposed to have written the first draft of The Old Batchelor.¹⁵

By spring of the following year, Congreve was entered as a student in The Middle Temple, the place which has produced not only great lawyers but also great men of letters. There young Congreve found little to prevent his doing the things he enjoyed doing most.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 29-33: To avoid confusion, throughout the remainder of this thesis the seventeenth-century spelling of batchelor will be observed except where it is otherwise spelled in quoted material.

On the contrary, Congreve found that the Inns of Court had recently nursed the three comic dramatists of the Restoration whose writings most nearly pointed the way toward his own comedies: Etherege, who had inaugurated the comedy of manners and had capped his work with the brilliant inanities of Sir Fopling Flutter; Wycherley whose Plain Dealer was strong medicine even for the Restoration; and Shadwell, still in his prime, with such recent successes as The Squire of Alsatia and Bury Fair.¹⁶

The Middle Temple was conveniently located near the center of all London's social activity. Drury Lane, where London's main theater was located, was within easy reach. Also nearby was Will's Coffee House, rendezvous of the wits and meeting place of Dryden's group. The society of the coffeehouse was brilliant, gay, and pleasure-loving, and undoubtedly it furnished inspiration for some of Congreve's most scintillating wit in his comedies.

II. Congreve's Career in Literature and the Theater

Before the end of 1690, Congreve had begun his brief literary career with a story. On December 22, 1691, a license was issued for the printing of his Incognita: or Love and Duty Reconcil'd by Cleophil.¹⁷ This small novelette, packed with adventure, possessed the flavor of an Italian romance but showed originality in plot.¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁷Sir Edmund Gosse, Life of William Congreve (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 4.

¹⁸Hodges, op. cit., p. 37.

Congreve made his start in literary life--for the Incognita was scarcely a debut--under the majestic auspices of Dryden, who reprinted the three odes of 1692 in his Examen Juvenal and Persius of 1693. . . .No better opportunity for making a public appearance could be conceived. This was, perhaps, the most important publication of 1693, and it was one in which Congreve found himself associated with the first poet of the age, and with a group of the most distinguished living scholars. Moreover, a thirst for poetical translations of the classics was now very keen with the public, who had been spurring Dryden to further triumphs of Horace and Virgil. Everything was combined to give the young poet a fair opportunity for displaying his powers of verse and scholarship.¹⁹

After this venture, Congreve began his literary production in earnest. The Old Batchelor, a play pushed aside in the business of printing the novel and writing translations, Congreve hesitantly showed to Dryden, who was quick to pronounce it the "best 'first play' that he had ever seen." "'The stuff,'" he said, "'was rich indeed' and needed 'only the fashionable cutt of the town.'"²⁰ Dryden, Arthur Mainwaring, and Captain Thomas Southerne aided in the polishing of The Old Batchelor, and Southerne persuaded Thomas D'Avenant, manager of the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, to put it into production. Produced in March, 1693, The Old Batchelor was instantaneously successful.

A second comedy, The Double-Dealer, was produced in late December, 1692, or in early January, 1693. This play

¹⁹Gosse, op. cit., p. 15.

²⁰Hodges, op. cit., p. 40.

was not applauded by the public, but it received the praise of such critics as Dryden, Swift, and their followers--a fact which later helped the play to gain a measure of popular favor. It gained even more popularity when it was known that Queen Mary had commanded a special performance of the play about a month after the initial performance.²¹ Congreve was a conscientious artist; therefore the cool reception of his play by the public was a blow to him.

On March 25, 1695, Mrs. Bracegirdle, Thomas Betterton, Mrs. Barry, Bowman, Williams, Underhill, Doggett, Bowen, Mrs. Verbruggen, Mr. Leigh, and Bright were issued a license by King William to begin a new theater. They separated from the older patentee group when the old controversy between the actors and the patentees was renewed in 1694. The newly formed group of actors opened their theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields on April 30, 1695, with Congreve's third comedy, Love for Love. This proved the most popular of Congreve's comedies, and the new company were so much pleased that they gave Congreve a share in the company. He, in turn, promised to produce a play every year if his health permitted--a promise that he was unable to keep because of recurring sieges of the gout and increasing difficulty with his eyes.²² Nevertheless, the summer of 1695 was a happy one for the young

²¹Ibid., pp. 46-48.

²²Ibid., pp. 51-52, and "William Congreve," DNB, IV, 951.

author. His health was good; he was a successful writer; he owned a share in the new theatre; he had a small government position. Early in the summer he wrote the important critical essay, Concerning Humour in Comedy, which was valuable because it defined his own views concerning wit and humor.

Two years passed before Congreve fulfilled his promise to the players in Lincoln's Inn Fields. All that is known of his activities in 1696 is in the Minutes of the Provost and fellows of the Trinity College, Dublin, dated February 19, 1695/6: "Mr. Tho. Southern and Mr. Will Congreve had the grace of ye house for ye Degree of Master of Arts."²³ He was probably contemplating his next venture into dramatic writing in the field of tragedy. As early as 1693, Swift mentioned his friend's having turned to heroics. In 1695 Walter Moyle inquired about the progress of his tragedy, but not until February 27, 1697, was The Mourning Bride presented at Lincoln's Inn Fields.²⁴ The Mourning Bride is excellent; and it proved to be the most popular of all Congreve's plays, surprising those critics who believed that Congreve's muse was of the comic vain entirely.

No new play was to follow immediately. In 1698, Jeremy Collier, persistent controversialist and pamphleteer, wrote A Short View of the Immorality and the Profaneness of

²³Hodges, op. cit., p. 57.

²⁴Ibid., p. 58.

the English Stage: Together with the sense of Antiquity upon this Argument. This book proved a literary bombshell and was very influential for a time. In the course of his argument, Collier proposed to destroy the English theater. Had he not launched out so bitterly and so injudiciously against the stage, the playwrights might have agreed with him. Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Dryden were viciously attacked, and Congreve, probably the "least morally offensive of the three," was the most violently assailed.²⁵ There were in Congreve's plays three factors to which Collier objected most strenuously. The first objection was to Congreve's satirical manner of representing persons of quality:

Bellmour is Lewd and Profane, and Mellefont puts Careless in the best way he can to Debauch Lady Flyant. These Sparks generally Marry the Top-Ladies, and those that do not, are brought to no renance but go off with the Character of a Fine Gentleman.²⁶

The second objection was to Congreve's portrayal of women in an unfavorable light:

Women are sometimes represented Silly, and sometimes Mad, to enlarge their Liberty and screen their Impudence from Censure. This Politick Contrivance we have in Marcella, Hoyden, and Miss Prue. However it amounts to this confession; that women, when they have their Understandings about them, ought to converse otherwise. In fine; Modesty is the distinguishing

²⁵Ibid., p. 63.

²⁶A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage (London: S. Birt and T. Tyre, 1787), p. 142.

Virtue of that Sex, and serves both for Ornament and Defence: Modesty was design'd by Providence as a Guard to Virtue; and that it might be always at Hand, 'tis wrought into the Mechanism of the Body.²⁷

Collier's third objection was that many of the passages in the plays were sacrilegious:

Scandal sollicit Mrs. Foresight: She threatens to tell her Husband. He replies, He will die a Martyr rather than disclaim his Passion. Here we have Adultery dignified with the Style of Martyrdom: As if 'twas as Honourable to Perish in Defence of Whoring, as to die for the faith of Christianity. But these Martyrs will be a great while in burning and therefore let no body strive to grace the Adventure, or increase the Number. . . . The Play advances from one Wickedness to another from the Works of God to the Abuse of his Word. Foresight confesses 'tis Natural for Men to mistake. Scandal replies, You say true, Man will err, meer Man will err--but you are something more--There have been wise Men; but they were such as You--Men who consulted the Stars, and were Observers of Omens. Solomon was wise, but how?--by his Judgment in Astrology. 'Tis very well! Solomon and Foresight had their Understandings qualified alike. And pray what was Foresight? Why an Illiterate Fellow. A Pretender to Dreams, Astrology, Palmistry, &c. This is the Poet's Account of Solomon's Supernatural Knowledge! Thus the wisest Prince is dwindled into a Gypsie!²⁸

At first, Congreve made no answer to the attack; but, when a second and enlarged edition appeared, he felt called upon to defend himself. He did so effectively, although he was not so good in the art of controversy as he was in the art of drama. He admitted that Collier had a point on his side, but called attention to Collier's unfairness:

²⁷Ibid., pp. 10-11

²⁸Ibid., pp. 74-75.

I think truly he had a fair appearance of Right on his side in the Title Page of his Book; but with reason I think I may also affirm, that by his mismanagement he has very much weak'ned his Title. He that goes to Law for more than his Right, makes his Pretensions, even to that which is his Right, suspected; as a true Story loses its Credit, when related from the Mouth of a known Liar.²⁹

In spite of the attempts of many authors to refute Collier's attacks, Collier was the apparent victor. His book was a sensation, and the government recognized its timeliness. The government did not suppress the theater; but when the next theatrical company was licensed, the Queen selected Congreve and Vanbrugh, the two living dramatists most vigorously attacked by Collier, for the management and "for the better Reforming the Abuses and Immorality of the Stage."³⁰

Congreve's new company was by this time in desperate need of a new play which might repeat the success of Love for Love and The Mourning Bride, but it was not until March, 1700, that The Way of the World was presented to the Restoration audience. Received with only moderate enthusiasm, Congreve's literary masterpiece has since been rated by critics as the "finest English achievement in the comedy of manners."³¹ It is the one play which Congreve wrote to please

²⁹William Congreve, "Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations," The Mourning Bride, Poems, and Miscellanies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 460. See also Hodges, op. cit., p. 67.

³⁰Hodges, op. cit., p. 67.

³¹Ibid., p. 68.

himself; and it is his last major contribution to the stage, although he later wrote a masque, The Judgment of Paris, and an opera, Semele, and had a hand in the moderately successful translation of Molière's Monsieur de Pourceaugnac. This latter play with its English name of Squire Trelooby also bore the names of Vanbrugh and Walsh. Congreve spoke of the work in a slighting manner as the work of two mornings.³²

Non-dramatic literature which comes from Congreve's pen includes two odes, a pastoral, a scholarly discourse, ballads, and miscellaneous poems and prose. His ode for the celebration of St. Cecilia's day was written for the London Musical Society in 1701. In the next few years he published The Tears of Amaryllis, a pastoral on the death of Lord Marquis of Blanford inscribed to Lord Godolphin, A Pindaric Ode to the Queen, and the Discourse on the Pindaric Ode, an excellent and scholarly study which explains the rigorous metrical principles which Pindar observed. Congreve was always a collector and writer of ballads. When Jonathan Swift set out to expose the deceiving almanac maker, John Partridge, Congreve joined him. Congreve also wrote a group of miscellaneous poems and a small volume of poetry called Poems upon Several Occasions.³³

³²Ibid., pp. 70-74.

³³Ibid., pp. 74-112.

Why Congreve produced no more plays after 1700 is not known. Perhaps he wished to cease at the peak of his success; perhaps his health and near blindness prevented his writing more. It is unlikely that his plays had gained for him so large a fortune that he could retire, and it is not probable that the attack of Jeremy Collier made such an impression upon him that he would write no more. It must not be thought, however, that he deserted the theater entirely, for he did not. He continued his association with Betterton and, in 1703, entered with Vanbrugh into the plans for a new theater to be constructed in the Haymarket. Vanbrugh was to supervise the construction of the building while Congreve was to get subscriptions and to engage new singers and dancers. Since all the members of Betterton's group were badly in need of money, each did his share in helping. The license for the new company was granted in 1704.

The new theater was unsuccessful for several reasons. First of all, it was located too far away from Inns of Court to be within walking distance of this center of theater-goers. In addition, Vanbrugh's design for the theater was entirely unsuitable, and the audience could not hear the actors. By the end of the year Congreve gave over the entire management to Vanbrugh,³⁴ thus concluding his last active participation

³⁴Ibid., pp. 74-77.

in a theatrical company. Congreve's love for the theater was too strong, however, to keep him away from the plays, and frequently he was seen in the audience upon opening night.

III. Congreve's Official Career

During the time that Congreve was active as a literary figure, he held only one political office. The first appointment, given in the summer of 1695, made him one of the five commissioners for licensing hackney coaches. His annual salary, only one hundred pounds, shows the post not to have been a lucrative one. Since, on the other hand, it did not require much time, it gave him opportunity for writing. Congreve served in this post until 1705.³⁵

In 1697, Congreve was one of the directors for the Malt Lottery, an unsuccessful scheme for raising taxes for which the managers were paid only half the promised fee.³⁶ This temporary appointment was followed in 1700 by the minor sinecure post of "Customer at Poole,"³⁷ which lasted until 1703. In the meantime, Congreve's friend, Joseph Keally, was rising rapidly in the world of politics. He suggested that Congreve try to secure an Irish post, but the dramatist, discouraged by previously unkept "fair promises," objected

³⁵Ibid., pp. 53-55.

³⁶Ibid., p. 81.

³⁷Ibid., p. 82.

to leaving London.³⁸ At the close of 1705, Congreve became commissioner for wines instead of commissioner of hackney coaches. This commission seemed suited to the man who loved wine and "admirable champagn," but a short time later he was objecting to the fact that "this town affords not one drop of wine of a private house."³⁹ When the administration changed in 1710 from a Whig to a Tory government, Congreve feared that he might lose his small office. The Tories did not, however, cancel his appointment.

Not until 1714 did Congreve receive a commission which afforded him some measure of security, the post of Secretary to the Island of Jamaica, which was an ideal one because it permitted him to carry it on by deputy. Four years after the commission was granted, friends succeeded in securing the position for the remainder of Congreve's life. The salary was small; yet it was sufficient to allow the dramatist to purchase South Sea stock and some four per cent annuities of the Bank of England.⁴⁰ Frugality and wise investments enabled Congreve to leave an estate of approximately ten thousand three hundred pounds to his friend, the Duchess of Marlborough.

³⁸Ibid., p. 83.

³⁹Ibid., p. 85.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 93-99.

IV. Congreve's Friendships

It is natural that a man whose plays gained widespread public approval should have many admirers. For a while Congreve enjoyed the life of a "typical man about town." He always lived in the Strand while in London, where he was within easy walking distance of Inns of Court, of his office for licensers of hackney coaches, of the theaters, or of his favorite chocolate houses and taverns.⁴¹ In the Strand was the Fountain Tavern, the place of the weekly meetings of the Kit-Cat Club. Also near Inns of Court was Will's coffee house in Covent Garden, with its spacious "upper rooms," where Dryden and his followers often gathered for the evening.

During his first ten or twelve years in London Congreve lived the life of the typical gentleman about town. . . . Congreve had many invitations. Swift found him dining in private homes more frequently than in taverns. Dinner over, the next move was to the play, and after that to the upper room at Will's to sup and talk with Dryden and other friends until midnight. But on many an evening, no doubt, he would go instead to pay his devoirs to the ladies at one of the frequent assemblies.

After Dryden's death in 1700, Congreve cared less and less for the society of wits. His enthusiasm for the hearty life of the coffee houses, so evident in his letters about 1695, waned after the turn of the century. He lived in comparative retirement near his associates in the Strand, or with close friends at watering places and country houses.⁴²

Proof of his changing attitude towards life is given in a letter to Joseph Keally dated July 2, 1700:

⁴¹Ibid., p. 79.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 79-80.

I need not tell you that I do; who am not apt to care for many acquaintance, and never intend to make many friendships. You know I need not be very much alone; but I choose it rather than to conform myself to the manners of my court or chocolate house acquaintance.⁴³

Later, Congreve expressed the same idea in another letter to his friend:

Of my philosophy I make some use; but, by God, the greatest trial of it is that I know not how to have the few people I love as near me as I want.⁴⁴

Dryden recognized the genius of young Congreve and felt that here at last was someone who could take his own place in the world of letters. To prove his faith in the young man, he wrote a dedication for the second of Congreve's comedies, The Double-Dealer, praising the skill of Congreve and predicting that the young man would inherit the "Throne of Wit, Tho' with some short Parenthesis between."⁴⁵ The dedication ended with a petition from the older dramatist:

Maintain your Post: That's all the Fame you need;
For 'tis impossible you shou'd proceed.
Already I am worn with Cares and Age;
And just abandoning th' Ungrateful Stage:
Unprofitably kept by Heav'n's Expence,
I live a Rent-charge on his Providence:
But You, whom Ev'ry Muse and Grace adorn,

⁴³William Congreve, "Letters," The Mourning Bride, Poems, and Miscellanies, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 486.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 421.

⁴⁵John Dryden, "To My Dear Friend Mr. Congreve on his Comedy, call'd The Double Dealer," Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 119.

Whom I foresee to better Fortune born,
 Be kind to my Remains; and oh defend,
 Against your Judgment, your departed Friend!
 Let not th' insulting Foe my Fame pursue;
 But shade those Laurels which descend to You:
 And take for Tribute what these Lines express:
 You merit more; nor cou'd my Love do less.⁴⁶

Congreve was not faithless to this petition. In a "Preface to Dryden" written for the collected edition of Dryden's work, he wrote to the Duke of New Castle, saying that he had the honor of being as intimately acquainted with Dryden as the difference in their ages would permit. Expressing gratitude for the "instructions and friendly offices" which he had received from Dryden, he said:

I was then and have been ever Since most sensibly touched with that Expression: and the more so, because I could not find in my self the Means of satisfying the Passion which I felt in me, to do something answerable to an Injunction laid upon me in so Pathetic and so Amicable a manner.⁴⁷

Whoever shall Censure me, I dare be confident, You, my Lord, will Excuse me, for anything that I shall say with due Regard to a Gentleman, for whose Person I had as just an Affection as I have an Admiration of his writings.

He was of a Nature exceedingly Humane and Compassionate; easily forgiving Injuries, and capable of a prompt and sincere Reconciliation with them who had offended him.

Such a Temperament is the only solid Foundation of all moral Virtues, and sociable Endowments. His Friendship, where he profess'd it, went much beyond his Profession; and I have been told of strong and generous Instances of it, by the Persons themselves

⁴⁶Ibid., ll. 64-77, pp. 119-120.

⁴⁷William Congreve, "Preface to Dryden," ll. 64-77, The Mourning Bride and Miscellanies, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 480.

who received them: Tho' his Hereditary income was little more than a bare Competency.⁴⁸

If the friendship of Dryden and Congreve was that of a master and an excellent pupil, if it was a friendship based upon the reverence a young man might feel for an older and very famous man, then the friendship between William Congreve and Joseph Keally was warm and personal, a friendship based upon close association, complete understanding and similar interests. Their association began in Kilkenny and lasted until Keally's death at the age of forty.⁴⁹ Although Congreve and Keally shared similar interests, their careers bore little similarity.

Keally entered Pembroke College, Oxford, May 30, 1689, and stayed there until June 13, 1690.⁵⁰ On February 6, 1693, he entered the Middle Temple. At this time Congreve had been in the Middle Temple for two years; therefore the reunion between the two friends was probably a joyful one. There is no record as to the location of Keally's lodgings. In later years Congreve sent him frequent greetings from "our friends in Arundell Street." If Keally did not live in the Strand, he must have spent much time there and must have been well-known to Congreve's friends.⁵¹ In the fall of 1697 he returned

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 481.

⁴⁹ Supra, p. 5.

⁵⁰ Kathleen M. Lynch, "Congreve's Irish Friend, Joseph Keally," PMLA, LIII (1938), 1079.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 1080.

to Ireland. Congreve began the first of his letters to him, September, 1697, expressing concern for his friend's safety, because he knew that the Irish coasts were infested with privateers.⁵²

Keally was admitted to the Irish Bar in 1700.⁵³ The first of a series of political honors came to him in March, 1705, when he received the appointment of M. P. for the borough of Doneraile. He kept this position for six years. The additional honor of the Post of Recorder of Kilkenny came to him in June, 1705, and pleased Congreve very much. In a letter from London, dated December 15, 1708, Congreve said: "I am dear Recorder and Judge, in futuro, already in wisdom, gravity, and understanding, yours, and so is all the neighborhood."⁵⁴

In spite of the fact that their careers led them to far separate paths, the two men shared many experiences together. Congreve did many errands for Keally in London, even taking upon himself the task of forwarding the letters of John Keally, Joseph's brother, to his friend.⁵⁵ Whether

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴"Letters," The Mourning Bride, Poems, and Miscellanies, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Greatest Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 508. See also Lynch, op. cit., p. 1081.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 491.

Congreve had been commissioned to purchase a necklace⁵⁶ or a dozen shirts,⁵⁷ he did the task willingly and gave an exact account of his purchases. He told Keally news of their friends and added homely bits of gossip. He spoke of a mare which someone had given him;⁵⁸ he told of the death of a pet dog,⁵⁹ vividly pictured a November hurricane for the absent friend,⁶⁰ expressed his opinion about the picture which Keally had ordered from the portrait painter, Howard,⁶¹ evidenced great concern for Keally's accident during the summer of 1706, and sent a cheerful message to his injured friend:

I have not seen Mein since I received your letter; but I expect that he should hang or stab himself when I tell him. I think he ought to do no less who affected to fast upon the news of Lord Donnegal's death, and got drunk the night following.⁶²

Both Congreve and Keally enjoyed the theater, and Congreve tried to keep his friend posted on all the new plays. He told of such new plays as "The Ambitious Stepmother, written by Mr. Rowe of the Temple, and a very good one; another called Lady's Visiting-day, written by Mr. Barnaby the last is likely to have a run and has something more in

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 485.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 512.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 486.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 487.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 492-493.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 493.

⁶²Ibid., p. 498, and Lynch, op. cit., p. 1081.

it relating to the title than the trip."⁶³ When the contest for the music for Congreve's masque, The Judgment of Paris, was in full swing, Congreve sent a vivid letter describing the contests, the gaiety of the theater crowd, and the performance of Venus by Mrs. Bracegirdle.

Congreve also felt that Keally was a friend in whom he could confide. He frequently mentioned his having had attacks of the gout. Several times he told of the difficulty he had in seeing and spoke of having had his eyes treated by a conjuror who he hoped might be of some use.⁶⁴

Congreve's and Keally's was a friendship of complete understanding and consequently without reserve. Congreve could be "plain" with Keally concerning the frailties of "honest Robinson" whom they both loved. Keally's "friendly sense" of a personal loss could be relied on. . . . This was the most enlightened sort of friendship, for it was unexacting. . . . Perhaps few friendships have been so complete, so secure from the hazards of alteration. . . . And when Congreve was living entirely at home and seeing no one, the logic of friendship required that "I write to you because I will write to you and always must desire to hear from you."⁶⁵

The list of Congreve's friends is long; indeed, he seemed to have no enemies. Jonathan Swift, who quarreled with most of his contemporaries, admired Congreve very much and frequently mentioned the dramatist in Journal to Stella.

⁶³William Congreve, "Letters," The Mourning Bride, Poems, and Miscellanies, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 486.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 513.

⁶⁵Lynch, op. cit., pp. 1086-1087.

Swift and Congreve joined forces to expose John Partridge, the astrologer and almanac maker.

Alexander Pope, who also had the reputation for being quarrelsome at times, was an admirer of Congreve. He had no quarrel with him regardless of the fact that he became infatuated with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who was, in turn, so very much interested in Congreve that she thought only of the dramatist. In return for Congreve's help in getting subscriptions for his translation of the Iliad,⁶⁶ he expressed his sincere appreciation by saying: "I must also acknowledge, with infinite pleasure, the many friendly offices, as well as sincere criticisms, of Mr. Congreve, who had led me the way in translating some parts of Homer."⁶⁷ After Congreve's death Pope made, in his list of departed friends, this note for the dramatist: "Poeta, Eximus, vir comis, urbanus, et mihi perquam familiaris."⁶⁸

The Kit-Cat Club began as a set of wits "enjoying prestige chiefly for its interest in belles lettres,"⁶⁹ in more specific terms, a group of young poets who met weekly with Jacob Tonson, a publisher and a man of considerable ability in recognizing merit in new writers. Among the members were William Congreve, Dryden, Vanbrugh, the Duke of

⁶⁶Hodges, op. cit., p. 106.

⁶⁷Alexander Pope, The Iliad of Homer, The works of the poets, ed. Samuel Johnson (London: T. Payne and Son, 1790), XLVIII, 38.

⁶⁸Hodges, loc. cit.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 93.

Somerset, Steele, Walsh, Garth, and Addison.⁷⁰ Later, the Kit-Cats admitted to their ranks some of the nobles of the time, and the club grew into a political organization for Whigs.

In any list of Congreve's friends two women must be mentioned. The first is Mrs. Anne Bracegirdle, who played the first Araminta of The Old Batchelor. Mrs. Bracegirdle was seven years older than young Congreve and was a charming and beautiful favorite of all her audiences. It is no wonder that Congreve fell in love with her. For her, he created some of the most charming heroines of the Restoration stage, and he was frequently seen with her outside the theatre. There were persistent rumors that the two were married; but no proof of marriage has been discovered, and the two in question gave no indication that they were concerned. In spite of the gossip, Mrs. Bracegirdle had many champions, for she had previously gained the enviable reputation for "strict chastity," a virtue which was most unusual among actresses of the Restoration theatre.⁷¹ This friendship lasted for almost ten years until a rival entered the picture, the cousin of the dramatist, Robert Leke, the third Earl of Scarsdale. The town was aware of the infatuation of the Earl for Mrs. Bracegirdle and enjoyed any choice bits

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 96.

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 44-59.

of news about the two. The seriousness of the Earl's relationship with the actress is indicated by his will which bequeathed to her the sum of one thousand pounds, "the first money to be paid."⁷² Congreve was very much disturbed over this new relationship, for he considered Mrs. Bracegirdle unfaithful to the love he had given her. Just how much he was affected is shown in the following poem:

False tho' you've been to me and Love,
 I ne'er can take revenge,
 (So much your wondrous beautys move)
 Tho' I resent your change.

In hours of bliss we oft have met,
 They could not allways last;
 And tho' the present I regret,
 I still am Gratefull for the past.

But think not, Iris, tho' my breast
 A gen'rous flame has warmed
 You ere again could make me blest,
 Or charm as once you charm'd.

Who may your future favours own
 May future change forgive,
 In Love, the first deceit alone,⁷³
 Is what you never retrieve.

In spite of this lament to a false lover, Congreve maintained his friendship with the capricious Mrs. Bracegirdle until his death. His continued regard for her is proved by the fact that he left a bequest of two hundred pounds for her in his will.⁷⁴

⁷²Ibid., p. 87.

⁷³Ibid., p. 88 and n. 30. Mr. Hodges claims the honor of having been the first to publish this poem by Congreve.

⁷⁴Ibid.

The second woman to play a large part in the life of Congreve was the charming Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough. Her desire to be known as a Wit led her to cultivate the friendship of many men of letters. She had, at the age of eighteen, married Francis Godolphin, a "kind and patient and long-suffering" man.⁷⁵ Congreve met her around 1703. He was thirty-three years old, and she was eleven years younger. When Congreve addressed some of his odes to members of the Godolphin House, this gesture strengthened their friendship. From then on Congreve was often invited to her house.⁷⁶ By 1722 Pope lamented the fact that Congreve had forgotten all women except the Duchess of Marlborough.⁷⁷

Congreve spent the summer of 1722 at Bath. The Duchess of Marlborough was also there. When a daughter was born to her in the following year, there were many unkind comments, the most scathing of these remarks coming from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who had always been an admirer of Congreve and had felt herself very much neglected by him. Congreve discreetly said nothing; or if he did reply to the gossips, there is no record of the fact. A carefully worded will later left the bulk of his estate to the Duchess, three thousand pounds in Old South Sea Annuities and seven thousand three hundred pounds

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 111.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 108-115.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 116.

in other funds.⁷⁸ The Duchess invested most of the seven thousand pounds in a diamond necklace which she willed to her daughter, Mary. To her daughter she also left the South Sea securities.⁷⁹

By 1728 Congreve's health was so bad that he and the Duchess spent a very long season at Bath. This time the waters did not prove beneficial, and a carriage accident supposedly inflicted upon the ailing man some internal injuries which hastened his death on January 19, 1729.⁸⁰ With Congreve at the time of his death was the Duchess, who later saw to it that Congreve received a very handsome burial in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey.⁸¹

An interesting story has grown up concerning the Duchess's reaction to Congreve's death. The Daily Post of Saturday, July 15, 1732, reported that she had caused Congreve's figure to be done in wax work and kept in her house. Mr. Hodges refers to this story as "scandal, of course--palpably a falsehood--yet it represented something of underlying truth. It spoke of immense devotion."⁸² In 1733 a scurrilous poem appeared under the title, The Amorous D[is]h[ess]: or, Her G[race] Grateful. In 1753, Theophilus Cibber represented the

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 118-120.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 120.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 121 - 122.

⁸² Ibid., p. 110.

Duchess as having directed daily conversations to the wax figure. By 1874 the wax figure was changed to an automaton of ivory. By 1789 the Biographia Britannica represented her as having ordered the wax figure served with choice foods and attended by physicians. The ingenious Macaulay provided the Duchess with two figures--one in wax and one in ivory.⁸³

Although there was doubt concerning the action of the Duchess after Congreve's death, there is no doubt that the Duchess of Marlborough gave Congreve understanding and rare companionship. When she died four years after Congreve's death, she ordered that her body be buried in Westminster Abbey near Congreve in "the very same place with the Right Honourable Sidney late Earl of Godolphin."⁸⁴

⁸³Ibid., pp. 109, 110, n. 1.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 123.

CHAPTER II

CONGREVE'S DRAMATIC ABILITY AS VIEWED BY THE CRITICS

A study of Congrevean criticism from its beginning to the present time is both interesting and profitable to the student of drama. Such a study reveals that critics have considered and evaluated Congreve's plays from the standpoint of his ability to write excellent dialogue, to construct interesting and logical stories, and to create well-defined characters.

I. Congreve's Undisputed Mastery of Witty Dialogue

Only upon one phase of his writings do the critics record almost unanimous acclaim. In the opinion of the majority of the students of the drama, Congreve is the undisputed master of witty dialogue. Indeed, so consistent is their praise that a review of their opinions upon this one phase of Congreve's work is almost no more than a compilation of the same words repeated again and again. John Dryden, to whom Congreve showed his first effort, The Old Batchelor, was the young dramatist's first champion. Pronouncing the play to be "rich stuff," Dryden predicted that its author should inherit the "throne of wit," an enviable position for any dramatist, especially for a young one.¹

¹Supra, p. 20.

In his panegyric, "To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve, on his Comedy, Call'd The Double-Dealer," Dryden exclaimed:

In easie Dialogue is Fletcher's Praise:
 He mov'd the Mind, but had no Pow'r to raise.
 Great Johnson did by Strength of Judgement please:
 Yet doubling Fletcher's Force, he wants his Ease.
 In diff'ring Talents both adorn'd their Age;
 One for the Study, t'other for the Stage.
 But both to Congreve justly shall submit,
 One match'd in Judgement, both o'er-matched in Wit.
 In him all Beauties of his Age we see;
Etherege his Courtship, Southern's Purity;
The Satire, Wit, and Strength of Manly Wicherly.
 All this in blooming Youth you have Atchiev'd;
 Nor are your foiled Contemporaries griev'd;
 So much the Sweetness of your Manners move,
 We cannot Envy you because we Love.²

Thomas Southerne, one of those "foil'd Contemporaries" whose purity Dryden commended, was, true to the old poet's prediction, not envious of one whom he called the natural successor to Dryden's mind:

What thou has done, shews all is in thy Pow'r,
 And to write better, only must write more.³

Another contemporary, B. J. Marsh, mentioned more specifically Congreve's wit:

Like a well-mettled Hawk, you took your Flight
 Quite out of Reach, and almost out of Sight.
 Each Line of yours, like polish'd Steel's so hard,
 In Beauty safe, it wants no other Guard.⁴

²Op. cit., ll. 20-34, pp. 118-119.

³"To Mr. Congreve," ll. 40-41, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 19.

⁴"To Mr. Congreve," ll. 9-10, 14-15, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 19.

Bevil Higgons, also a contemporary of Congreve, offered a complaint and a prediction:

But you too Bounteous, sow your Wit so thick,
 We are surpriz'd and know not where to pick:
 And while with clapping we are just to you,
 Ourselves we injure or lose something new.
 What mayn't we then, great Youth, of thee presage,
 Whose Art and Wit so much transcend the Age?

When Dryden dying, shall the World deceive,
 Whom we Immortal, as his Works, believe;
 Thou shalt succeed, the Glory of the Stage,
 Adorn and entertain the coming Age.⁵

By no means must it be thought that all Congreve's contemporaries held the opinion of John Dryden. Jeremy Collier ranted against Congreve's art with all the power which he could muster. For that matter, Collier assailed the whole of the comedies of manners. What to other critics was wit to him was "Smut or Blasphemy." His cry against the language used in all comedies of manners was bombastic, but well-phrased:

Obscenity in any Company is a rustick uncreditable Talent; but among Women 'tis particularly rude. Such Talk would be very affrontive in Conversation, and not endur'd by any Lady of Reputation. Whence then comes it to pass that those Liberties which disoblige so much in Conversation, should entertain upon the Stage?⁶

⁵"To Mr. Congreve, on his Play called The Old Batchelor," ll. 13-18, 21-24, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 20-21.

⁶Op. cit., pp. 7-8.

Collier's was the one dissenting voice among those of a multitude of admirers, but so powerful were his accusations that Congreve felt called upon to answer him and in so doing began a famous literary controversy between the two men, the repercussions of which are noticeable in the critical opinions of many later scholars.

Later critics are inclined to talk in superlatives when mentioning Congreve's ability to write excellent dialogue. Samuel Johnson was one of the first critics to make a study of Congreve's plays. Upon this particular subject he said:

His wit is a meteor playing to and fro with alternate coruscations. His comedies have, therefore, in some degree, the operation of tragedies, they surprise rather than divert, and raise admiration oftener than merriment. But they are works of a mind replete with images, and quick in combination.⁷

In his own interesting and enthusiastic manner, Thomas Babington Macaulay said much the same thing. He was speaking specifically of one play, The Old Batchelor, but he made similar remarks about the other plays:

The dialogue is resplendent with wit and eloquence--which indeed are so abundant that the fool comes in for an ample share--and yet preserves a certain colloquial air, a certain indescribable ease of which Wycherley had given no example and which Sheridan in vain attempted to imitate.⁸

⁷Lives of the English Poets (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1926), II, 31.

⁸"Introduction," William Congreve, ed. Alexander C. Ewald, F. S. A. (Mermaid Series; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n. d.), p. xiii.

Agreeing with Macaulay are such critics as Addison, Hazlitt, Meredith, Sir Edmund Gosse, Adolphus W. Ward, Professors Bonamy Dobrée, Allardyce Nicoll, Henry Ten Eyck Perry and John Palmer. To record their separate opinions here would be but to repeat what Johnson and Macaulay said. There is a danger, too, in praising Congreve's brilliance too much:

Congreve's brilliance, indeed, is so dazzling that admiration nearly always stops short at praising it, and fails to perceive the real force of the man, the solid personality, and the knowledge of human beings. . . . These praises are abundantly warranted, but too great an attention to style in this sense is apt to obscure the broader vision.⁹

II. Congreve's Ability to Construct a Story

This broader vision of which Mr. Dobrée speaks must include another phase of Congreve's art, that is, his ability to construct a story. If there are innumerable praises of his ability to write comedy resplendent because of its sparkling dialogue, there are almost as many condemnations of his ability to write good plots. He was indebted to fellow dramatists, Wycherley and Etherege, and, to an extent, Molière and Jonson, for the use of certain stock situations in his comedies.¹⁰ Probably the last person to deny this debt would

⁹Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Comedy (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 122.

¹⁰Henry Ten Eyck Perry, The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), pp. 8, 57-59.

would have been Congreve himself; but a perusal of his plays leaves no doubt that he possessed an independence of workmanship in direct contrast to the often crude ways of appropriation practiced by some of his contemporaries.¹¹ Samuel Johnson was the only critic to declare that Congreve's plots are original:

Congreve has merit of the highest kind; he is an original writer who borrowed neither the models of his plot nor the manner of his dialogue.¹²

Since Johnson gave no explanation for such an unusual opinion, perhaps the best reason is found in his own affirmation that he had not read the plays in years.¹³

The three charges most often leveled against Congreve's ability as a story writer are that his plots are stock, melodramatic, and mechanical.¹⁴ It is necessary only to point to the dramatist's use of the stock situations employed by Wycherley and Etherege to support the first charge. Melodramatic his plays are, too, dealing in farcial scenes such as the Prue-Tattle episodes, in shocking situations such as the Maskwell and Lady Touchwood scenes, and in sharp contrasts of true wit and farce as shown in many different scenes. Furthermore, the frequent use of songs and dances takes the plays from the realm of pure comedy. The third charge that Congreve's plots

¹¹Adolphus William Ward, A History of English Dramatic Literature. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1899), III, 469.

¹²Op. cit., p. 31.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Perry, op. cit., p. 66.

are mechanical is also perceivable. Like the Elizabethan audience which wanted to see the reworkings of a familiar story, not a new and original one, the Restoration audience demanded neither originality nor coherence of plot, but sparkling reproductions of themselves, speaking brilliantly and fashionably.¹⁵ Plot was always subordinated to wit, not only in Congreve's plays but also in those of most of his contemporaries.

There seems to be no extant criticism by his contemporaries upon this subject of originality of plot, but the fact that Congreve sought to give his second play but a single plot in order to avoid confusion suggests that there must have been some comment upon the chaotic confusion of five strands of plot woven into the first play.¹⁶ Because of its diffusion of plots The Old Batchelor is often said by critics to be destitute of interest and probability, a mere hodge-podge of characters and amatory scenes¹⁷ of which too many are morally objectionable.¹⁸ The Double-Dealer has, according to Congreve, but one plot; however, the obstacles against keeping it single were too many because, in

¹⁵Ward, op. cit., p. 291.

¹⁶William Congreve, "The Epistle Dedicatory," The Double-Dealer, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 114.

¹⁷Perry, op. cit., p. 61.

¹⁸Ward, op. cit., p. 472. See also Collier, op. cit., pp. 171-172.

elaborating the central situation of a young man and a young woman in love, Congreve set for them too strong an opposing force in the person of Maskwell:

The outcome is confusion worse confounded, an infinitely more perplexing imbroglio than that formed by the numerous but individually simple plots of The
Old Bachelor.¹⁹

This play because of its concentrated intrigues is too near heroic tragedy to be good comedy.²⁰ Love for Love has a plot, a loose but deliberately developed plot which is more interesting than usual.²¹

Love for Love has the most free and natural of Congreve's plots, and interest as to the outcome of the play is best sustained in it, but its structure hampers the witty dialogue of professed lovers, which is the finest flower of his dramatic work.²²

When the choice was between wit and a strong story, Congreve was usually more likely to choose wit. Love for Love is also unusual in that, "having never represented vice as extremely interesting, it closes with a deliberate concession of good fortune to virtue."²³ A modern Broadway critic, Mr. John Mason Brown, does not agree with either of these statements:

¹⁹Perry, op. cit., p. 63.

²⁰Malcolm Elwin, The Playgoer's Handbook of Restoration Drama (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 167.

²¹Perry, op. cit., p. 70.

²²Ibid.

²³Gosse, op. cit., p. 63.

Even more tedious in Love for Love than old Foresight is the maze of adultery into which the overcomplicated and unfollowable plot leads us.²⁴

Opinions concerning Congreve's masterpiece, The Way of the World, do not vary. It possesses the most brilliant display of wit of all his plays, but it is dramatic chaos:

The Way of the World. . . .was a failure on the stage and deserved to be. An audience cannot be expected to sit with any pleasure through five acts of drama (particularly an abstruse fifth one), if there be no coherent plot to hold one's interest and, in fact, no attraction but enchanting dialogue. After all, a play is to be acted on a stage before an audience and must be written with that end in view; it is unlike purer forms of literature which fulfill every requirement if they can be read with pleasure in the solitude of one's study. Judged by this standard, Congreve's last and most characteristic play is not a play at all, but a so-called "closet drama," written in well-nigh perfect dialogue, which must be read and reread to be appreciated.²⁵

Looking back over this discussion so far, it seems apparent that no matter what age the critics lived in or what personal views concerning the matter were, all agreed that Congreve's plays are very deficient in this very important element called a plot. The only palliative remarks have been presented by Sir Edmund Gosse and Mr. John Mason Brown. Gosse said:

His plays were never really well-made, in the modern sense, but no more are those of Molière or Shakespeare.²⁶

In the same trend of thought, Mr. Brown said:

²⁴"Seeing Things," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXX:24 (June 14, 1947), 22.

²⁵Perry, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

²⁶Op. cit., p. 41.

If one is really listening to the talk of Congreve's people, there is little time left in which to bother about what . . . is mechanical in their actions. "They all shine like naughty deeds in a not so good world."²⁷

III. Congreve's Portrayal of Persons

This statement leads into a study of critical opinions concerning Congreve's characters, whom many scholars have undertaken to analyze, and concerning whom there are almost as many different opinions as there are scholars. Since no one has yet undertaken to compile and to analyze the critical opinions of these scholars in the light of the age in which they were produced, the remainder of this chapter will attempt to do so in the hope that such a study will aid in the better understanding and enjoyment of Congreve's plays. Any discussion by the critics concerning Congreve's characters usually centers upon three subjects, their originality, their morality, and their reality; this will be the basis for further discussion.

Perhaps the most astounding fact revealed by a study of Congreve's contemporary critics is the paucity of their comments upon his art of characterization. Southerne, Higgons, Marsh, and Swift commented upon neither the originality of the portraits nor the morals involved. This lack of comment by

²⁷Broadway in Review (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1910), pp. 80-81.

contemporary writers may be interpreted as meaning that these excellent judges either cared little about whether Congreve's characters were pictures of the people whom they knew or found the portraits realistic enough. Those writers who did comment upon the subject--Congreve, Collier, Dryden, and John Downes--show that at this time there were two definite divisions of thought concerning the matter. The Puritanically inclined considered these creations of Congreve too immoral. The coterie who attended the plays considered them at times too satirical. This may be taken to mean that many play-goers and readers of Congreve's dramas found the characters too lifelike for comfort. Dryden, in a letter to Walsh, commented upon this fact:

Congreve's Double-Dealer is much censured by the greater part of the town, and is defended only by the best judges, who, you know, are commonly the fewest. Yet it gains ground daily and has already been acted eight times The gentlemen were 28
offended with him for the discovery of their follies.

Dryden further remarked that the women of the audience were offended because the play "exposed their Bitchery too much."²⁹

Jeremy Collier was vicious in his attack upon The Double-Dealer. In his opinion it was an extremely profane play:

In the Double-Dealer, Lady Plyant cries out Jesu and talks Smut in the same Sentence. Sir Paul Plyant, whom the poet dubb'd a Fool when he made him a Knight

²⁸ Gosse, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

²⁹ Ibid.

talks very Piously! Blessed be Providence, a poor unworthy Sinner, I am mightily beholden to Providence: and the same word is thrice repeated upon an odd Occasion. The meaning must be, that Providence is a ridiculous Supposition, and that none but Block-heads pretend to Religion. But the Poet can discover himself farther if need be. Lady Froth is pleas'd to call Jehu a Hackney-Coach-Man. Upon this, Brisk replies, If Jehu was a Hackney-Coach-Man, I am answer'd,--you may put that into the Marginal Notes though, to prevent criticisms--only mark it with a small Astercism and say--Jehu was formerly a Hackney-Coach-Man. This for a heavy Piece of Profaneness, is no doubt thought a lucky one, because it Burlesques the Text, and the Comment all under one.³⁰

According to a twentieth-century scholar, Sister Rose Anthony, citing Narcissus Luttrell as her source, Collier's Short View was responsible for a humiliating public indictment of Congreve's The Double-Dealer by the justices of Middlesex. Congreve, Tonson, who printed the play, and the playhouse which presented it were all censured.³¹ Just how much credit is to be given to this statement is debatable. Neither the Dictionary of National Biography nor Professor John Hodges mentioned the fact when discussing Congreve's life. Sir Edmund Gosse recorded the event, also giving Luttrell as his source.³² Giving Collier full credit for the indictment probably is giving that controversialist more credit than is due him. As

³⁰Op. cit., p. 64.

³¹Sister Rose Anthony, The Jeremy Collier Stage Controversy (1698-1726) (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1937), p. 112: Sister Anthony gives as her source: N. Luttrell, A Brief Historical Relation, IV (May, 1698), 170.

³²Op. cit., p. 107.

early as 1686 Dryden had already called attention to the need for reform in his ode, To the Pious Memory of Mrs.

Anne Killigrew:

O gracious God! how far have we
Profan'd thy heav'nly gift of poesy!
Made prostitute and profligate the Muse,
Debas'd to each obscene and impious use,
Whose harmony was first ordain'd above³³
For tongues of angels, and for hymns of love.

A year before the appearance of the Short View, Congreve had lamented "the licentious Practice of the Modern Theatre."³⁴ Collier's book was a vigorous and pointed attack upon evils which the public and the government knew existed.³⁵ Giving his work sole credit for the indictment of Congreve's play is probably unjustifiable, and there may be reason for questioning the authenticity of the indictment as recorded by Luttrell, although according to the Dictionary of National Biography the only criticism generally leveled against Luttrell's work is the confusion in the dates of some of the events he recorded due to errors in the newspaper from which he took his excerpts or to his acceptance of the newspaper data as the date upon which the event occurred.³⁶

The fact that Congreve himself felt it necessary to come to the defense of The Double-Dealer upon two accounts

³³Hodges, op. cit., p. 63.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 67.

³⁶"Narcissus Luttrell," DNB, XII, 301.

shows that there must have been much criticism of this play. Believing that his frequent use of the soliloquy in the drama caused some of its unpopularity, Congreve said in his dedicatory epistle to Charles Montague:

I grant, that for a Man to Talk to himself, appears absurd and unnatural; and indeed it is so in most Cases; but the Circumstances which may attend the occasion, make great alteration. It oftentimes happens to a Man, to have Designs which require him to himself, and in their Nature cannot admit of a Confident. Such, for certain, is all Villany; and other less mischievous Intentions may be very improper to be Communicated to a second Person. In such a Case therefore the Audience must observe, whether the Person upon the Stage takes any notice of them at all, or no. For if he supposes any one to be by, when he talks to himself, it is monstrous and ridiculous to the last degree But because we are conceal'd Spectators of the Plot in Agitation, and the Poet finds it necessary to let us know the whole Mystery of his Contrivance, he is willing to inform us of this Person's Thoughts; and to that end is forc'd to make use of the Expedient of Speech, no other better way being yet invented for the Communication of Thought.³⁷

In the same letter Congreve defended his hero, Mellefont, from charges of being stupid, saying that many people evidently had "mistaken cunning in one character for Folly in another."³⁸

Further commenting upon the unpopularity of his women characters, Congreve said:

But there is one thing, at which I am more concerned than all the false Criticisms that are made upon me; and that is, some of the Ladies are offended. I am heartily sorry for it, for I declare I would rather disoblige all the Criticks in the

³⁷ Op. cit., pp. 114-115.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 115-116.

World, than one of the fair Sex. They are concerned that I have represented some Women Vicious and Affected; How can I help it? It is the Business of a Comick Poet to paint the Vices and Follies of Human-kind; and there are but two Sexes, Male, and Female, Men, and Women, which have a Title to humanity: And if I leave one half of them out, the Work will be imperfect. I should be very glad of an Opportunity to make my Compliment to those Ladies who are offended: But they can no more expect it in a Comedy, than to be Tickled by a Surgeon, when he's letting 'em Blood. They who are Virtuous or Discreet, should not be offended, for such Characters as these distinguish them, and make their Beauties more shining and observ'd: And they who are of the other kind, may nevertheless pass for such, by seeming not to be displeas'd, or touch'd with the Satire of this Comedy. Thus have they also wrongfully accus'd me of doing them a Prejudice, when I have in reality done them a Service.³⁹

There seem to be no adverse comments upon Love for Love by any of Congreve's contemporaries. The popularity of the play is an indication that its author had learned his lesson well and had written a play suitable to the tastes of his audience. In writing to Charles, Earl of Dorset and Middlesex, Congreve admitted having to cut a scene in the third act when the play was presented. This so took from the character of Foresight that he added the scene in the printed version.⁴⁰

The Way of The World ushered in a very different group of characters from those of the previous plays. Lacking the

³⁹Ibid., pp. 116-117.

⁴⁰"Epistle Dedicatory," Love for Love, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 215.

farcial elements of the first three dramas and abounding in elegant wit and biting satire, this play was not so popular as Love for Love. John Downes recorded:

The Way of The World, a Comedy wrote by Mr. Congreve, was curiously Acted; Madam Bracegirdle performing her Part so exactly and just, gained the Applause of the Court and City; but being to Keen a Satyr, had not the Success the Company Expected.⁴¹

Lady Marow wrote to one of her acquaintances:

"The way of the World," Congreve's new play, doth not answer expectation, there being no plot in it but many witty things to ridicule the Chocolate House, and the fantastical part of the world.⁴²

Aside from remarks by Jeremy Collier which do not deviate in tone from his bombardments against the other plays, Congreve's own words are salient proof that the drama received many derogatory criticisms of its characterizations. Again, in the "Epistle Dedicatory" he said:

That it succeeded on the Stage, was almost beyond my Expectation; for but little of it was prepar'd for that general Taste which seems now to be predominant in the Pallats of our Audience.⁴³

In the eighteenth century the man who praised Congreve's plots as being original was also one of the first to remark concerning the lack of originality in his characterizations. In his Lives of the Poets, published between 1779 and 1781,

⁴¹Roscius Anglicanus, ed. Rev. Montague Summers (London: The Fortune Press, n. d.), pp. 44-45.

⁴²Hodges, op. cit., p. 68.

⁴³Op. cit., p. 336.

Samuel Johnson opined that the characters of The Old Batchelor were either fictitious and artificial or easy and common, possessing little of nature and not much of life. To Johnson, Congreve's personages were merely intellectual gladiators and not real at all.⁴⁴ To understand this remark it is necessary to know that Johnson was writing in an age when classicism was beginning to be impregnated with romantic tendencies. Johnson himself was a mixture of both schools. In his own writings he tended to adhere to the classical idea of accepting definite models and to oppose the experimentation and aspiration of the romantics. In much of his work there is a serious moral tone. The romanticist in his make-up was strong enough to lead him to hate sham when he saw it.⁴⁵ While this tendency recognized the great artistry of Congreve, it, at the same time, condemned the artificiality of Congreve's characterizations. Johnson's moralistic views, very naturally, led him to condemn the characters as "easy and common."

Just what effect such an attitude had upon the popularity of the comedy of manners as stage productions is not very easily ascertained because information concerning the number of revivals of Congreve's plays in the eighteenth century

⁴⁴Op. cit., p. 31.

⁴⁵William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett, A History of English Literature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), pp. 248-250.

is incomplete. It is known that The Old Batchelor enjoyed great popularity during the eighteenth century, experiencing ten revivals,⁴⁶ and during the last decade of this century was so frequently cut and altered that its popularity decreased considerably.⁴⁷ Also a favorite with audiences was The Double-Dealer, but by 1734 its popularity was on the wane. At a performance in Drury Lane, December 3, 1784, the play was said not to have been acted in eleven years. No other performance is listed until 1802.⁴⁸ Love for Love had a similar theatrical history for this century. In 1705 there was a performance by the entire female cast in the Haymarket, and other performances are listed in 1708 and 1739.⁴⁹ If existing information is accurate, The Way of the World, so unpopular in the beginning, was the most popular of Congreve's plays during the eighteenth century, having been presented at twenty-one different intervals during the years 1718 until 1797.⁵⁰

⁴⁶John Parker (ed.), Who's Who in the Theater (8th ed.; London: Pitman and Sons Ltd., 1936), p. 1753. Revivals of The Old Batchelor are listed in 1708, 1722, 1742 (2), 1746, 1753, 1769, 1776, 1777, and 1789.

⁴⁷Rev. Montague Summers, "Explanatory Notes," Roscius Anglicanus, by John Downes (London: The Fortune Press, n. d.), p. 244.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 245.

⁴⁹Parker, op. cit., p. 1732.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 1804-1805: Revivals are listed in 1718 (2), 1722, 1731, 1732 (2), 1740, 1742 (2), 1744, 1749, 1750, 1758, 1759, 1762, 1764, 1766, 1768, 1776, 1789, and 1797.

During the nineteenth century the popularity of Congreve's plays decreased markedly. A closer look at the works of the various critics gives an insight into the reasons for such a decline. There were three definite groups of thought discernible among the nineteenth century commentators. The first group condemned the characters of Congreve as being completely unrealistic but perhaps entertaining exhibitions of the society of his time. The second group of critics was more concerned with morals than with any other phase of characterization. A third group, in direct revolt against the first two schools, used an idealistic and artistic approach to their studies of Congreve's plays. Belonging to the first group are William Makepeace Thackeray and William Hazlitt. The former, in a very entertaining manner, said:

The Congreve muse is dead, and her song choked in Time's Ashes. . . . Reading in these plays now is like shutting your ears and looking at people dancing. What does it mean? the measure, the grimaces, the bowing, suffling and retreating, the cavalier seul advancing upon those ladies--those ladies and men twirling round at the end in a mad galop, after which everybody bows and a quaint rite is celebrated. Without the music we can't understand the comic dance of the last century--its strange gravity and gaiety, its decorum and its indecorum.⁵¹

Congreve's comic feast flares with lights, and round the table, emptying their flaming bowls of drink, and exchanging the wild jests and ribaldry, sit men and women, waited on by rascally valets and attendants as dissolute as their mistresses--perhaps

⁵¹William Makepeace Thackeray, The English Humorists and The Four Georges, ed. Ernest Rhys (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1936), p. 56.

the very worst company in the world. There doesn't seem to be a pretense of morals. At the head of the table sit Mirabel and Belmour (dressed in the French fashion and waited on by English imitators of Scapin and Frontin). Their calling is to be irresistible, and to conquer everywhere. Like the heroes of the chivalry story--they are always splendid and triumphant--overcome all dangers, vanquish all enemies and win the beauty at the end. Fathers, husbands, and usurers are the foes these champions contend with. They are merciless in old age, invariably, and an old man plays the part in the dramas which the wicked enchanter or the great blundering giant performs in the chivalry tales, who threatens and grumbles and resists--a huge, stupid obstacle always overcome by the knight. . . . Money is for youth, love is for youth, away with old people All this pretty morality you have in the comedies of William Congreve, Esquire. They are full of wit. Such manners as he observes, he observes with great humour; but ah! it's a weary feast, that banquet of wit where no love is. It palls very soon; sad indigestions follow it, and lonely blank headaches in the morning.⁵²

There is some similarity in the artistic purposes of Thackeray and Congreve which explains his attitude. Like Congreve, Thackeray used his characters as puppets to illustrate his views. Whereas Congreve sought to portray only the manners of his own society and allowed no real human sympathy to enter, Thackeray portrayed his age in a slightly more cynical but certainly in a more sympathetic manner, illustrating his belief in the innate goodness of man towards his fellow man. A feast where no real love is would, indeed, pall him.⁵³

⁵²Ibid., p. 58.

⁵³Moody and Lovett, op. cit., pp. 408-410.

Except for the fact that only Thackeray thought to compare Congreve's characters with the personages appearing in the older tales of chivalry, his opinions are much like those of Hazlitt, the second nineteenth century critic to deny any relationship of Congreve's personages to real human beings. Hazlitt said:

Congreve's characters can all of them speak well; they are mere machines when they come to act. Our author's superiority deserted him almost entirely with his wit.⁵⁴

Hazlitt also made several pertinent comments upon the separate plays. In The Double-Dealer he found Lady Touchwood too turbulent, Maskwell too villainous, and the Froths too insipid in their follies to be good comic characters. In The Way of the World he found Millamant to be the only diverting creature among a host of callous, gross, and absurd personalities.⁵⁵ Hazlitt admired Millamant because, although she is an artificial character, she is so well conceived that she is the perfect creation for the stage.⁵⁶

The second group of critics in the nineteenth century is that group which concerned themselves primarily with the moral implications of Congreve's characters. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was writing around the turn of the century, said:

⁵⁴William Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Comic Writers with Miscellaneous Essays (Everyman's Library; New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1910), p. 75.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 72-75.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 73.

Wickedness is not subject for comedy. This was Congreve's great error and peculiar to him. The dramatic personalities of Dryden, Wycherley, and others are often viciously indecent, but not like Congreve's wicked.⁵⁷

In a similar mood, Leigh Hunt also said:

We see nothing but a set of hearless fine ladies and gentlemen coming in and going out, saying witty things at each other and buzzing in a maze of intrigue.⁵⁸

Another important member of this group is Thomas Babington Macaulay, whom Professor Perry has called the "spiritual successor" of Jeremy Collier.⁵⁹ Macaulay, a conservative in viewpoint, regarded Collier's Short View as a very significant publication and considered its author "a great reformer, whom, widely as we differ from him in many important points, we can never mention without respect."⁶⁰ Macaulay began his essay with the intention of discussing the work of Congreve and digressed into a discussion of Jeremy Collier's book which took over one-half the space of the entire essay. In Macaulay's opinion, Collier was the winner of the controversy because he had more points in his favor.⁶¹

George Meredith, himself a writer in the manners style, belongs to neither the first nor the second group of critics and is, indeed, a combination of both. He is even slightly suggestive of the third group who used a purely

⁵⁷Dobrée, op. cit., p. 122.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Perry, op. cit., p. 10.

⁶⁰Op. cit., pp. xvii-xviii.

⁶¹Ibid.

artistic approach to studying Congreve's plays. Meredith's own idea of the work of the comic poet was this:

. . . . a society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current and the perceptions quick, that he may be supplied with matter and an audience.

Moreover to touch and kindle the mind through laughter, demands more than sprightliness, a most subtle delicacy. That must be the natal gift of a comic poet He must aim at the head and be subtle to penetrate. To laugh at everything is to have no appreciation of the Comic of Comedy.⁶²

"He must aim at the head and be quick to penetrate." This was the idea behind Meredith's novels of manners. In definite revolt against the realistic school himself, Meredith cared little whether his characters were mirrors of life so long as they were embodiments of "the essential, spiritual truth of humanity. His dialogue is more highly compressed, more heavily loaded with meaning than it could be in real life He does not reproduce life; he does not idealize it; but he exemplifies it in types and situations of unusual meaning and power."⁶³ With these facts in mind then it is easy to understand Meredith's question concerning Congreve's characterizations:

How could the Lurewell's and the Plyants ever have been praised for ingenuity in wickedness?
These Lurewells, Plyants, Pinchwifes, Fondlewifes,

⁶²George Meredith, An Essay of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), pp. 2-3.

⁶³Moody and Lovett, op. cit., pp. 422-423.

Miss Prue, Peggy Hoyden, all of them save charming Millamant are dead as last year's clothes in a fashionable fine lady's wardrobe It will at any rate hardly be questioned that it is unwholesome for men and women to see themselves as they are, if they are no better than they should be; and they will not when they have improved in manners, care much to see themselves as they once were.⁶⁴

It was natural that Millamant, according to Meredith's point of view, should make the perfect character for the comedy of manners because she was created with the subtle delicacy of a great artistic work. To Meredith realism was carried too far in The Old Batchelor when the Fondlewifes used inane con-
nutial epithets in speaking to each other.⁶⁵

Meredith hinted of an artistic approach to the study of Congreve's plays, but it remained for Charles Lamb to view the problem from a completely idealistic point of view. It was Lamb who suggested that Miss Prue, Tattle, Lady Wishfort, Lady Touchwood, and the others were not immoral but amoral creatures rightfully engaged in their own sphere, the world of "Cuckoldry--the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is duty, and the manners perfect freedom."⁶⁶ Lamb's remarks are the most significant in all nineteenth century criticism. Whereas such critics as Coleridge, Hazlitt, Hunt, and Macaulay sought to judge Congreve's plays in terms of their own standards or in terms of the viewpoint of the age in which they

⁶⁴Op. cit., pp. 11-13.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 13, n.

⁶⁶The Life, Letters, and Writings of Charles Lamb, ed. Percy Fitzgerald (London: John Stark, 1886), III, 364-365.

lived, Lamb pointed out that the standards for judgement must be taken from the realm of art, not from the realm of life or from personal views.

Turning from critical views to a study of the actual revivals of Congreve's plays in the nineteenth century, it is discernible that the attitude of the age towards the morality and the reality of the characters in the plays is reflected in the number of revivals of the plays. From the information available it is revealed that The Old Batchelor was not performed between the years 1789 and 1924.⁶⁷ The Double-Dealer had only one performance in one hundred years, and that was in 1802.⁶⁸ Love for Love fared better than the first two plays with engagements listed in 1825, 1842, 1846, and 1871.⁶⁹ The Way of the World was produced in 1800 and 1842.⁷⁰

The twentieth century, demanding realism and the use of the actual as its subject matter,⁷¹ has marked a slight shift in Congrevean criticism from the question of immorality to a more definite emphasis upon the question of the reality of the characters. More and more scholars are beginning to agree with Charles Lamb's approach to the study of Congreve's

⁶⁷Parker, op. cit., p. 1753.

⁶⁸Summers, op. cit., p. 244.

⁶⁹Parker, op. cit., p. 1805.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 1732.

⁷¹Moody and Lovett, op. cit., p. 489.

plays. Many scholars have made extensive studies of Restoration comedy, but six have become particularly outstanding in their field. Two of these, Sir Edmund Gosse and Professor John Hodges, are primarily biographers, seeking not to interpret but to record. Gosse, whose second Life of William Congreve was published in 1924, does no more than give a long summary of each play, plus a few comments upon one or two of his favorite characters; nor is he always careful in stating his facts. For instance, in the discussion of Love for Love he mentions old Foresight several times as the father of Angelica rather than her uncle.⁷² Professor Hodges has given a very scholarly and interesting account of the dramatist's life, but he does not summarize the plays nor does he seek to interpret the characters.

Belonging to the school of Jeremy Collier, Coleridge, and Macaulay is William Adolphus Ward, whose work was published near the turn of the century. Ward recognized the merit of Congreve's wit but declared:

The comedies of Congreve are but few in number; they vary, however, from one another in more respects than one. But, although they are not uniformly devoid of moral purpose, not one of them can be pronounced free from gross and intentional indecency, or undegraded by a deplorable frivolity of tone. The good breeding of Congreve proved no sufficient safeguard against his falling in with the worst tastes of the age which he enchanted; and the utmost that can be urged on his behalf is that he instinctively avoids the brutality of Wycherley, and that

⁷²Op. cit., p. 59.

even to a modern reader he seems less coarse than either Vanbrugh or Farquhar. Yet it is a melancholy reflexion that a writer of such gifts and capable of exercising so great a power over his age should only, when essaying the branch of his art for which he was least fitted, have risen to the height of desire to prove that "a Play may be with industry so disposed in spite of the licentious practice of the modern theater, as to become sometimes an innocent and not unprofitable entertainment."⁷³

Ward was one of the last critics to let the question of morals become a vital issue in his estimate of the works of the dramatist. Mr. Allardyce Nicoll returned to the older statement that the characters of The Old Batchelor were nothing but humours. Love for Love he declared a curious mixture of the highly artificial with the crass and brutal reality of the men and women of the Restoration. He also claimed that The Way of the World lacks reality in some of its characterizations but that Millamant is the greatest achievement of Congreve's career.⁷⁴

Professor Bonamy Dobrée, who has edited several volumes of Congreve's works and has also made an extensive study of Restoration drama, agrees with Lamb and approaches the study of Congreve's plays as a form of art:

In discussing Congreve, then, it must be insisted that he belongs to the type of "pure" creator, who is to be judged solely on aesthetic grounds, that

⁷³Op. cit., pp. 471-472.

⁷⁴British Drama (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1925), III, 254-257.

is, by the quality of delight which he imparts. He and Dickens are not to be measured by the same instrument, any more than Dostoievsky and Miss Austen, in spite of the elements they possess in common. It is, when all is said, the province of art to delight the spirit, and it is, finally, the aesthetic pleasure we get from Congreve that earns him his high place. It is on that plane, and not on the moral or philosophic, that he has something to give.⁷⁵

Others who agree with this idea of an aesthetic approach to the study of Congreve's plays include such well-known scholars as Professor H. T. E. Perry and John Palmer. To quote passages from their works would be merely to repeat what Professor Dobrée has said so well.

This more artistic and less prejudiced view has, perhaps, aided in a slight revival of the popularity of Congreve's plays during the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, there has been much renewed interest in the comedy of manners since Oscar Wilde and Henry Arthur Jones wrote their own comedies of manners in the eighteen nineties. Two productions of The Old Batchelor were presented in 1924 and 1931, the first record of the play's having been staged since 1789.⁷⁶ The Double-Dealer has proved less successful, having only one performance to its credit in May, 1916. Both Love for Love and The Way of the World have had five productions each. The Way of the World experienced a record run of one hundred and

⁷⁵Op. cit., pp. 471-472.

⁷⁶Parker, op. cit., p. 1753.

fifty-eight performances at the Lyric, Hammersmith, London, beginning February 7, 1924.⁷⁷

IV. Summary

In a summary of the findings of this study, the following are apparent. To the critics of all ages Congreve is the undisputed master of witty dialogue. From his contemporaries he received special recognition as an artist, the only dissenting voice being that of the Puritanical Jeremy Collier. In reference to his ability to construct a well-developed plot, only one man, Samuel Johnson, professed to believe Congreve's plots to be original; other critics have taken special pains to prove that Congreve could not develop a strong plot and that he was very much indebted to his precursors for certain stock situations of which he made full use. The only palliative statements concerning this phase of the study were offered by two critics who pointed out that if Congreve's plots were not always original and well-defined, neither were those of Shakespeare and Molière.

The study of critical opinions concerning the characterizations of Congreve reveals that each scholar has attempted to interpret Congreve's ability in terms of his own age and his own ideas of writing. There was an unexplained lack of comment upon this subject by his contemporaries, Congreve

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 1732, 1805.

himself giving more information about the matter than anyone else. In the eighteenth century Samuel Johnson was almost the only critic to write upon this phase of the drama. The popularity of the plays as stage productions was on the wane near the end of the century. The nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of scholars who studied the plays and a marked decrease in the popularity of the comedies of manners upon the stage. According to their critical opinions scholars of the nineteenth century were divided into three groups: those who considered the characters unrealistic but entertaining, those who questioned the morals of the characters, and those who suggested that the correct approach to a study of Congreve's plays is from an aesthetic point of view. Of this last school Charles Lamb was almost the only member. The twentieth century has put less emphasis upon the question of morality and has agreed with Lamb that the only correct view for the study of the comedy of manners is an artistic one. In the first half of this century there has been a renewed interest in this type of drama, as shown in the increasing number of revivals.

CHAPTER III

CONGREVE'S WITTY LOVERS

The preceding chapter analyzed and interpreted Congrevean criticism from its beginning to the present time. The purpose of this chapter is to examine each group of Congreve's witty lovers, the central characters in each of his dramas, from the standpoint of what the critics have said and from the standpoint of their conformity to, and departure from, the code of manners for the conventional heroes and heroines of the Restoration stage.

I. Approaches to the Study of Congreve's Characters

Critics of Congreve's characters have dwelt upon two topics: morality and originality. When Jeremy Collier hurled his diatribes at the writers of his time, one of his most heated accusations was that the characters created by William Congreve were lewd and profane.¹ He questioned not the reality of the characterizations, but rather the moral implications of their speech. Later, the learned Samuel Johnson declared that Congreve drew his characters not from his observations of the world about him but from a perusal of the other

¹Op. cit., p. 41: This was specifically said of the Old Bachelor: however, Collier had similar epithets for each of Congreve's plays.

poets, using witty dialogue to make them distinctive from the men and women created by his predecessors.² Charles Lamb, uniting both approaches, agreed with Johnson in criticizing the lack of originality in Congreve's characterizations, but differed with Collier by excusing any offensiveness to morals which they might seem to possess:

I could never connect those sports of a witty fancy in any shape with any result to be drawn from them in imitation of real life. They are a world of themselves, almost as much as a fairy-land. . . . In their own sphere, these characters do not offend my moral sense; in fact, they do not appeal to it at all. They seem engaged in their proper element. They break through no laws, or conscientious restraints. They know of none.³

In fact, Lamb called for an approach to the comedy of manners and to Congreve's characterizations in particular that is the approach to art instead of photography:

We substitute a real for a dramatic person, and judge him accordingly. We have been spoiled with--not sentimental comedy--but . . . the exclusive and all devouring drama of common life; where the moral point is everything; where instead of fictitious half-believed personages of the stage, . . . we recognize ourselves, our brothers, aunts, kinsfolk, allies, patrons, enemies--the same as in life--with an interest in what is going on so hearty and substantial that we cannot afford our moral judgment in its deepest and most vital results, to compromise or slumber for a moment We carry our fireside concerns to the theater with us.⁴

²Op. cit., II, 25.

³Op. cit., pp. 364-365.

⁴Ibid., pp. 361-362.

II. Conditions Forming the Basis for Critical Comedy

As a master of comic selection, not as a realist, Congreve was picturing his own age, the men and women of his own world, the society which sought pleasure as its primary aim in life, the society which frequented the theater, the coffee house, Saint James's Park, the Piazza, the drawing room:

The life of the time--brilliant, but corrupt and cynical--provided admirable copy for satiric portraiture. . . . If Lamb meant that the satirist was not drawing his material from actual conditions he was clearly wrong. Hazlitt insists, rightly, that the truthfulness of the portrait is what accounts for the vigor of Restoration comedy and its fascination for the contemporary public. No one supposes that the loose morals exhibited on the Restoration stage are those of a whole people or indeed any considerable portion of it; but they are, emphatically the manners of a modish world centering in Whitehall--and in the Restoration theater no one else counted The characters are as real as the familiar scenes through which they pass--the Rose, Hyde Park, Spring Gardens, the New Exchange; some of the scandalous episodes are transcripts from life. Gathered in the Duke's or the King's haunts of pleasure, where no Puritanic censor would think of appearing, was a more homogeneous audience than had ever before assembled in an English theater or was likely to assemble again. The men and women who composed it came to see themselves mirrored to the life, to laugh over their follies, and to applaud the wit inspired by their frailties. The picture is, of course, selective as satirical portraiture always is. It has the exaggeration of any composite. Vice and Folly are, speaking in terms of art, idealized. But the elements are indigenous and the degree of exaggeration is actually slighter than comic realism.⁵

⁵Cecil A. Moore, "Introduction," Twelve Famous Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century (The Modern Library; New York: Random House, Inc., 1933), pp. xi-xii.

Improbable as the people in Congreve's plays may seem to men and women of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, they are the product of an age in which people were endeavoring to re-evaluate their standards of thinking after the great political and religious upheavals of the Puritan Revolt and the Restoration. The struggle of the political and religious groups had led to uncertainty; of like importance, the new scientific revolution had destroyed old ideas and concepts of the universe and had as yet failed to rebuild new concepts acceptable to the majority of men. Children of a transitory era, these people of the seventeenth century were merely trying to see themselves in a clear light to make for themselves new standards of value.⁶

It is not my purpose here to judge the moral standards of Congreve's characters but to analyze his characters and to show through this analysis the author's growth not only as a dramatist but as a discerner of persons.

III. Congreve's Originality

One of the first characteristics that critics point out in a discussion of Congreve's artistry is his dependence upon some of his precursors both for his plots and for the general outline of character development. Johnson's statement that Congreve drew upon the other poets for his characters is

⁶John Herman Randall, Jr., The Making of the Modern Mind (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1940), pp. 172-307.

not wholly wrong. More ambitious critics have pointed out that Congreve had at least a superficial acquaintance with Aristophanes, Terence, Plautus, Molière, and Jonson. Aristophanes in Greece and Terence and Plautus in Italy wrote comedies of manners and developed this particular type of drama to a high degree of artistic refinement. To these three men future writers are indebted for the beginning of a classical tradition in comedy, although there have been many changes since.⁷ In particular, Mr. Bonamy Dobrée, a twentieth century scholar, has pointed out a vague resemblance of Setter, the pimp in The Old Batchelor, to characters in some of Terence's plays. Without reciting specific parallels, he has declared the resemblance to be to a stock character used many times and not to a particular one.⁸ The influence of Molière is in the use of the soliloquy in The Double-Dealer, a play which also bears a vague resemblance to Tartuffe. The criticism of Lady Froth's poem by Brisk in the same play by Congreve is reminiscent of the conversation between Oronte, Philente, and Alceste in the Misanthrope.⁹ Aside from the fact that some of Congreve's personages more nearly resemble humorous characters than true wits, there are not many direct resemblances to Ben Jonson. Bluffe, the

⁷ Perry, op. cit., p. 8.

⁸ Op. cit., p. 127.

⁹ Gosse, op. cit., p. 42.

cowardly servant in The Old Batchelor, is very like Jonson's Bobadil. Fondlewife of The Double-Dealer is of the same jealous type as Kitely.¹⁰

The influence of Congreve's immediate predecessors, Wycherley and Etherege, is more clearly discernible. For example, the influence of Wycherley is very apparent, especially in The Old Batchelor, which has several characters resembling those in Wycherley's The Country Wife. Congreve borrowed from Wycherley a stock situation involving a deceiving gallant, an amorous wife, and a jealous husband. The gallant with the assent of the wife tells a clever lie, and the gullible husband is tricked into believing that all has been well in his absence.¹¹ During the course of this discussion it will be interesting to see how Congreve has taken a stock situation and improved it enough, finally, to make it almost his own.

Congreve usually based his plot upon the affairs of a young man and woman in love, a situation of which Etherege made much use. The humor in the play arises from "an apparent disagreement between the parties in the love match."¹²

In Congreve too these scenes are always most successful where the obstacles to love are not objective but subjective, where the difference between what the lovers feel and what they say is most

¹⁰Perry, op. cit., p. 57. See also Gosse, op. cit., p. 41.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 58-59.

¹²Ibid.

strongly marked; in such a case their complete sophistication forms a striking contrast to the human promptings of their hearts.¹³

This was not a device originating with Etherege, however. It had been used very successfully by William Shakespeare in Much Ado About Nothing. Shakespeare, however, made his two witty lovers, Beatrice and Benedick, parts of the sub-plot and gave to them many more human qualities than are possessed by their counterparts as created by Etherege and Congreve.¹⁴ While it is true that Congreve depended upon stock characters and that his characters sometimes resemble others created by Molière, Wycherley, and Etherege, it cannot be denied that there is a refreshing vitality as well as an originality in his creations which furnishes much enjoyment for the student of the comedy of manners.

IV: The Code of Manners for Heroes and Heroines of the Restoration Stage

Similar situations and attitudes may not indicate borrowings from precursors but mirrorings of the age. With the growth of the comedy of manners, for example, there grew up a code of manners for the ideal gentleman and the ideal lady, the deviation from which furnished amusement to the audience. The ideal gentleman was a well-born creature and was always

¹³ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁴ John Palmer, Comic Characters of Shakespeare (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1947), p. 117-118.

tastefully dressed. Poised and witty, he never was embarrassed or put out of countenance. Of course, the ideal gentleman was skilled in love-making, and at the beginning of the play he had at least one affair going on. He usually had an affair with a married woman and one with a woman of his own rank. He never boasted of his affairs and never betrayed the confidence of a woman of his own rank. He always concealed his passion either by an affectation of extreme indifference or an overacted protestation of love. If married, he showed no jealousy towards his wife; nor did he show publicly that he loved her.

The fashionable lady had to be familiar with the world of intrigue, but she was never to be involved in it. If she indulged in illicit love, she had to take care never to be found out. If married, she never expected complete constancy in her husband.¹⁵

V. The Old Batchelor, an Imitation of Wycherley and Wethers

William Congreve has given to the public four excellent examples of the comedy of manners. His first comedy, The Old Batchelor, was produced in March, 1693,¹⁶ the product

¹⁵George H. Nettleton and Arthur E. Case (eds.), British Dramatists from Dryden to Sheridan (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1939), p. 151.

¹⁶Hodges, op. cit., p. 41: Mr. Hodges says this is the actual date of the first performance, although it is usually listed as January, 1693.

of a man scarcely out of his teens, and the most eclectic of his plays. In this comedy Congreve made full use of the stock situations as borrowed from Wycherley. The Bellmour, Laetitia Fondlewife, and Fondlewife triangle is more directly related to the affairs of the Pinchwives in The Country Wife than are any of the similar situations in the other plays. This relationship will be discussed more fully in another chapter. The borrowing from Wycherley did not stop here. Heartwell, the old batchelor himself, resembles very closely Manly, the misogynist created by Wycherley, and Fondlewife resembles Alderman Gripe, of Love in a Wood.¹⁷ The main plot of the play, however, is based upon the Etherege theme.

In The Old Batchelor there are two couples, not one. The main action of the play centers around the affairs of Vainlove and Araminta, but to them Congreve failed to give the charm and vivacity with which he endowed their friends, Bellmour and Belinda. Professor Perry has said of this:

Take The Old Batchelor first as an example of Congreve in embryo. The principal lovers are Vainlove, too capricious and sentimental to be a true wooer, and Araminta, too modest to be spirited game. Their one important scene together, that in which Vainlove confronts her with the forged letter, smacks more of comédie larmoyante than anything else. It is unbelievably eighteenth century.¹⁸

Professor Perry did not point out that perhaps Congreve's purpose was to contrast the normalcy of the first couple with

¹⁷ Perry, op. cit., p. 58.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

the affected behavior of the second. Vainlove scarcely deviates from the ideal gentleman of the comedy of manners. He is poised, witty, and capricious in his love affairs. He has a mistress whom he has just deserted and who is trying desperately to regain his affection. He also has an affair with one of the married women of the town, Laetitia Fondlewife, whom he admits knowing only slightly. The air of indifference so often affected by the young gentleman towards his lover is extended by Vainlove to all his affairs. He ignores Sylvia's pleas, and engages Bellmour to act as a proxy in his affair with Laetitia.

Vainlove and Araminta both affect an air of extreme indifference towards each other. Their main topic of conversation always centers on love, seemingly the only topic suitable for a young man and woman to discuss. Conversation must always be a game, and each participant must try to be more witty than the other. The following is a typical example of the conversation between two young lovers:

Vain. . . . For as Love is a Deity, he must be serv'd
by Prayer.

Belin. O Gad, would you all pray to Love then, and
let us alone.

Vain. You are the Temples of Love, and 'tis through
you, our Devotion must be convey'd

Aram. Rather poor silly Idols of your own making,
which, upon the least Displeasure you forsake,
and set up new--Every Man, now, changes his

Mistress and his Religion, as His Humour varies
or his Interest.¹⁹

Vainlove not only wants to appear indifferent to all women, but he also is desirous of being the pursuer, not the pursued. For this reason he has scorned Laetitia and Sylvia. For the same reason he is very angry when he received a forged letter, supposedly containing Araminta's pardon for a stolen kiss:

By Heav'n there's not a Woman, will give a Man the
Pleasure of a Chase: My sport is always balkt or
cut short--I stumble over the Game I would pursue--
'Tis dull and unnatural to have a Hare run full in
the Hounds Mouth; and would distaste the keenest
Hunter--I would have overtaken, not have met my
Game.²⁰

This attitude on Vainlove's part leads to a misunderstanding, and their love affair is almost at an end until Vainlove finds that the letter is forged and has to offer some apologies himself. Only once does this arrogant young man admit his real feelings for Araminta. This is in answer to Bellmour's question of whether or not he would be content to marry Araminta. His reply is simple, "Could you be content to go to Heav'n?"²¹

¹⁹The Old Batchelor, II, vii, 31-41, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 49. All subsequent references and quotations from the comedies are from this edition, the mention of which it will not be necessary to repeat.

²⁰Ibid., IV, v, 25-31.

²¹Ibid., III, iii, 21.

When Vainlove finally surrenders to Araminta and is invited to follow Bellmour and Belinda's example by marrying her, he can only ask hopefully, "May I presume so great a Blessing?"²² Araminta's answer is just what the proud man deserves: "We had better take the Advantage of a little of our Friends Experience first."²³

The typical lover, Vainlove is also the typical gentleman of the town, scorning all pretense of work and professing pleasure to be the sole pursuit worth while in life. He is content to let Bellmour be his proxy to Laetitia Fondlewife; but when things do not directly concern him, he is most willing to arrange affairs. The best example of this trait is his successful attempt to trick the artless Sir Joseph Wittol and his cowardly servant, Captain Bluffe, into marriage with Sylvia and her maid, Lucy. Certainly, Vainlove is not an uninteresting character. He lacks the dash of Valentine and the superb finesse of Mirabell because Congreve had not yet reached his best in character creation.

The part of Araminta as first played by Mrs. Bracegirdle was extremely well-praised. As she appears to the reader, Araminta is "too self conscious and too modest to be spirited game."²⁴ Indeed, it may be said that she lacks any real definiteness of personality. Bellmour's picture of

²²Ibid., V, xv, 83.

²³Ibid., ll. 84-85.

²⁴Perry, op. cit., p. 67.

her as a "kind of floating Island, who sometimes seems in reach, then vanishes and keeps him [Vainlove] busied in the search,"²⁵ is augmented by Sharper, one of Bellmour's friends, who says that she needs to have a good share of sense if she desires to manage so inconstant a lover as Vainlove.²⁶ This brief information is almost all that is given about Araminta. She is definitely a typical restoration heroine in her endeavor to keep her love for Vainlove a secret until she is sure of him and is ready to marry him; however, in the presence of Belinda she has nothing but praise for love:

If Love be the Fever which you mean, kind Heav'n avert
the Cure; Let me have Oil to feed the Flame and never
let it be extinct, 'till I my self am Ashes.²⁷

The entrance of Vainlove immediately causes her to change the tone of her speech, and she is content merely to furnish charming observations upon the subject and to add that bit of tongue-in-cheek cynicism about man's transient affections for his mistresses. When she finds the conversation bordering too much upon the serious, Araminta interrupts the discussion to sing a love ballad.

Araminta appears in only one more good scene which gives her a chance to express both wit and indignation. This

²⁵The Old Batchelor, I, iv, 29-32.

²⁶Ibid., ll. 33-34.

²⁷Ibid., II, iii, 10-13.

is when Vainlove confronts her with the forged letter. It is this scene which Professor Perry called eighteenth century in style:

Vain. I Find, Madam, the Formality of the Law must be observed, tho' the Penalty of it be dispens'd with; and an Offender must plead to his Arraignment, though he has his Pardon in his Pocket.

Aram. I'm amaz'd! This Insolence exceeds, t'other;-- whoever has encouraged you to this Assurance-- presuming upon the easiness of my Temper, has much deceiv'd you, and so you shall find.

Vain. Hey day! Which way now? Here's fine doubling.
[Aside.

Aram. Base Man! Was it not enough to affront me with your sawcy Passion?

Vain. You have given that Passion a much kinder ~~Place~~ than sawcy, in another Place.

Aram. Another Place! Some villainous Design to blast my Honour--But tho' thou hadst all the Treachery and Malice of thy Sex, thou canst not lay a Blemish on my Fame--No, I have not err'd in one favourable Thought of Mankind--How Time might have deceiv'd me in you, I know not; my Opinion was but young, and your early Baseness has prevented its growing to a wrong Belief--Unworthy, and ungrateful! Be gone, and never see me more.

Vain. Did I dream? Or do I dream? Shall I believe my Eyes, or Ears? The Vision is here still--Your Passion, Madam, will admit of no farther reasoning--But here's a silent Witness of your Acquaintance.

[Takes out the Letter, and offers it: She snatches it, and throws it away. 28

The scene is too short to allow more than a glimpse of Araminta, and such a fleeting glimpse of the girl who has captured the heart of one so inconstant as Vainlove is insufficient to afford any real acquaintance with her. Even the reconciliation scene contains only two speeches by Araminta in which she

²⁸Ibid., IV, xii, 1-33.

haughtily declares, "But there's no need to forgive what is not worth my Anger."²⁹ When Vainlove finally does declare that he wishes that they might be married at the same time that their friends wed, she gives a shrewd answer, "We had better take the Advantage of a little of our Friends Experience first."³⁰

If Araminta and Vainlove do not prove particularly so, their friends, Belinda and Bellmour, are extremely amusing. In them Congreve heralds greater achievements to come. Their predecessors are Beatrice and Benedick, Shakespeare's witty young couple; and their successors are Millamant and Mirabell, Congreve's finest creations.³¹ Professor Perry has also pointed out that Bellmour resembles Horner in Wycherley's The Plain Dealer:

Wycherley's other great character, Horner, is also to be found in The Old Bachelor masquerading under the name of Bellmour. His method of intrigue differs slightly from Horner's, for his way is to enjoy not only his own mistresses but those of a fickle friend, who starts many an affair that he is too bored to finish. Bellmour's principal exploit in the play is to seduce the wife of the Puritan banker, Fondlewife.³²

It is true that Bellmour is merely a foil to complete his friend's amours; yet he possesses much individuality of his own. The idea of his visit to Laetitia Fondlewife, disguised as a minister, originated with Vainlove, but Bellmour may be

²⁹Ibid., V, x, 8-9.

³⁰Ibid., V, xv, 84-45.

³¹Palmer, loc. cit.

³²Perry, op. cit., p. 58.

credited with much originality in carrying this out. For instance, having been discovered in Laetitia's rooms by her husband, Bellmour is the complete master of the situation, and he will not betray the woman in question. His explanation to Fondlewife, however unusual and improbable, is acceptable to the foolish old man. In the meantime, Bellmour continues to make love to Laetitia behind her husband's back.

Still disguised as a minister, this young rascal tricks the old bachelor, Heartwell, into marrying Sylvia. That Bellmour is thoroughly enjoying himself is indicated by the conversation of his friends:

Setter. Talk of the Devil--See where he comes.

Sharper. Hugging himself in his prosperous Mischief--
No real Fanatick can look better pleas'd after
a successful Sermon on Sedition.³³

As a lover Bellmour is fully aware of the fact that Belinda loves him, because "she never speaks well of me her self, nor suffers any Body else to rail at me."³⁴ Nor is Bellmour blind to the fact that Belinda has a fortune of ten thousand pounds which he considers very adequate for a wife. Vainlove tries to conceal his passion for Araminta by an affectation of indifference; Bellmour does just the opposite and gives such an overacted protestation of love that Belinda declares:

³³The Old Batchelor, V, v, 1-4.

³⁴Ibid., I, ii, 25-27.

He has so pestered me with Flames and Stuff--I think
I shan't endure the sight of a Fire this Twelve-month.

. . . . don't come always like the Devil, wrapt in
Flames--and I'll not hear a Sentence more that begins
with an, I burn--Or an, I beseech you, Madam.³⁵

After this Bellmour very cleverly replies that he will adore
her in silence and resorts to some very delightful pantomime.
The play ends with Bellmour's committing himself to the "last-
ing Durance" of marriage.³⁶

Little more need be said of Belinda, for much has
already been said of her in discussing other characters. She
is not wholly the affected lady that Congreve lists in the
dramatis personae, nor is she entirely consistent with Sharper's
description of her as "too proud, too inconstant, too affected,
and too witty, and too handsome for a Wife."³⁷ Belinda's wit
and affectation, no doubt, put her in Congreve's mind as an
ideal comic heroine.³⁸ Professor Perry said of Belinda:

Belinda is a baffling character, as has been remarked
by all the critics that have considered her, probably
because Congreve started out intending to do one
thing with her and ended by doing another
Congreve evidently meant her as a satire on affectation.

³⁵Ibid., II, viii, 4-14.

³⁶Ibid., V, xv, 78-79.

³⁷Ibid., I, iii, 19-26.

³⁸"Essay Concerning Humor in Comedy," Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 8: "For if ever anything does appear Comical or Ridiculous in a Woman, I think it is little more than an acquir'd Folly, or an Affectation." See also Perry, op. cit., p. 68.

. . . . a heroine Belinda certainly is, if to be a heroine means to have your creator lavish upon you his greatest care and put into your mouth his choicest pearls of wit and wisdom.³⁹

Belinda is a true heroine of the Restoration stage, for she appears to flee from her lover until she is sure of his affections. Never by any of her actions does she give a hint of her true feelings. To her cousin she declares that she hates all men and pretends disdain for marriage in such an epigrammatic statement as this: "Courtship to Marriage [is] as a very witty Prologue to a very dull Play."⁴⁰ Never is Araminta given such a speech! Of this speech, Professor Perry remarked: "Certainly to hear Belinda talk of marriage makes a very witty play out of what would otherwise have been dull dialogue."⁴¹ When finally Belinda does accept Bellmour, seemingly in a hesitant manner, she says:

O my Conscience, I cou'd find in my Heart to marry thee, purely to be rid of thee--At least, thou art so troublesome a Lover, there's hopes thou'lt make a more than ordinary quiet Husband.⁴²

Belinda's final surrender to Bellmour is given in the same sprightly tone as the preceding speech. When Bellmour says that he is committing himself to the "lasting Durance of marriage," Belinda retorts, "Prisoner, make much of your

³⁹Op. cit., p. 67.

⁴⁰The Old Batchelor, V, x, 27-39.

⁴¹Op. cit., p. 68.

⁴²The Old Batchelor, V, x, 12-14.

Fetters."⁴³ In her sprightly manner of speaking Belinda is more nearly related to Congreve's greatest heroine, Millamant, than any other of his creations.

VI. The Double-Dealer, Simplification of the Basic Plot

Congreve was evidently so well pleased with his use of the domestic triangle borrowed from Wycherley that he used it twice in his second play, The Double-Dealer. The Lord Froth-Lady Froth-Brisk affair has nothing to do with the plot, but it furnishes a frivolous touch to the play. These creatures wander in and out of the scenes being witty and charming but scarcely anything more. The Sir Paul Plyant-Lady Plyant-Careless triangle is more vicious in its implications, for Careless is seeking to divert Lady Plyant's attention sufficiently to keep her from aiding Lady Touchwood's plans against Mellefont. There is even the hint of a third triangle in the Touchwood and Mellefont affair, but Mellefont's constancy to Cynthia keeps it from being one.

In spite of its maze of intrigues, The Double-Dealer is marked by Congreve's attempt to simplify the basic plot of his play. By the author's own admission the play has "but a single plot" to avoid the confusion which characterized The Old Batchelor.⁴⁴ Seeking to preserve the unities of the

⁴³Ibid., V, xv, 80.

⁴⁴"Epistle Dedicatory," The Double-Dealer, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 114.

drama, Congreve introduces into The Double-Dealer only one pair of witty lovers, Mellefont and Cynthia, neither of whom is a true character of the Restoration stage in every sense of the word. Mellefont is merely a passive creature in the hands of the villainous Maskwell. "Mellefont is no sort of character at all but a mere puppet, shot about like a shuttlecock by the battledores of action."⁴⁵ Why should he lack the strength of character possessed by Bellmour or Vainlove?

Professor Perry suggested a possible reason:

He [Congreve] is too occupied with his serious plot to lavish much attention on Mellefont and Cynthia. Then too these young people have already come to an understanding, and no contrast to their honeyed words is possible. Mellefont is content to play the passive role of conventional hero, but Cynthia rather makes opportunities to display her wit it is exactly this agreement which weakens the play of Congreve's wit between them.⁴⁶

Mellefont has no mistress except Cynthia and seeks none. He even finds it necessary to flee from the unnatural advances of his aunt, Lady Touchwood. Mellefont is much too serious to be witty, and the only time that he does indulge in repartee is at the beginning of the play when he talks with Careless:

Care. Where are the Women? I'm weary of guzzling,
and begin to think them the better Company.

Mel. Then thy Reason staggers and thou'rt almost
Drunk.

⁴⁵Elwin, op. cit., p. 169.

⁴⁶Op. cit., p. 69.

Care. No Faith, but your Fools grow noisie--and if a Man must endure the Noise of Words without Sense, I think Women have more Musical Voices, and become Nonsense better.

Mel. Why, they are at the end of the Gallery; retir'd to their Tea and Scandal; according to their Ancient Custom, after Dinner.⁴⁷

The rest of the play concerns Mellefont's efforts to marry Cynthia and to escape the unwanted attentions of his aunt. He employs Maskwell to aid him and considers this villain a true friend. Since it seems almost inconceivable that Mellefont could be so stupid as to trust Maskwell, perhaps it is better to let his creator come to his defense, as he did in the "Epistle Dedicatory":

The Hero of the Play, as they are pleas'd to call him, (meaning Mellefont) is a Gull, and made a Fool, and cheated. Is every Man a Gull and a Fool that is deceiv'd? At that rate I'm afraid the two Classes of Men will be reduc'd to one, and the Knaves themselves be at a loss to justify their Title: But if an Open-hearted honest Man, who has an entire Confidence in one whom he takes to be his Friend, and whom he has oblig'd to be so: and who (to confirm him in his Opinion) in all Appearance, and upon several Trials has been so: If this Man be deceiv'd by the Treachery of the other; must he of necessity commence Fool immediately, only because the other has prov'd a Villain? Ay, but there was Caution give to Mellefont in the first Act by his Friend Careless. Of what Nature was that Caution? Only to give the Audience some light into the Character of Maskwell, before his Appearance; and not to convince Mellefont of his Treachery; for that was more than Careless was then able to do: He never knew Maskwell guilty of any Villany; he was only a sort of Man which he did not like.⁴⁸

⁴⁷The Double-Dealer, I, i, 1-14.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 115-116.

Cynthia, another character created for Mrs. Bracegirdle, is gracious, charming, and the only feminine character in the drama whose morals are unquestionable:

In Cynthia, Congreve produced one of those honest and gracious maidens whom he liked to preserve in the wild satiric garden of his drama, that his beloved Mrs. Bracegirdle might have a pure and impassioned part to play. We owe to this penchant the fortunate circumstance that, while in *Etterage*, *Wycherley*, and *Vanbrugh* there is often not a single character that we can esteem or personally tolerate from the beginning of the play to the end, in Congreve there is always sure to be one lady of reputation, even if she be not quite of the crystalline order of that famous Lady who walked among apes and tigers in the boskages of Comus.⁴⁹

Cynthia is not the usual witty heroine, and she possesses an air of wistfulness. She has not kept her lover in doubt as to her true feelings, and for this reason she declares that she does not believe their marriage will ever take place:

My Mind gives me it won't--because we are both willing; we each of us strive to reach the Goal and hinder one another in the Race. I swear it never does well when the Parties are so agreed--For when People walk Hand in Hand, there's neither overtaking or meeting.⁵⁰

Cynthia is wistful and apprehensive concerning her forthcoming marriage, but she does not lack spirit. Almost as soon as she has given voice to her doubts, she demands that Mellefont make good his boast to undermine Lady Touchwood and gain his aunt's consent to their match. Cynthia, like Mellefont, is deceived by Maskwell and almost falls into his trap, but she discovers his villainous plot long before Mellefont does.

⁴⁹Gosse, op. cit., p. 44.

⁵⁰The Double-Dealer, IV, i, 12-20.

In her relationship with the pedantic and coquettish Lady Froth, Cynthia is politely sarcastic. When Lady Froth exclaims about how sad it would have been had she not met Lord Froth, Cynthia replies, "Then neither of you would have met with your Match, on my Conscience."⁵¹ To Lady Froth's offer to define the words phosphorus and hemisphere, Cynthia's reply is scathing, "Madam, I'm not so ignorant."⁵² When Lady Froth declares that Mellefont can never love Cynthia as Lord Froth loves her, Cynthia is again equal to the occasion:

Cynt. I believe he'll love me better.

Ld. Froth. Heav'n's that can never be, why do you think so?

Cynt. Because he has not so much reason to be fond of himself.⁵³

It is no wonder then that when the Froths leave, Cynthia declares:

I'm thinking, tho' Marriage makes Man and Wife one Flesh, it leaves 'em still two Fools; and they become more conspicuous by setting off one another.⁵⁴

Such statements make Cynthia a forerunner of Angelica and Milamant in Congreve's later plays; yet it was these same passages which Professor Perry spoke of as being forced wit.

VII. Love for Love, Diversity of Plot

Love for Love, by far the longest of Congreve's comedies and also his most successful play, was first presented

⁵¹Ibid., II, i, 26-27.

⁵²Ibid., I, 37.

⁵³Ibid., II, ii, 49-53.

⁵⁴Ibid., II, iii, 2-5.

in April, 1695, at the new Lincoln's Inn Fields theater where it enjoyed a record run of thirteen successive days.⁵⁵ This play has also had more successful revivals than the other three plays, the last major production being that of John Gielgud and Company in April, 1947.

Coming more fully to recognize his own powers as a dramatist, Congreve diversified the Wycherly plot and leaned more heavily upon the stock situation of a young man and a young woman in love to furnish the main interest for Love for Love. The deceiving gallant has, in one instance, become a vain, affected beau, Tattle, who is deceived into an irrevocable marriage with one of the women of the town, Mrs. Frail. The Scandal-Mrs. Foresight-Foresight triangle is different from the triangles of the first two plays because the character of Foresight is telescoped so much that interest in the assignations of his wife and Scandal is almost lost.

The basic plot of Love for Love is fairly simple, for it centers around the fortunes of Valentine Legend, whose spendthrift ways have caused his father to attempt to disinherit him and to give the estate to a younger brother. Valentine feigns madness in order to keep from signing the final papers which would convey the fortune to Ben. His friend, Scandal, and his sweetheart, Angelica, finally succeed in outwitting the old man. Gosse pointed out one unusual thing

⁵⁵Downes, op. cit., p. 44.

concerning the plot of Love for Love, and that is the fact that "having never represented vice as supremely interesting it closes with a deliberate concession of good fortune to virtue."⁵⁶

One of the few critics to have anything to say about Valentine was Jeremy Collier, who found him to be "compounded of vice":

Valentine in Love for Love is (if I may so call him) the Hero of the Play; this Spark the Poet would Pass for a Person of Virtue, but he speaks too late. 'Tis true, He was hearty in his Affection to Angelica. Now without Question, to be in Love with a fine Lady of Thirty Thousand Pounds is a Great Virtue! But then abating this single commendation, Valentine is altogether compounded of Vice. He is a Prodigal Debauchee, Unnatural and Profane, Obscene, Sawcy, and Undutiful; And yet this Libertine is crown'd for the Man of Merit, has his Wishes thrown into his Lap, and makes the Happy Exit. I perceive we should have a rare set of Virtues if these Poets had the making of them! How they hug a Vicious Character, and how profuse are they in their Liberalities to Lewdness.⁵⁷

In spite of this condemnation by Collier there are many good qualities about Valentine, and he is an interesting character. For the first time Congreve has allowed his hero to participate in some excellent comic scenes. Valentine has neither the capriciousness of Vainlove nor the stupidity of Mellefont. Erudite, somewhat arrogant, yet constant in his love for Angelica, Valentine has little affectation of wit and is sharply contrasted with his friend, Scandal, who has designated

⁵⁶ Gosse, op. cit., p. 63.

⁵⁷ Op. cit., pp. 142-143.

himself as a free speaker. Both men are true wits. Together they enjoy some very amusing diversion early in the play when Mr. Trapland comes to collect the money which Valentine owes him. Craftily they plot to divert Mr. Trapland's attention from the purpose of his visit by getting him very drunk and by turning the conversation to a discussion of a widow with whom Mr. Trapland is very well acquainted. They do not succeed in making Mr. Trapland forget entirely the purpose of his visit, but they do succeed in getting him so befuddled that he apologizes for being so pressing about the matter and is satisfied to follow Sir Sampson Legend's steward off in the hope of getting a payment.

As soon as Trapland leaves, Tattle enters. He is an affected fop who brags of his secrecy and usually tells all he knows. The two friends wheedle some very choice bits of information from him, including the fact that he has had an affair with Mrs. Frail, a mutual acquaintance. Threatened with exposure to Mrs. Frail as one who cannot protect a lady's honor by secrecy, Tattle is bribed into sacrificing "half a Dozen Women of good Reputation" to the merciless Scandal.⁵⁸

Scandal, Valentine, and Jeremy also indulge in intrigue later on in the play. Mrs. Foresight, thinking Valentine really mad, believes she can trick him into marrying her fortune-hunting sister, Mrs. Frail. She bribes Jeremy into helping

⁵⁸Love for Love, I, xiii, 21-22.

her, but Jeremy, loyal to his master, informs Valentine of the plan. Valentine turns the tables upon the two by having Mrs. Frail marry Mr. Tattle, who believes he is marrying Angelica. As in The Old Batchelor, this is done by having the principals of the wedding disguised in masks. Neither Mrs. Frail nor Tattle deserves the punishment which they receive; yet Valentine excuses it by saying that Tattle is merely being punished for trying to stand in his way with Angelica.⁵⁹

Valentine's relationship with his father is not a happy one. In the first place, he has spent too lavishly. The old gentleman offers to pay Valentine's debts in return for a signed deed of conveyance giving his claim to the estate to his younger brother. Valentine agrees to this hard bargain because he says he wants to be free to see Angelica once more; furthermore he secretly hopes that his father will relent and will not force him to give up his right of inheritance. He soon visits his father with this in mind, but the father is not to be bargained with. There follows a dramatic scene in which both father and son hurl angry accusations at each other. Sir Sampson demands to know what he has done to deserve such a son; Valentine demands to know why the father brought a son into the world if he does not intend to provide for him. Rather than take away things to which Valentine

⁵⁹Ibid., V, xii, 106-109.

has become accustomed, he asserts that the father should leave the son as he found him without "Reason, Thought, Passions, Inclinations, Affectations, Appetites, Senses, and the huge Train of Attendants that you begot along with me."⁶⁰

The quarrel reaches its climax when Sir Sampson turns to Jeremy and asks him if he begot Jeremy too and is supposed to provide for him also. Jeremy's excellent reply, "By the Provision that's made for me, you might have begot me too,"⁶¹ is too much for the old man. He turns to Valentine and tells his son to live by his wits. "You were always fond of the Wits,--Now let's see if you have Wit enough to keep your self."⁶²

Valentine does employ his wits by feigning madness, He has the twofold purpose of deceiving his father and of winning an admission of love from Angelica. Sir Sampson, who does not believe his son really mad, takes a lawyer with him when he goes to see Valentine. Valentine pretends not to recognize his father, who, half-believing and half-suspicious, does not know what to do but to ask the son if he really does not know his own father. Sir Sampson tells the lawyer to have the deed ready in the event that Valentine is rational enough to sign it. The rest of the scene is excellent. Valentine's answer serves only to confuse his father more than ever:

⁶⁰Ibid., II, vii, 80-83.

⁶¹Ibid., II, 103-104.

⁶²Ibid., II, 148-150.

It may be so--I did not know you--the World is full--
 There are People that we do not know, and yet the
 Sun shines upon all alike--There are Fathers that
 have many children; and there are Children that have
 many Fathers--'tis strange! But I am Truth and come
 to give the World the Lie.⁶³

Still keeping up the masquerade, Valentine turns upon Mr. Buckram and frightens him so that the poor man runs from the room. The lawyer having gone, Valentine seemingly regains his faculties; but when Mr. Buckram is recalled, he suffers a relapse.

Valentine is not the true Restoration gentleman in so far as his love affair is concerned, for he has but one interest and is constant in his love. Even Jeremy Collier conceded this fact when he accused Valentine of being very wicked. Like Vainlove, Valentine wants to be the pursuer. He is never sure that Angelica loves him; yet she has never given him any reason to despair, and he is content to wait. His first meeting with Angelica is in the nature of a quarrel, Scandal making an interested third party:

Ang. You can't accuse me of Inconstancy; I never told you that I lov'd you.

Val. But I can accuse you of Uncertainty for not telling me whether you did or not.

Ang. You mistake Indifference for Uncertainty; I never had concern enough to ask my self the Question.

Scan. Nor good Nature enough to answer him that did ask you: I'll say that for you, Madam.

Ang. What, are you setting up for good Nature?

⁶³ Ibid., IV, vi, 10-17.

Scan. Only for the Affectation of it, as the Women do for ill nature.

Ang. Perswade your Friend, that it is all Affectation.

Scan. I shall receive no benefit from the Opinion; For I know no effectual Difference between continued Affectation and Reality.⁶⁴

After a first moment of doubt, Angelica is not deceived by Valentine's feigned madness. She does not confess her love, as he hopes she will. Not until he is sure that he has lost her does he really prove worthy of her by promising to sign the deed of conveyance:

I have been disappointed of my only Hope; and he that loses Hope may part with any thing. I never valu'd Fortune, but as it was subservient to my pleasure; and my only Pleasure was to please this Lady: I have made my vain Attempts and find at last that nothing but my Ruin can affect it: . . .⁶⁵

What sort of woman was this for whom Valentine was willing to sacrifice his fortune? Evidently, some critics have found her hard and unsympathetic, because Gosse came to her defense:

With those critics who have found Angelica hard and unsympathetic, I cannot agree. To me she is one of the most delightful of all comic heroines; refined and distinguished in nature, she refuses to wear her heart on her sleeve, and her learned spark, with his airs of the academic beau, has to deserve her or seem to deserve her, before she yields to his somewhat impudent suit. If she tricks him, it is only when she finds him tricking her, and the artifice in neither case is very serious. No, Angelica is charming

⁶⁴Ibid., III, iii, 1-17.

⁶⁵Ibid., V, xii, 54-60.

in her presence of mind and her lady-like dignity, and reigns easily first among the creations, not only of Congreve, but of post-Restoration comedy down to Goldsmith. She is the comic sister of Belvidera, and these two preserve that corrupt and cynical stage from moral contumely.⁶⁶

Valentine's description of Angelica shows her to be a woman of great beauty:

You're a Woman--One to whom Heav'n gave Beauty,
when it Grafted Roses on a Briar. You are the
Reflection of Heav'n in a Pond, and he that leaps
at you is sunk.⁶⁷

Scandal is not so complimentary because he declares Angelica to be of an airy temper, one who seldom thinks before she acts and is, therefore, rarely understood.⁶⁸ Since Scandal is seldom complimentary to anyone, this may be taken to mean little more than what was said about most of the heroines of the comedy of manners. Angelica also possesses an extremely sharp wit, an independent manner, and wisdom enough to outwit Valentine in many ways.

In her dealings with her foolish old uncle, Angelica is very independent and slightly scornful of the old man's prognostications. When her uncle refuses to let her borrow his coach because the stars say this is not the right day for going abroad, Angelica turns the scene to her advantage. She ridicules her uncle's hobby and tries to frighten the old man

⁶⁶Op. cit., pp. 63-64.

⁶⁷Ibid., IV, xvi, 76-79.

⁶⁸Ibid., I, xi, 25-33.

by threatening to have him declared a wizzard. Foresight merely exhibits patience at his niece's behavior, declaring such to be his fate. When Angelica turns upon the nurse who is also in the room and declares her to be a witch, the poor creature is beside herself. Thwarted in her effort to disturb her uncle by ridiculing his love for astrology, Angelica maliciously plants in his mind the seed of suspicion concerning his wife's fidelity, and then she sweeps from the room.

To Valentine, Angelica is a riddle from whom he can expect nothing but a riddle.⁶⁹ She declares herself merely to be indifferent and says, "Resolution must come to me, or I shall never have one."⁷⁰ It is this irresolution which caused Professor Perry to say: "One is not quite sure of what Angelica is about a good share of the time."⁷¹ Angelica is very much concerned when she first hears of Valentine's madness. She almost confesses her true feeling for him, but she is not willing to be victimized. After first making sure that Valentine's madness is a trick, she then declares to Scandal that she cannot help it if her inclination is not to love Valentine. When at last she does see Valentine, she pretends to believe him really mad. Valentine seeks to tell her the truth but cannot tell whether or not she believes him. His complaint about being left in uncertainty is answered with the wisest speech in the entire play:

⁶⁹Ibid., IV, xxi, 1-2.

⁷⁰Ibid., III, ii, 21-22.

⁷¹Op. cit., p. 64.

Wou'd any thing, but a Madman, complain of Uncertainty? Uncertainty and Expectation are the Joys of Life. Security is an insipid thing, and the overtaking, and possessing of a Wish discovers the Folly of the Chase. Never let us know one another better; for the Pleasure of a Masquerade is done, when we come to shew our Faces: but I'll tell you two things before I leave you; I am not the Fool you take me for; and you are mad, and don't know it.⁷²

It is Angelica's scheme, not Valentine's, which finally offers a solution to his problem. She goes to Sir Sampson, flatters him, and finally proposes a mock wedding ceremony in order to bring Valentine to a confession of his having feigned madness. The old scoundrel is not willing to let it be a counterfeit ceremony, however. Angelica demurs, says she must consult her lawyer, and finally consents. It is a very much chastened Valentine who enters the scene and excuses his right to deceive his father if his father is trying to undo him.⁷³ Sure that Angelica is to marry his father, Valentine says that he is ready to sign over his rights to the estate. Now Angelica steps in, tears up the paper, reproves Sir Sampson for his treatment of his son, and gives herself to Valentine with a very pretty speech:

Here's my Hand, my Heart was always yours, and
struggl'd very hard to make this utmost Trial of
your Vertue.⁷⁴

⁷²Love for Love, IV, xx, 6-15.

⁷³Ibid., V, xii, 18-20.

⁷⁴Ibid., 11. 73-75.

To Angelica is given the final speech in the play. It is a defense of woman's actions and amounts almost to an epilogue for the drama which has just been presented:

'Tis an undreasonable Accusation, that you lay upon our Sex: You tax us with Injustice, only to cover your own want of Merit. You would all have the Reward of Love; but few have the Constancy to stay 'till it becomes your due. Men are generally Hypocrites and Infidels, they pretend to Worship, but have neither Zeal nor Faith: How few, like Valentine, would persevere even to Martyrdom, and sacrifice their Interest to their Constancy! In admiring me, you misplace the Novelty.

The Miracle to Day is, that we find 75
A Lover true: Not that a Woman's Kind.

According to Mr. Malcolm Elwin, this ending is one of the qualities which take Love for Love out of the realm of the real comedy of manners. He said, "The ending is of the school of Steele and Cibber, impregnated with sentiment."⁷⁶

VIII. The Way of the World, Congreve's Masterpiece

Early in March, 1700, Congreve brought to the stage The Way of the World, the most original of his plays and a masterpiece of witty dialogue. There are no longer a jealous husband and an amorous wife, but there is, instead, a couple--a man and a woman--who hate each other. The deceiving gallant has become an impostor who woos, not another man's wife but a foolish old woman. In this play the emphasis is upon wit, much of which is placed in the mouths of the lovers, Mirabell

⁷⁵ Ibid., ll. 143-155.

⁷⁶ Op. cit., p. 170.

and Millamant. So pure was the wit and so free was it from many of the coarse, farcial elements of the previous plays that The Way of the World enjoyed only moderate success on the stage. Congreve expressed surprise that it succeeded at all, for he declared that he had written the play to please himself:

Those Characters which are meant to be ridiculous in most of our Comedies, are of Fools so gross, that in my humble Opinion, they shou'd rather disturb than divert the well-natur'd and reflecting Part of an Audience; they are rather Objects of Charity than Contempt; and instead of moving our Mirth, they ought very often to excite our Compassion.

This reflection mov'd me to design some Characters, which shou'd appear ridiculous not so much thro' a natural Folly (which is incorrigible, and therefore not proper for the Stage) as thro' an affected Wit; a Wit, which at the same time that it is affected, is also false.⁷⁷

The two principal characters thus conceived in The Way of the World are Mirabell and Millamant. Both are brilliantly drawn characters, but Millamant overshadows Mirabell, who has been described as the "sprightliest male figure of English comedy."⁷⁸ Mirabell does all a young wit is supposed to do. He has two former mistresses, Mrs. Marwood, who is now his enemy, and Mrs. Fainall, who is still his friend. The play begins in a chocolate house, a very integral part of London society and a forerunner of many an

⁷⁷"Epistle Dedicatory," The Way of the World, Comedies by William Congreve, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (The World's Classics; London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 336-337.

⁷⁸Meredith, op. cit., p. 23.

eighteenth-century social club.⁷⁹ Mirabell is in disgrace with Lady Wishfort for having falsely pretended to love her in order to conceal his love for Millamant. Since half Millamant's fortune depends upon her aunt's approval of her choice of a husband, Mirabell is determined to gain the old woman's approval. He resorts once more to intrigue, this time employing his servant, Waitwell, and Lady Wishfort's servant, Foible, in the scheme. Waitwell, disguised as a wealthy lord, Sir Rowland, is to woo Lady Wishfort. Once having gained her consent to their marriage, he is to be exposed as an impostor and Lady Wishfort is to be forced to give her consent to her niece's marriage or to be exposed to the world for the foolish old woman that she is. This scheme is disclosed by Mrs. Marwood and Fainall, who are plotting to gain the whole family fortune by disgracing Lady Wishfort and her daughter, Mrs. Fainall. It is Mirabell who finally saves the family from disgrace by conveniently having in his possession a deed signed by Mrs. Fainall before her marriage, giving him control of her fortune.

In spite of his various schemes, Mirabell is a very likable young man. He is proud, gallant, and jealous. Even Fainall, who proves to be his enemy, admits his gallantry:

⁷⁹Thomas Burke, The Streets of London through the Centuries (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 43.

You are a gallant Man, Mirabell; and tho' you may have Cruelty enough, not to satisfie a Lady's longing; you have too much Generosity, not to be tender of her Honor. Yet you speak with an Indifference which seems to be affected; and confess you are conscious of Negligence.⁸⁰

Mirabell's intrigues are not always of the most honorable kind. He has used his aunt most shamefully in pretending love for her, and his plot to force her to consent to his marriage is equally shameful. He is, however, punished for his schemes when he believes that he has lost Millamant's love and is commanded by her to seek pardon from his aunt. Even in his disgrace, Mirabell exhibits a charm which touches the old woman deeply:

Oh, he has Witchcraft in his Eyes and Tongue; When I did not see him I cou'd have brib'd a Villain to his Assassination; but his Appearance rakes the Embers which have so long lain smother'd in my Breast.⁸¹

Mirabell is in love with Millamant, who knows of this love and enjoys torturing her suitor in every possible way. In the first place, Mirabell dislikes the cabals which Millamant holds regularly because she has excluded him from them. Even though he is aware of Millamant's scorn for the half-witted Petulant, he offers to cut Petulant's throat for paying court to her.⁸² Mirabell is also deeply concerned when it is rumored that Sir Wilfull Witwood is a very good match for

⁸⁰ The Way of the World, I, i, 102-107.

⁸¹ Ibid., V, ix, 58-62.

⁸² Ibid., I, ix, 45-47.

Millamant. It is in a long, and very wise speech to Fainall, however, that Mirabell proved his true regard for Millamant:

Fain. For a passionate Lover, methinks you are a Man somewhat too discerning in the Failings of your Mistress.

Mira. And for a discerning Man, somewhat too passionate a Lover; for I like her with all her Faults; nay, like her for her Faults. Her Follies are so natural or so artful, that they become her; and those Affectations which in another Woman wou'd be odious, serve but to make her more agreeable. 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 ev'ry 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.³³

Mirabell's wit is overshadowed by that of Millamant, but he is not lacking in this very necessary quality of a young gentleman. This is proved by the speech above and by his part in the famous bargaining scene which shall be discussed later. Even during his losing quarrel with Millamant over her cabals and the gay company that she keeps, Mirabell exhibits much wit. Millamant is being charmingly provocative when she asks, "What would you give, that you cou'd help loving me?" Mirabell's answer is the only one that he can give:

³³Ibid., I, iii, 26-47.

Mira. I would give something that you did not know,
I cou'd not help it.

Milla. Come, don't look grave then. Well, what do
you say to me?

Mira. I say that a Man may as soon make a Friend by
his Wit, or a Fortune by his Honesty, as win a
Woman with Plain-dealing and Sincerity.⁸⁴

Millamant is Congreve's greatest characterization.

Upon her he lavished all his dramatic ability and, in so doing, achieved perfection. Critics have all agreed upon this fact and to quote their opinions is but to be repetitious. Mr. Malcolm Elwin summed up all the critical opinions when he said:

She is the concentrated essence of artificial comedy in the guise of the finest of fine ladies, whose language is wit, with recreation her occupation, being eternally desired no more than her due, and no knowledge of laws other than her passing whim or fancy. . . . Love, beauty, and grace are her innate characteristics; the outer world could know no commerce with her, for she is the most refined product of a cultured civilization.⁸⁵

In fact, Mr. Elwin suggested that perhaps Millamant possessed so much awe-inspiring delicacy that the original Lincoln's Inn Fields audience, who were expecting more of the robust humor of Love for Love, were overpowered and did not appreciate this comedy.

No heroine in any of Congreve's comedies has such a favorable entrance as does Millamant. She is talked of from the very first act and is not introduced until late in the

⁸⁴ Ibid., II, v, 40-42.

⁸⁵ Op. cit., p. 177.

second act. Then a flourish of trumpets could not herald her coming in a more propitious manner than does Mirabell:

Here she comes i' faith full Sail, with her Fan spread
and Streamers out, and a Shoal of Fools for Tenders.⁸⁶

The shoal of fools turns out to be "one empty Sculler," Witwoud, for whom Millamant exhibits an immediate scorn by asking him to stop his ridiculous use of similes.⁸⁷ Later, she expresses the same contempt for Petulant, whom she terms illiterate. She believes that no illiterate man has the right to make love.⁸⁸ If Millamant professes indifference for these two suitors, it is no more than what she professes for all her suitors. She cares so little for the letters which they send her that she pins up her curls with them, provided, of course, the letters are written in poetry.⁸⁹

Millamant is at her best when in the presence of Sir Willful Witwoud, a foolish country squire, who has been mentioned as a possible suitor for her. Her object is to discourage him without incurring the wrath of her aunt, who approves of him. At first, Millamant asks Mrs. Fainall to entertain the country squire but is refused. Sir Willful augments his courage with too much wine. When he enters, Millamant is quoting Suckling's poetry to herself. Hearing the name Suckling

⁸⁶Ibid., II, iv, 1-3.

⁸⁷Ibid., I, 4.

⁸⁸Ibid., III, xiii, 38-40.

⁸⁹Ibid., II, iv, 44-72.

mentioned, Sir Willful takes it as an epithet to be applied to himself and immediately exclaims, "No such Suckling neither, Cousin, nor Stripling: I thank Heav'n I'm no Minor."⁹⁰ Millamant is determined to be difficult. Sir Willful proposes a walk; Millamant declares walking to be a country pastime and expresses hatred for the country. Sir Willful mentions a pastime of the city, and Millamant expresses hatred for the city, too. With this she dismisses the confused man and continues to quote Suckling.⁹¹ Evidently this treatment does not make Sir Willful angry, for he later helps Millamant to gain Lady Wishfort's consent for her marriage to Mirabell.

Millamant's scenes with Mirabell are the finest in Congreve's plays. Millamant knows that Mirabell is completely under her power and consequently turns every scene to her advantage. She has a love of affectation, and she likes social mannerisms, but beneath the surface she is a woman who is in love and will not admit it.⁹² After her torturing question concerning what Mirabell would give if he could help loving her, she sweeps from the room with the command that he think of her. It is small wonder that Mirabell says:

. . . . Think of you! To think of a Whirlwind, tho'
'twere in a Whirlwind, were a Case of more steady
Contemplation; a very Tranquility of Mind and Man-
sion. A Fellow that lives in a Windmill, has not a

⁹⁰Ibid., IV, iv, 18-20.

⁹¹Ibid., II, 20-58.

⁹²Perry, op. cit., p. 71.

more whimsical Dwelling than the Heart of a Man that is lodg'd in a Woman. There is no Point of the Compass to which they cannot turn, and by which they are not turn'd; and by one as well as another; for Motion not Method is their Occupation. To know this, and yet continue to be in Love, is to be made wise from the Dictates of Reason, and yet persevere to play the Fool by force of Instinct.⁹³

Finally, Millamant admits that she is interested, and she promises to be Mirabell's wife if he can meet her conditions. There follows the most excellent scene in the entire comedy with the two lovers matching wits and each giving a good picture, not only of themselves, but of the life of the day also.

So each rails at the married habits of the opposite sex in quite the most masterly scene in all Congreve's theater. They are like Benedick and Beatrice, but with less humanity than Shakespeare would ever have allowed his characters; they are like Dorimant and Harriet Woodvil, but with sharper tongues and keener brains than Etherege could ever have conceived of. Their encounters mark the highest point reached in the English Comedy of Manners as far as dialogue is concerned, and yet theirs is not quite dialogue purely for the sake of dialogue.⁹⁴

Millamant's demands upon Mirabell are unsurpassed, even by his demands upon her:

. . . . 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--Positively Mirabell, I'll lye a-bed in the Morning as long as I please.

. . . . And d'ye hear, I won't be call'd Names after

⁹³The Way of the World, II, vi, 2-15.

⁹⁴Perry, op. cit., p. 72.

I'm Marry'd; positively I won't be call'd Names.

· · · · ·
 Ay, as Wife, Spouse, my Dear, Joy, Jewel, Love, Sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous Cant, in which Men and their Wives are so fulsomly familiar, --I shall never bear that--Good Mirabell don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before Folks, like my Lady Fadler and Sir Francis: Nor go to Hide-Park together the first Sunday in a new Chariot, to provoke Eyes and Whispers; And then never be seen there together again; as if we were proud of one another the first Week, and asham'd of one another ever after. Let us never Visit together, nor go to a Play together, but let us be very strange and well bred: Let us be as strange as we had been marry'd a great while: and as well bred as if we were not marry'd at all.

· · · · · Liberty to pay and receive Visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive Letters, without Interrogatories or wry Faces on your part; to wear what I please; and chuse Conversation with regard only to my own Taste; to have no Obligation upon me to converse with Wits that I don't like, because they are your Acquaintance; or to be intimate with Fools, because they may be your Relations. Come to Dinner when I please, dine in my Dressing-Room when I'm out of Humour, without giving a Reason. To have my Closet inviolate; to be sole Empress of my Tea-Table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly where-ever I am, you shall always knock at the Door before you come in. These Articles subscrib'd, if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a Wife.⁹⁵

Mirabell's conditions for "enlarging himself into a husband" are just as numerous as those offered by Millamant. It will not be necessary to repeat all of them, however, to show the contrast between the cleverness of the two characters.

⁹⁵ The Way of the World, IV, v, 36-36.

. . . . Inprimis then, I covenant that your Acquaintance be general; that you admit no sworn Confident, or Initmate of your own Sex; no she Friend to skreen her affairs under your Countenance, and tempt you to make Trial of a mutual Secresie. No Decoy-Duck to wheadle you a fop-scrambling to the Play in a Mask-- Then bring you home in a pretended Fright, when you think you shall be found out--And rail at me for missing the Play, and disappointing the Frolick which you had to pick me up and prove my Constancy.

. . . . I Article, that you continue to like your own Face, as long as I shall: And while it passes currant with me, that you endeavor not to new Coin it. To which end, together with all Vizards for the Day, I prohibit all Masks for the Night, made of Oil'd-skins and I know not what--Hog's Bones, Hare's Gall, Pig Water, and the Marrow of a roasted Cat. In short, I forbid all Commerce with the Gentlewoman in what-d'ye-call-it Court. Item, I shut my Doors against all Bauds with Baskets, and penny-worths of Muslin, China, Fans, Atlases, &c.⁹⁶

In his discussion of this scene Professor Perry said:

In such fashion is the peerless Millamant wooed and won, half way between grave and gay, seriousness and jest, naturalness and sophistication, hardly ever without some overtone of deeper meaning and never at all with any touch of heaviness. It is a splendid example of artificial comedy at its most perfect--polished and subtle, but necessarily limited in scope.⁹⁷

IX. Summary

A study of Congreve's witty lovers reveals several interesting facts. First of all, critics have usually approached the study of his characters from the standpoint of their morality and their originality and have discovered something lacking in each method of approach. Although there are those

⁹⁶Ibid., ll. 94-119.

⁹⁷Loc. cit.

who still disagree with him, Lamb first suggested that approaching the study of Congreve's portraits through the realm of art, not photography, was after all, the only correct basis for judging the works of a man who wrote in an age very different from that of most of the critics.

Many critics have pointed out that Congreve borrowed from his predecessors in creating his plays, and they have cited specific parallels to prove their point. From Wycherley, Congreve borrowed the basic pattern from which he created his husbands and wives. From Etherege, he borrowed the idea of having as the central characters in each of his plays a pair of witty lovers confronted with some obstacle to their love. However, Congreve took these stock situations and made from them something original and refreshing.

Congreve's first play, The Old Batchelor, is a direct imitation of Wycherley and Etherege. In this play, the Wycherley theme is the predominant one, for the lovers, Vainlove and Araminta, no more than conventional lovers, lack any real interest. In the opinion of one critic, Vainlove is too capricious and Araminta is too self-conscious to be spirited game. Furthermore, they have only one important scene together. Much more lively and interesting are Bellmour and Belinda, who carry on a witty verbal battle from their first meeting to their final surrender. One critic has pointed out that Bellmour is Wycherley's great character, Horner, in

masquerade. Critics have also agreed that Belinda is a baffling character apparently because Congreve changed his mind about what he was going to do with her. Both Bellmour and Belinda are excellent forerunners of Mirabell and Millamant.

The Double-Dealer is the result of Congreve's effort to simplify his plot; however, he became so much involved with his villain that he failed to give much attention to the lovers. Most critics have held that Mellefont is no more than a passive creature ruled by Maskwell. Evidently, such an observation was made in Congreve's time, for he found it necessary to make a vigorous defense of Mellefont. Cynthia is by no means a witty heroine, but she is charming, gracious, and honorable.

When he wrote Love for Love, Congreve, no doubt, came to the full realization that his own powers lay in the creation of witty lovers rather than in the creation of interesting intrigues for his husbands and wives. Valentine, in spite of Collier's accusations, is an excellent characterization. For the first time, Congreve allowed his hero to participate in a number of excellent comic scenes. In many ways Angelica's actions are not well motivated; yet she is in every respect charming. She also possesses an independence and an ingenuity which neither Araminta nor Cynthia possesses.

In The Way of the World, Congreve created his greatest lovers. Although Mirabell has been called the most sprightly male in English comedy, it is upon the character of Millamant that the critics have lavished most of their attention. Her provocative charm, her vitality, and her merry laughter dominate the play, even though she does not enter until the second act. The scene in which she and Mirabell exchange conditions for marriage is one of the finest in the whole of the comedies of manners. Perhaps it is well that Congreve did not write any more comedies after he finished The Way of the World, for he had attained perfection and had succeeded in pleasing himself and those critics whose opinions he valued.

CHAPTER IV

CONGREVE'S HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Congreve's debt to Wycherley in the use of a stock situation involving a jealous husband, an amorous wife, and a deceiving gallant has been mentioned in the preceeding chapter. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine what the critics have said concerning his use of this stock situation, to compare the passage in Congreve's play with its original when a specific borrowing has been noted, to add further comments, in so far as possible, concerning what the critics have failed to mention, and finally, to show how Congreve varied the use of the stock situation in each play until he made it his own. An attempt to compare critical comments concerning Congreve's individual characters has not been made before, nor has a comparison of Congreve's variation upon the husband-wife-gallant theme been made with a view to showing Congreve's increasing power as a dramatist.

I. Approaches to the Study

This study may well begin with an explanation of the conditions in Restoration society which formed a basis of Congreve's portrayal of husbands and wives. Although, in picturing witty lovers, Congreve took his young men and women from the realm of reality and placed them in a realm of

charming artificiality and light fancy, he did not often do so with his husbands and wives. When portraying married people in his plays, he assumed a slightly cynical attitude. He portrayed them with the earnestness, not of a reformer, but of one who simply desired to bring to light for others to examine a situation which existed in his society. His husbands and wives are not always the most delightful creatures in his plays, and he did not intend them to be. Professor Bonamy Dobrée, perhaps, explained the motivation behind these portrayals better than anyone else. Speaking of the licentiousness of the Restoration era, he asked why men and women would live such a day-to-day reckless existence. Then he attempted to answer the question by telling of the national, political, and religious insecurity of the nation as a whole. He further stated that the age was one of curiosity which extended into literature, into politics, into science, and even into life itself:¹

This curiosity extended itself into every day life; men and women were experimenting in social things; they were trying to rationalize human relationship. They found that, for them at least, affection and sexual desire were quite separate, and they tried to organize society on that basis. Love, in which the two feelings are imaginatively fused, scarcely existed for them. And since they accepted man as a licentious animal, it meant, of course, that if life was to be easy, the pursuit of a mistress must be acknowledged amusement. You could, they believed, preserve

¹Op. cit., p. 20.

your affection for your wife and be sure of hers for you, even if she had liaisons with other men. It was absurd to make a fuss about a thing that mattered so little. What then became of jealousy? It was ridiculous. . . . The unfortunate husband obtained little sympathy. "All over England a man who was so ill-bred as to be jealous of his wife was regarded with amazement; in the town, indeed, it was an unheard of thing for a man to resort to those violent means to prevent that which jealousy both fears and deserves. . . ." Thus it comes throughout Restoration comedy husbands are such "Filthy, odious beasts" that it is hardly polite to mention them.

There is an exaggeration here, one will say. Yes, and it was just this exaggeration that lent itself to the comic writers. Moreover, it was because the experiment did not, after all, make for social comfort that those who attempted it became the butts of the comic stage. For most men still disliked being cuckolded, the wittol was still an object of scorn. As a result of the conditions, the jealous man became still more jealous, and fell into "excess." Had the experiment succeeded, there might have been no good Restoration comedy. Luckily such does exist, good serious comedy, concerning itself with something very important, in fact eternal, for this question is never settled. Thus its bawdry is not merely jesting--though some of it undoubtedly is--but an attempt to be frank and honest. In this society of an experimental temper, seeking to see itself clearly, anything might be, and was said.²

Mr. Dobrée's statement should make it easier for us to understand Congreve's portraits of husbands and wives as mirrors of the age. It is to Congreve's credit as a great writer that not once did he permit satire and cynicism to overshadow the comic spirit of his portrayals.

II. The Fondlewifes

Approaching a study of Congreve's couples through a study of what critics have said is often a difficult task

²Ibid., pp. 20-22.

because most critics have stopped short with remarks upon his wit, his plots, and his characterizations as a whole. Only a few have seen fit to make further observations upon specific characters. For example, critical comments upon the Fondlewives, the married couple in The Old Batchelor, have dealt with three subjects: a discussion of the original and continued popularity of the Fondlewife scenes, a mention of parallels between the Fondlewife episodes and similar episodes in *Wycherley*, and a condemnation of some of the scenes in which the Fondlewifes appear.

The Fondlewife scenes occur in only one act, the fourth, and do not have any real connection with the play. According to Downes, the original Fondlewife was Dogget, who gained lasting fame for this portrayal. Opposite him in the rôle of Laetitia was Mrs. Barry, who was also very much praised for her acting of this part.³ Later Colley Cibber immodestly recorded that he was given the part of Nykin, which he portrayed so well that many in the audiences believed that Dogget had returned to play his original rôle.⁴ So popular were the Fondlewife scenes that they were frequently produced separately to supplement other theatrical entertainment.⁵ Indeed, it is easy to see why these episodes were popular,

³Op. cit., p. 42.

⁴Colley Cibber, Days of the Dandies (London: The Grolier Society, Edinburgh Press, n. d.), I, 266.

⁵Hodges, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

for they are farce at its best and would have pleased all elements of the audience. The least original of Congreve's couples, the Fondlewifes bear a very close resemblance to the Pinchwifes in Wycherley's The Country Wife; however, Congreve's debt goes back much farther than Wycherley. Ben Jonson's Kitem, a jealous husband who is afraid to attend to his business lest, during his absence, his wife prove unfaithful to him, is the prototype from which future Pinchwifes and Fondlewifes were created. Concerning Congreve's debt to Wycherley, Professor Perry has called attention to the great similarity in the names of the two couples as indicating more strongly than ever that Congreve was well acquainted with The Country Wife.⁶ Most of the time, however, Congreve made better use of the stock situations than did Wycherley, his success being due, perhaps, to his having concentrated into one act what Wycherley attempted to scatter over five acts. His debt to Wycherley is a general one, although some scenes in the works of the two playwrights are closely related. For example, Pinchwife seeks to keep his wife Margery by hiding her from the rest of the world. By instructing her about what she is to shun, he makes her desire these forbidden pleasures:

Pinch. Ay, my dear, you must love me only; and not be like the naughty town-women who only hate their husbands, and love every man else; love plays, visits, fine coaches, fine clothes, fiddles, balls, treats, and so lead a wicked town-life.

Mrs. Pinch. Nay, if to enjoy all these things be

⁶Op. cit., p. 58.

town-life, London is not so bad a place, dear.
Pinch. How! if you love me, you must hate London.⁷

Fondlewife does not seek to keep his young wife in ignorance, for he fears that she knows too well the pleasures of the town. Instead, he seeks to impress upon her the seriousness of the sin of unfaithfulness:

Fond. Wife--Have you thoroughly consider'd how detestable, how heinous, and how crying a Sin, the Sin of Adultery is? have you weigh'd it I say? For it is a very weighty Sin; and although it may lie heavy upon thee, yet thy Husband must also bear his Part: For thy Iniquity will fall upon his Head.

Laet. Bless me, what means my Dear!

Fond. Speak, I say, have you considered, what it is to cuckold your Husband?

Laet. Aside.) I'm amazed: Sure he has discovered nothing--Who has wrong'd me to my Dearest? I hope my Jewel does not think, that ever I had any such thing in my Head, or ever will have.

Fond. No, no. I tell you I shall have it in my Head--⁸

Both Pinchwife and Fondlewife, in their efforts to keep their wives chaste, provide means for their own cuckoldry. Not only does Pinchwife succeed in making Margery desire the very things he would keep her from, but he also augments her desire by telling her that at the play one of the "lewdest fellows in town, who saw you there, told me he was in love with you."⁹ From then on Pinchwife is made miserable in the knowledge that Margery is determined to experience the pleasures of the town and is especially determined to meet the "lewdest of fellows." Fondlewife

⁷William Wycherley, The Country Wife, II, i, Twelve Famous Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century (The Modern Library; New York: Random House, Inc., 1933), p. 16.

⁸The Old Batchelor, IV, iv, 3-21.

⁹Wycherley, op. cit., p. 19.

provides for his own cuckoldry when he plans to send the Puritan preacher, Tribulation Spintex, to spend the evening with Laetitia and to teach her how a wife should behave. Laetitia plans to have Vainlove waylay Spintex, take his garb, and come to her house for an evening of conversation.

In the final episode of Wycherley's triangle, the wife's rendezvous is discovered, and the gallant tells an amusing lie which the gullible husband believes. In this case, Wycherley's gallant tells the more original lie, for Horner succeeds in convincing Pinchwife that he is a eunuch and that, therefore, Margery's visit to his lodgings is an innocent one. The naïve Margery does not aid Horner in his story, and it is with difficulty that she is prevented from declaring his tale to be a lie.¹⁰ Bellmour, who substitutes for Vainlove in this tryst with Laetitia, does not tell so elaborate a lie. He frankly admits having come to seduce Laetitia but asserts that her constancy to her husband prevented the success of his scheme. Fondlewife is all too glad to believe such a tale.¹¹ In The Country Wife the humor of the situation is in Margery's effort to protect Horner's honor, an attitude which is contrary to the code. In The Old Batchelor the humor is furnished by Bellmour, who, while protesting Laetitia's innocence, is kissing her hand behind her husband's back.

¹⁰ Ibid., V, iv, pp. 85-86.

¹¹ The Old Batchelor, IV, xxii.

From this discussion it would seem apparent that Congreve's debt to Wycherley is in the use of a general pattern which he followed very closely; but, in diminishing the importance of the triangle and in emphasizing the affairs of the witty lovers, Congreve was, in his first play, showing an independence of workmanship which became more apparent in his later plays.

A third debt to another dramatist was cited by Bonamy Dobrée. This borrowing occurs in the scene which Meredith deprecated as carrying realism too far when the husband and wife used "inane connubial epithets in speaking to each other."¹² In apparent agreement with Meredith, Mr. Dobrée pointed out:

The Fondlewife scenes, which are irrelevant to the plot fall from the height of comedy to erotics and buffoonery, But the bawdy scenes are simply dull comedy of intrigue, and the Nykin-Cocky dialogues reach a level of realism which make them almost as humiliating as the Nicky-Nacky scenes in Venice Preserved, though there is none of the degrading filth of the masochistic Antonio.¹³

Congreve kept a finer comic spirit than Otway did in his play. The scene in The Old Batchelor follows the speeches in which Fondlewife is asking whether or not she knows how wicked the sin of adultery is:

Laet. Aside.) I know not what to think. But I'm resolv'd to find the meaning of it--Unkind Dear! Was it for this you sent to call me? Is it not Affliction enough that you are to leave me, but you must study to encrease it by unjust Suspicions? [Crying] Well--Well--you know my Fondness, and you love to Tyrannize--Go on cruel Man, do, Triumph over my poor Heart, while it holds; which cannot be long, with this Usage of yours--But

¹²Supra., p. 55.

¹³Op. cit., p. 127.

that's what you want--Well You will have your Ends soon--You will--You will--Yes it will break to oblige you. [Sighs.]

Fond. Verily I fear I carried the Jest too far--Nay, look you now if she does not weep--'tis the fondest Fool--Nay, Cocky, Cocky, nay, dear Cocky, don't cry, I was but in jest, I was not ifeck.

Laet. Aside.) Oh then all's safe. I was terribly frightened--My Affliction is always your Jest, barbarous Man! Oh that I should love to this degree! Yet--

Fond. Nay, Cocky.

Laet. No, no, you are weary of me, that's it--that's it--that's all, you would get another Wife--another fond Fool, to break her Heart--well, be as cruel as you can to me, I'll pray for you; and when I am dead with Grief, may you have one that will love you as well as I have done: I shall be contented to lye at Peace in my cold Grave--since it will please you. [Sighs.]

Fond. Good lack, good lack, she would melt a Heart of Oak--I profess I can hold no longer--Nay dear Cocky--Ifeck you'll break my Heart--Ifeck you will--See you have made me weep--made poor Nykin weep--Nay come kiss, buss poor Nykin--and I won't leave thee--I'll lose all first.

Laet. Aside.) How! Heav'n forbid: that would be carrying the Jest too far indeed.

Fond. Won't you kiss Nykin?

Laet. Go naughty Nykin, you don't love me.

Fond. Kiss, kiss, ifeck I do.

Laet. No you don't. [She kisses him.]

Fond. What not love Cocky?

Laet. No--h [Sighs.]

Fond. I profess, I do love thee better than 500 Pound--and so thou shalt say, for I'll leave it to stay with thee.

Laet. No you shan't neglect your Business for me--No indeed you sant Nykin--If you don't go, I'll think you been dealous of me still.

Fond. He, he, he, wilt thou poor Fool? Then I will to, I won't be dealous--Poor Cocky, kiss Nykin, kiss Nykin, ee, ee, ee--Here will be the good Man anon, to talk to Cocky and teach her how a Wife ought to behave her self.

Laet. Aside.) I hope to have one that will shew me how a Husband ought to behave himself--I shall be glad to learn, to please my Jewel. [Kiss.]

Fond. That's my good Dear--Come kiss Nykin once more, and then get you in--So--Get you in, get you in. By, by.

Laet. By Nykin.

Fond. By Cocky.

Laet. By Nykin.

Fond. By Cocky, by, by.¹⁴

Although the Nicky-Nacky scene by Otway was intended to be the one comic scene in his tragedy, it descends, as Mr. Dobrée suggested, below the level of good comedy. The scene is too long to quote in its entirety, but an examination of only a part of it will show that except for the fact that both men are seeking favors from the women involved and that there is a similarity in names used, there is no indication that Congreve was very much indebted to Otway:

Anto. Nacky, Nacky, Nacky--how dost do, Nacky? Hurry, durry. I am come, little Nacky; past eleven a Clock, a late hour; time in all Conscience to go to bed, Nacky--Nacky did I say? Ay Nacky; Aquilina, lina, lina, quilina, quilina, quilina, Aquilina, Naquilina, Naquilina, Acky, Acky, Nacky, Queen Nacky--come let's to bed--you Fubbs, you Pugg you--you little Puss--Purree Tuzzey--I am a Senator.

Aquil. You are a Fool, I am sure.

Anto. May be so too sweet-heart. Never the worse Senator for all that. Come Nacky, Nacky, lets have a Game at Rump, Nacky.

Aquil. You would do well Signior to be troublesome here no longer, but leave me to my self, be sober and go home, Sir.

Anto. Home Madona!

Aquil. Ay home, Sir. Who am I?

Anto. Madona, as I take it you are my--you are--thou art my little Nicky Nacky--that's all.¹⁵

¹⁴The Old Batchelor, IV, iv, 22-27.

¹⁵Thomas Otway, III, i, Venice Preserv'd; or, A Plot Discovered, Twelve Famous Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, ed. Cecil Moore (The Modern Library; New York: Random House, Inc., 1933), p. 207.

The scene is continued for almost one hundred and fifty lines more and grows more indecent in its implications as it progresses.

III. The Froths

The Double-Dealer has two couples in it. Lord and Lady Plyant are not essentially different from the Fondlewifes, although there is an amusing picture of Sir Paul, the slave of his wife and so completely under her thumb that it is easy for her to coquette with whomever she desires. However, Lord and Lady Froth are, indeed, as Lamb said, creatures of a sportive fancy, wandering in and out of the scenes without materially changing the plot. Their omission from the drama would, however, decidedly affect the enjoyment of the play.

Critical estimates of the Froths have centered around several topics. First, many critics are quick to point out that Congreve again borrowed from Molière and also from Wycherley in constructing some of the scenes. Strangely enough, the major borrowings are in the scenes in which the Froths appear. Second, some critics center their arguments around whether or not the Froths are too insipid to be enjoyable or are enjoyable in spite of their antics. Third, others point out that Lady Froth and her friend, Brisk, save the play from being a melodrama and bring it back to the realm of comedy.

Sir Edmund Gosse said that Congreve incorporated from Molière's The Misanthrope the amusing discussion of Lady Froth's poem in the third act.¹⁶ Since Gosse made no attempt

¹⁶Op. cit., p. 42.

to explain just how extensive Congreve's debt to Molière was, it is interesting to look now at both these scenes. The discussion between Lady Froth and Brisk concerning her poem is long, because they must first exclaim over the title and the names of the characters. As in most instances, Congreve's borrowing is of an idea or a situation rather than of actual lines:

L. Froth. Then you think that Episode between Susan, the Dairy-Maid, and our Coach-Man is not amiss; You know, I may suppose the Dairy in Town, as well as in the Country.

Brisk. Incomparable, let me perish--but then being a Heroic Poem, had not you better call him a Charioteer? Charioteer sounds great; besides your Ladyship's Coach-man having a red Face, and you comparing him to the Sun--And you know the Sun is call'd Heav'ns Charioteer.

L. Froth. Oh, infinitely better; I'm extremely beholden to you for the Hint; stay, we'll read over these half a Score Lines again. [Pulls out a Paper.] Let me see here, you know what goes before--the Comparison, you know. [Reads]

For as the Sun shines ev'ry Day,
So of our Coachman I may say.

Brisk. I'm afraid that Simile won't do in wet Weather-- Because you say the Sun shines ev'ry Day.

L. Froth. No, for the Sun it won't, but it will do for the Coach-man, for you know there's most Occasion for a Coach in wet Weather.

Brisk. Right, right, that saves all.

L. Froth. Then I don't say the Sun shines all the Day, but that he peeps now and then, yet he does shine all the Day too, you know, tho' we don't see him.

Brisk. Right, but the Vulgar will never comprehend that.

L. Froth. Well, you shall hear--Let me see.
[Reads] For as the Sun shines ev'ry Day,
So, of our Coach-man I may say,
He shows his drunken fiery Face,
Just as the Sun does, more or less.

Brisk. That's right, all's well, all's well. More or less.

[L. Froth reads]

And when at Night his Labour's done,
Then too, like Heav'ns Charioteer the Sun:
Ay, Charioteer does better.
Into the Dairy he descends
And there his whipping and his Driving ends;
There he's secure from Danger of a Bilk,
His Fare is paid him, and he sets in Milk.

For Susan, you know, is Thetis, and so--

Brisk. Incomparable well and proper, Igad--But I have one Exception to make--Don't you think Bilk (I know its good Rhime) but don't you think Bilk and Fare too like a Hackney Coach-man.

L. Froth. I swear and vow I'm afraid so--And yet our Jehu was a Hackney Coach-man, when my Lord took him.

Brisk. Was he? I'm answer'd, if Jehu was a Hackney Coach-man--You may put that in the marginal Notes tho', to prevent Criticism--Only mark it with a small Asterism, and say,--Jehu was formerly a Hackney Coach-man.

L. Froth. I will; you'd oblige me extremely to write Notes to the whole Poem.

Brisk. With all my Heart and Soul, and proud of the vast Honour, let me perish.¹⁷

In The Misanthrope Oronte asks Alceste's frank opinion concerning a love sonnet which he is writing:

Oronte. Sonnet...It is a sonnet...Hope...It is to be a lady who flattered my passion with some hope.
Hope...They are not long, pompous verses, but mild, tender and melting little lines.

[At every one of these interruptions he looks at Alceste.]

Alceste. We shall see.

Oronte. Hope...I do not know whether the style will strike you as sufficiently clear and easy, and whether you will approve of my choice of words.

Alceste. We shall soon see, sir.

Oronte. Besides, you must know that I was only a quarter of an hour in composing it.

¹⁷The Double-Dealer, III, x, 1-62.

Alceste. Let us hear, sir; the time signifies nothing.

Oronte. [reads.]

Hope, it is true, oft gives relief,
Rocks for a while our tedious pain,
But what a poor advantage, Phillis,
When nought remains, and all is gone!

Philinte. I am already charmed with this little bit.

Alceste [softly to Philinte]. What! do you mean to tell me that you like this stuff?

Orante:

You once showed some complaisance,
But less would have sufficed,
You should not take that trouble
To give me nought but hope.

Philinte. In what pretty terms these thoughts are put!

Alceste. How now! you vile flatterer, you praise this rubbish!

Oronte.

If I must wait eternally, My passion, driven
to extremes,
Will fly to death.
Your tender cares cannot prevent this,
Fair Phillis, aye we're in despair,
When we must hope for ever.

Oronte. This is all well and good, and I seem to understand you. But I should like to know what there is in my sonnet to...

Alceste. Candidly, you had better put it in your closet. You have been following bad models, and your expressions are not at all natural. Pray what is--Rocks for a while our tedious pain? And what, When nought remains, and all is gone? What, You should not take that trouble to give me nought but hope? And what, Phillis, aye we're in despair when we must hope for ever? This figurative style, that people are so vain of, is beside all good taste and truth; it is only a play upon words, sheer affectation, and it is not thus that nature speaks.

Oronte. And I, I maintain that my verses are very good.

Alceste. Doubtless you have your reasons for thinking them so; but you will allow me to have mine, which, with your permission, will remain independent.

Oronte. It is enough for me that others prize them.

Alceste. That is because they know how to dissemble which I do not.

Oronte. Do you really believe that you have such a great share of wit?

Alceste. If I praised your verses, I should have more.

Oronte. I shall do very well without your approbation.

Alceste. You will have to do without it, if it be all the same.

Oronte. I should like much to see you compose some on the same subject, just to have a sample of your style.

Alceste. I might, perchance, make some as bad; but I should take good care not to show them to any one.

Oronte. You are mighty positive; and this great sufficiency...

Alceste. Pray, seek some one else to flatter you and not me.¹⁸

The second borrowing which Sir Edmund Gosse has cited is from Wycherley's The Plain Dealer. Lord and Lady Froth's criticism of a acquaintance is reminiscent of a similar scene in Olivia's chamber. Gosse claims superiority in every respect for Congreve's work.¹⁹ Since Congreve did not allow the conversation to continue as long as Wycherley did, his scene does not become tedious. Again, as in the use of Molière's idea, Congreve's debt does not exceed the borrowing of a pattern from which he worked to add his own variations:

Ld. Froth. Hee, hee, hee, my Dear, have you done-- won't you join us, we were laughing at my Lady Whifler, and Mr. Sneer.

L. Froth. --Ay my Dear--Were you? Oh filthy Mr. Sneer; He's a nauseous Figure, a most fulsamick Fop,

¹⁸ Molière, The Misanthrope, I, ii, Writers of the Western World, ed. Addison Hibbard (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), pp. 291-293.

¹⁹ Op. cit., pp. 41-42.

foh--He spent two Days together in going about Covent-Garden to suit the Lining of his Couch with his Complexion.

Ld. Froth. O silly! yet his Aunt is as fond of him, as if she had brought the Ape into the World her self.

Brisk. Who, my Lady Toothless; O, she's a mortifying Spectacle; she's always chewing the Cud like an Old Ewe.

Cynt. Fie, Mr. Brisk, Eringo's for her Cough.

L. Froth. I have seen her take 'em half chew'd out of her Mouth, to laugh, and then put 'em in again--Foh.

Ld. Froth. Foh.

L. Froth. Then she's always ready to laugh when Sneer offers to speak--And sits in Expectation of his no Jest, with her Gums bare, and her Mouth open--

Brisk. Like an Oyster at low Ebb, I'gad--Ha, ha, ha.

Cynt. (Aside.) Well, I find there are no Fools so inconsiderable in themselves, but they can render other People contemptible by exposing their Infirmities.

L. Froth. Then that t'other great strapping Lady--I can't hit of her Name neither--Paints d'ye say? Why she lays it on with a Trowel--Then she has a great Beard that bristles through it, and makes her look as if she were plaister'd with Lime and Hair, let me perish.²⁰

There is one specific instance in this scene which resembles something Wycherley might have written. This is Brisk's quick uptake of Lady Froth's words with what he considers an excellent simile. Olivia strives to make a simile after each remark that Novel makes. The discussion of an old woman who tries to look younger by painting heavily is also similar to one of Olivia's remarks:

Nov. But, as I was saying, ma'am, I have been treated to day with all the ceremony and

²⁰ The Double-Dealer, III, x, 63-100.

kindness imaginable at my Lady Autuns. But the nauseous old woman at the upper end of her table--

Oliv. Revives the old Grecian custom, of serving in a deaths head with their banquets.

Nov. Hah! ha! fine, just, ifaith, nay and new. 'Tis like eating with the ghost in The Libertine: she would frighten a man from her dinner with her hollow invitations, and spoil one's stomach--

Oliv. To meat or women. I detest her hollow cherry cheeks: she looks like an old coach new painted; affecting an unseemly smugness, whil'st she is ready to drop in pieces.

Eliza. (Apart to Olivia.) You hate detraction, I see, cousin.

Nov. But the silly old fury, whil'st she affects to look like a woman of this age, talks--

Oliv. Like one of the last; and as passionately as an old courtier who has out-liv'd his office.

Nov. Yes, madam; but pray let me give you her character. Then, she never counts her age by years, but--

Oliv. By the masques she has liv'd to see.

Nov. Nay then, madam, I see you think a little harmless railing too great a pleasure for any but your self; and therefore I've done.²¹

Professor Perry has pointed out another instance of Congreve's dependence upon another dramatist for the scene in which Lady Froth, discovered in the arms of Brisk, explains that she is learning a new dancing step. A similar scene occurs in Wycherley's The Gentleman Dancing Master when Hippolota is discovered by her father in the arms of Girard.²² In both scenes it is the woman who thinks of the way out of the embarrassing situation. Brisk is more helpful in carrying out the trick than is Gerard:

²¹The Plain Dealer, II, i, The Country Wife and The Plain Dealer, ed. George B. Churchill (New York: D. C. Heath and Co., 1924), pp. 245-247.

²²Op. cit., p. 60.

Brisk. Zoons, Madam, there's my Lord.

[Softly to her.]

L. Froth. Take no notice--but observe me--Now cast off, and meet me at the lower end of the Room, and then join Hands again; I could teach my Lord this Dance purely, but I vow, Mr. Brisk, I can't tell how to come so near any other Man. Oh here's my Lord, now you shall see me do it with him.

[They pretend to practise part of a Country Dance.]

Ld. Froth. --Oh I see there's no harm yet--But I don't like this Familiarity. [Aside.]

L. Froth. Shall you and I do our close Dance to show Mr. Brisk?

Ld. Froth. No, my Dear, do it with him.

L. Froth. I'll do it with him, my Lord, when you are out of the way.

Brisk. That's good I'gad, that's good. Deuce take me I can hardly hold laughing in his Face. [Aside.]

Ld. Froth. Any other time, my Dear, or we'll dance it below.

L. Froth. With all my Heart.

Brisk. Come my Lord, I'll wait on you--My charming witty Angel! [To her.]

L. Froth. We shall have whispering time enough, you know, since we are Partners.²³

Again, Wycherley prolongs the scene to such an extent that quoting its entirety is impossible:

Pru. O Miss, Miss! your Father, it seems, is just now arriv'd, and here is coming in upon you.

Hipp. My Father!

Don. My Daughter! and a man!

Caut. A man! a man in the House!

Ger. Ha!--what mean these! a Spaniard.

Hipp. What shall I do? stay--nay, pray stir not from me; but lead me about, as if you lead me a Corant.

[Leads her about.]

Don. Is this your Government, Sister, and this your innocent Charge, that hath not seen the face of a man this twelve-month, En hora mala.

Caut. O sure it is not a man, it cannot be a man!

[Puts on her Spectacles.]

Don. It cannot be a man! if he be not a man he's a Devil; he has her lovingly by the hand too, Valga me el Cielo.

²³The Double-Dealer, IV, vii, 3-26.

Hipp. Do not seem to mind them, but dance on, or lead me about still.

Ger. What de'e mean by't? [apart to Hipp.

Don. Hey! they are frolick, a dancing.

Caut. Indeed they are dancing, I think, why Niece?

Don. Nay, hold a little: I'll make 'em dance in the Devils name, but it shall not be la Gaillardia!

[Draws his sword, Caution holds him.

Caut. O Niece! why Niece!

Ger. Do you hear her? what do you mean?

[apart to Hipp.

Hipp. Take no notice of them; but walk about still, and sing a little, sing a Corant.

Ger. I can't sing; but I'll hum, if you will.

Don. Are you so merry? Well, I'll be with you, en hora mala.

Hipp. Oh--what will you kill my poor Dancing-Master?

[Kneels.

Don. A Dancing-master, he's a Fencing master rather, --I think. But is he your Dancing-master? Umph--

Ger. So much Wit and Innocence were never together before.²⁴ [aside.

It was Hazlitt who criticized the follies of the Froths as he did the love-making of the Fondlewifes:

Sir Paul and Lady Plyant, and my Lord and Lady Froth, are also scarcely credible in the extravagant insipidity and romantic vein of their follies, in which they are notably seconded by the lively Mr. Brisk and the "dying Ned Careless."²⁵

There are two critics who disagree with Hazlitt, perhaps because they have not attempted to search into the morals of Congreve's husbands and wives, but have recognized them as creations of art. Gosse, for example, found Lady Froth to be a very charming person:

²⁴William Wycherley, The Gentleman Dancing Master, II, i, The Complete Works of William Wycherley, ed. Montague Summers (Soho: The Nonesuch Press, 1924), I, 177-178.

²⁵Op. cit., p. 72.

Lady Froth, the charming young blue-stockings with her wit and her redundancy, her affection and her merry vitality, is one of the best and most complex characters that Congreve has created. Her dotting affection for her child, "poor little Sappho," mingled with her interest in her own ridiculous verses, and set off by her genuine ability and power, combine to form a very life-like picture. . . . Her astronomical experiments are a concession on the poet's part to the worst instincts of his audience, and funny as they undeniably are, they spoil the part.²⁶

In the same mood, Professor Perry said:

Lady Froth pretends to be devoted to her solemnly stupid husband and to her child, little Sappho, but her real interest is poetry and learning. She is Congreve's picture of the précieuse, done with considerable understanding and no little keenness. Her literary pursuits bring her into contact with Brisk, a wit by profession, who advises her about the great poem on Lord Froth's love for his wife, to be called The Syllabub, "because my Lord's title's Froth, egad." Much as this association with Brisk may benefit the poem technically, it seriously impairs its inspiration, for one fine day Lord Froth finds his wife in her tutor's arms and is regaled with the excuse of a dancing lesson taken straight from Wycherley. Later they come indoors after a long time spent in star-gazing, but the imperturbable husband seems unconscious that star-gazing can be done in more ways than one.²⁷

Professor Bonamy Dobrée has given the Froth's credit for saving the drama from becoming melodrama instead of comedy:

Omit the three lines spoken at the end by Brisk and Lady Froth and the play would cease altogether to be critical comedy, and would be something more dynamic; it would almost be melodrama. These remarks however bring it back to the static and make us realize that nothing had really happened.²⁸

²⁶Op. cit., p. 43.

²⁷Op. cit., pp. 59-60.

²⁸Op. cit., pp. 129-130.

These lines of which Mr. Dobrée spoke follow the exposure of the plot of Lady Touchwood and Maskwell. The moment is a tense one:

Brisk. This is all very surprizing, let me perish.

L. Froth. You know I told you Saturn look'd a little more angry than usual.²⁹

IV. The Foresights

Star-gazing is done in a different manner in Love for Love, for old Foresight becomes so much interested in palmistry, astrology, and dreams that he fails to see that his wife is having an affair with Scandal.³⁰ This play reveals a definite growth in Congreve's powers as a dramatist because he had, for the first time, abandoned most of the original Wycherley theme. The ingredients are present, but the outcome is different because there is a decided shift in emphasis from the wife and her lover to the affairs of the husband. For the first time, no critic has found a similar scene in another play to indicate that Congreve used the work of another artist as a pattern for his own. Most critics have centered their attention upon the character of Foresight and not upon his wife, who is in reality not different from Mrs. Fondlewife, Lady Plyant, or Lady Froth. There seem to be no comments by Congreve's contemporaries upon the Foresights. Adolphus Ward

²⁹The Double-Dealer, V, xxiv, 13-15.

³⁰Perry, op. cit., p. 60.

has pointed out that although the part is antedeluvian now, it was not considered so in Congreve's time:

The would-be astrologer seemingly carries us back to an earlier age of the drama; the belief in palmistry and astrology had by no means expired before Free-thinking had come into fashion.³¹

The first critic to say anything about Foresight was Samuel Johnson, who considered him a very natural, common character.³² The twentieth-century scholar, Mr. Malcolm Elwin, has affirmed that Foresight is an original characterization.³³ Hazlitt, who found Foresight to be very amusing, spoke of the portrayal of the astrologer by the great actor, Munden:

In particular Munden's Foresight, if it is not just the thing is a wonderfully rich and powerful piece of comic acting. His look is planet-struck, his dress and appearance like one of the signs of the zodiac taken down. Nothing can be more bewildered; and it only wants a little more helplessness, a little more of the doting querulous garrulity of age, to be all that one conceives of the superannuated, stargazing original.³⁴

Mr. John Mason Brown, in reviewing the Gielgud production of Love for Love produced in 1947, found the part dull and impossible to portray on the stage:

Foresight is egregiously doleful. Whatever topical interest he may have once claimed as a caricature has long since vanished. The wonder is not that he

³¹Op. cit., p. 474. See also Percy H. Boynter, London in English Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1913), p. 101.

³²Op. cit., p. 28.

³³Op. cit., p. 71.

³⁴Op. cit., p. 71.

is made a cuckold, but that he was even married and that Congreve even bothered to make him a character. I have never seen any actor, however good, battle with this bore without being reminded of Johnson's description of Sheridan's father. "Why, Sir," thundered the good Doctor, "Sherry is dull, naturally dull; but it must have taken him a great deal of pains to become what we now see him. Such an excess of stupidity, Sir, is not in Nature."³⁵

What Mr. Brown does not recognize is that Congreve intended Foresight to be so dull that he would be amusing to the audience as a picture of senility. Foresight is introduced into the drama by Mrs. Frail who calls him a "superstitious old fool."³⁶ Later, Valentine continues the allusion by calling him an "old Weather-headed Fool."³⁷ The last words spoken to Foresight are almost the same. They are addressed by Sir Sampson, who has just been tricked by Angelica: "You're an illiterate old Fool, and I'm another."³⁸ By his clever repetition of such a phrase it would seem that Congreve wanted to make Foresight appear to be so much the fool that no one in the audience would miss the fact, and very adeptly proved that even dullness and stupidity can be amusing.

There is one thing which critics do not mention in their discussion of Foresight; this is the fact that Foresight, like Ben, tends to dominate almost every scene in which

³⁵"Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, XXX (June 14, 1947), 22.

³⁶Love for Love, I, xiv, 46.

³⁷Ibid., II, vii, 48.

³⁸Ibid., V, xii, 97-99.

he appears with his manner of speech. Perhaps this is why Congreve allows the two to appear together in only three scenes. When both men are on the stage, Foresight has very little to say. As an example of Foresight's astrological speech, there is the scene where Foresight and Angelica argue over whether or not she is to go out. Both Angelica and the nurse fall into the speech of the old man. To be sure, Angelica has a purpose in so doing. Later Sir Sampson and Foresight exchange tall tales about their knowledge and their travels. Sir Sampson's speech is as filled with astrological terms as is any Foresight is capable of. The scene begins when Sir Sampson shows Foresight the paper which Valentine has just signed:

Fore. Odso, let me see; Let me see the Paper--Ay, faith and troth, here 'tis, if it will but hold-- I wish things were done, and the Conveyance made-- When was this sign'd, what Hour? Odso, you should have consulted me for the time. Well, but we'll make haste--

Sir Samp. Haste, ay, ay; haste enough, my Son Ben will be in Town to Night--I have order'd my Lawyer to draw up Writings of Settlement and Jointure-- All shall be done to Night--No matter for the time; prithee, Brother Foresight, leave Superstition--Pox o' th' time; there's no time but the time present, there's no more to be said of what's past, and all that is to come will happen. If the Sun shine by Day, and the Stars by Night, why, we shall know one another's Faces without the help of a Candle, and that's all the Stars are good for.

Fore. How, now? Sir Sampson, that all? Give me leave to contradict you, and tell you, you are ignorant.

Sir Samp. I tell you I am wise; and sapiens dominabitur astris; there's Latin for you to prove it, and an Argument to confound your Ephemeris--

Ignorant!--I tell you, I have travell'd old Fircu, and know the Globe. I have seen the Antipodes, where the Sun rises at Midnight, and sets at Noon-Day.

Fore. But I tell you, I have travell'd, and travell'd in the Caelestial Spheres, known the Signs and the Planets, and their Houses. Can judge of Motions Direct and Retrograde, of Sextile, Quadrates, Trines and Oppositions. Fiery Trigons and Aquatical Trigons. Know whether Life shall be long or short, Happy or Unhappy, whether Diseases are Curable or Incurable. If Journeys shall be prosperous, Undertakings successful; or Goods stoll'n recover'd, I know--

I know when Travellers lye or speak Truth, when they don't know it themselves.

Sir. Samp. I have known an Astrologer made a Cuckold in the Twinkling of a Star; and seen a Conjuror, that cou'd not keep the Devil out of his Wife's Circle.

Fore. What does he twit me with my Wife too? I must be better inform'd of this,--[Aside]--Do you mean my Wife, Sir Sampson? Tho' you made a Cuckold of the King of Bantam, yet by the Body of the Sun--

Sir Samp. By the Horns of the Moon, you wou'd say, Brother Capricorn.

Fore. Capricorn in your Teeth, thou Modern Mandevil; Ferdinand Mendez Pinto was but a Type of thee, thou Liar of the first Magnitude. Take back your Paper of Inheritance; send your Son to Sea again. I'll wed my Daughter to an Egyptian Mummy, e'er she shall Incorporate with a Contemner of Sciences, and a Defamer of Virtue.

Sir. Samp. Body o'me, I have gone too far;--I must not provoke honest Albumazar,--an Egyptian Mummy is an Illustrious Creature, my trusty Hieroglyphick; and may have significations of Futurity about him; Odsbud, I would my Son were an Egyptian Mummy for thy sake. What, thou art not angry for a Jest, my good Haly--I reverence the Sun, Moon and Stars with all my Heart.--What, I'll make thee a Present of a Mummy: Now I think on't, Body o'me, I have a Shoulder of an Egyptian King, that I purloined from one of the Pyramids, powder'd with Hieroglyphicks, thou shalt have it brought home to thy House, and make an Entertainment for all the Philomaths, and Students in Physick and Astrology in and about London.³⁹

³⁹Ibid., II, v, 1-55, 62-97.

Congreve has varied the jealous-husband theme to an extent in Love for Love. Foresight experiences two momentary pangs of jealousy. One instance has just been cited, wherein Sir Sampson is able to turn the old man's interest away from the question very quickly. The second is in the scene in which Foresight shows jealousy when Angelica taunts him with the idea that his wife may not be faithful to him. Then he declares: "Well--why, if I was born to be a Cuckold, there's no more to be said."⁴⁰ Because of his interest in his own affairs, Foresight makes it easy for his wife to indulge in illicit love. In Congreve's first two plays, it is the wife who thinks of the scheme for deceiving the husband, but in Love for Love it is Scandal who originates the idea by convincing Foresight that he is ill.⁴¹ When the old man totters off to bed, Scandal and Mrs. Foresight are free to enjoy the evening. They are never discovered in their intrigue. Congreve leaves the audience free to wonder just what lie the ingenious Scandal would have offered to protect Mrs. Foresight's honor, had they been surprised.

Mrs. Foresight appears in only one scene which differs from scenes in which Congreve's other wives have appeared. When she accuses her sister of having been at the World's End,

⁴⁰ Ibid., II, iii, 10-11.

⁴¹ Ibid., III, xi-xiv.

a place of doubtful reputation, she is, in turn, exposed as having been there herself. Deciding that they are sisters in every way, Mrs. Foresight and Mrs. Frail come to agreeable terms:

Mrs. Fore. Well, since all's out, and as you say, since we are both wounded let us do what is done in Duels, take care of one another, and grow better Friends than before.

Mrs. Frail. With all my Heart, ours are but slight flesh wounds, and if we keep 'em from Air, not at all dangerous: Well, give me your Hand in Token of Sisterly Secresie and Affection.⁴²

V. The Fainalls

The Fainalls, who appear in The Way of the World, mark a complete departure from the old Wycherley theme and almost a departure from the realm of comic characterization. Fainall is not jealous of his wife because he despises her, nor is Mrs. Fainall the amorous wife of the previous comedies. Her love affair with Mirabell is over, and her feeling for him is now one of deep friendship. For the first time in Congreve's plays interest in the husband and wife is equally divided.

Aside from Downes's remark that many of the characters in The Way of the World were too satirical to please the audience,⁴³ only two critics have devoted special attention to the Fainalls. No critic has found scenes in another

⁴²Ibid., II, ix, 74-82.

⁴³Supra., p. 47.

play from which Congreve might have borrowed his material. The first critic to remark concerning the Fainalls was Hazlitt, who said:

There is a callousness in the worst characters in The Way of the World, in Fainall and his wife and Mrs. Marwood, not very pleasant; and a grossness in the absurd ones such as Lady Wishfort and Sir Wilful, which is not a little amusing.⁴⁴

The only other critic to remark upon the Fainalls is Mr. Bonamy Dobrée, who, although he agrees with Hazlitt, has presented a more discerning view:

Fainall is a repulsive villain, but Mrs. Fainall, whom Mirabell had once loved, is more sinned against than sinning. She remains loyal to Mirabell and even helps him in his advances to Millamant (what profound psychology is here!), but at the same time her heart aches at not being loved by her husband. "He will willingly dispense with the hearing of one scandalous story, to avoid giving an occasion to make another by being seen to walk with his wife," she says with an affectation of lightness. But how bitter it is! How full of unnecessary pain is the way of the world. She and Mrs. Marwood are figures of intense realism driven by insane jealousy which is often more bitter and nearer to the surface of illicit love than in the marriage tie.⁴⁵

Why should other critics have neglected to study the Fainalls? Probably the answer lies in the fact that they are among the least delightful people in a play where there are such delightful creatures as Millamant, Lady Wishfort, Sir Wilfull Witwoud, and Mirabell. Even so, the Fainalls are interesting dramatic studies.

⁴⁴Op. cit., p. 73.

⁴⁵Op. cit., pp. 140-141.

Fainall is a villainous character, but a much more subtly conceived portrait of villainy than is Maskwell of The Double-Dealer. Whereas from the first it is obvious that Maskwell is not to be trusted, Fainall appears in the first few scenes as nothing more than a commentator to let the audience know just what is going on. Mirabell gives the first indication that perhaps he is not the ordinary husband. Speaking of Mrs. Marwood's sudden outburst of hate for Mirabell, Fainall suggests that perhaps she is angry because Mirabell has paid too little attention to her advances, a thing which a woman does not easily forgive.

Fain. You are a gallant Man, Mirabell; and though you have cruelty enough not to satisfie a Lady's longing; you have too much Generosity, not to be tender of her Honour. Yet you speak with an Indifference which seems to be affected; and confesses you are conscious of a Negligence.

Mira. You pursue the Argument with a Distrust that seems to be unaffected, and confesses you are conscious of a Concern for which the Lady is more indebted to you, than is your Wife.⁴⁶

It does not take long for Fainall to show his real feeling for his wife. Just after Mrs. Fainall has left with Mirabell, declaring that her husband would not want to be seen with her in public, Fainall remarks:

Fain. Excellent Creature! Well, sure if I should live to be rid of my Wife, I shou'd be a miserable Man.

⁴⁶The Way of the World, I, i, 102-111.

Mrs. Mar. Ay!

Fain. For having only that one Hope, the accomplishment of it, of Consequence must put an end to all my Hopes; and what a Wretch is he who must survive his Hopes! Nothing remains when that Day comes, but to sit down and weep like Alexander, when he wanted other Worlds to conquer.⁴⁷

Later Fainall declares his hatred for his wife even more vehemently. Mrs. Marwood has just suggested a scheme which will enable him to gain control of Mrs. Fainall's fortune, a scheme which will ruin Mrs. Fainall completely:

Mrs. Mar. Well, how do you stand affected towards your Lady?

Fain. Why faith, I'm thinking of it.--Let me see--I am Marry'd already; so that's over--My Wife has plaid the Jade with me--Well, that's over too--I never lov'd her, or if I had, why that wou'd have been over too by this time--Jealous of her I cannot be, for I am certain, so there's an end of Jealousie. Weary of her, I am and shall be--No, there's no end to that; No, no, that were too much to hope.⁴⁸

From this time until the end of the play, Fainall's attention is focused upon the task of ruining his wife and gaining her fortune. When at last he is caught in his own web and is deprived of all hopes of a fortune, his final act is to attempt to inflict bodily harm upon his wife. Prevented from doing this, he rushes from the room, threatening retaliation:

Mirabell, you shall hear of this, Sir, be sure you shall--Let me pass, Oaf.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Ibid., II, iii, 1-11.

⁴⁸Ibid., III, xviii, 53-63.

⁴⁹Ibid., V, xiii, 51-52.

Why then in spite of all his villainy is Fainall still a comic character? He does not exceed the realm of comic characterization because not once is anyone allowed to feel sympathetic towards him. When finally he receives his just reward for his villainy, he does not do so with the dignity of a tragic villain; but he makes an inglorious exit. So cleverly written are the last lines that he speaks that there is a feeling of amusement, not of relief, when he leaves.

Mrs. Fainall, according to Mr. Dobrée, is more sinned against than sinning.⁵⁰ This is perceivable. She is not a coquette as her predecessors--Mrs. Fondlewife, Lady Froth, and Mrs. Foresight--were. She does not make witty remarks about marriage or pretend an affection for her husband which she does not feel. She still loves Mirabell, but she knows that there is no hope for her as far as he is concerned. In her dealings with this young gallant she is wistful and somewhat reproachful:

Mrs. Fain. While I only hated my Husband, I cou'd bear to see him; but since I have despised him, he's too offensive.

Mira. O You shou'd hate with Prudence.

Mrs. Fain. Yes, for I have lov'd with Indescretion.

Mira. You shou'd have just so much Disgust for your Husband, as may be sufficient to make you relish your Lover.

Mrs. Fain. You have been the Cause that I have lov'd without Bounds, and wou'd you set Limits to that Aversion, of which you have been the Occasion? Why did you make me marry this Man?

⁵⁰ Supra, p. 136.

Mira. 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 cou'd you have fix'd a Father's Name with Credit, but on a Husband? I knew Fainall to be a Man lavish in his Morals, and interested and professing Friend, and a false and 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 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.

Mrs. Fain. I ought to stand in some Degree of Credit with you, Mirabell.⁵¹

Mirabell heartlessly believes that he is showing her enough credit when he reveals to her his plans for winning Milla-mant.

Although Mrs. Fainall knows of her husband's affection for Mrs. Marwood, it is not upon this account that she dislikes her most; it is rather because she knows of Marwood's love for Mirabell. This is true to life because it is not likely that she should be jealous of one whom she despises.⁵² After the failure of Fainall's and Marwood's plans and their consequent exposure as the villainous creatures they really are, Mrs. Fainall is allowed a moment of triumph:

Mrs. Fain. Madam, you seem to stifle your Resentment; You had better give it Vent.

⁵¹The Way of the World, II, iii, 3-34.

⁵²Dobrée, loc. cit.

Mrs. Mar. Yes, it shall have Vent--and to your Confusion, or I'll perish in the attempt.⁵³

This moment of triumph marks a cleverly written speech by which Congreve is again able to turn into a comic situation what would ordinarily have been melodramatic. Deserving as she is of some of the accusations brought against her. Mrs. Fainall, up until this point, has the complete sympathy of the audience. This sympathy is not wholly destroyed, but Mrs. Marwood's complete downfall and ungraceful exit break the tension and bring the audience once more into the realm of comedy.

VI. Summary

The study of Congreve's husbands and wives reveals several facts worthy of summary. In picturing his married couples, Congreve assumed a slightly cynical attitude. He portrayed the conditions of his age, an age which was experimenting in social relationships and was trying to rationalize its attitudes towards marriage. Approaching the study of Congreve's characters is difficult and without antecedent guidance because most critics have limited their discussion to opinions upon Congreve's wit, his plots, or his characterizations as a whole.

Critical comments upon the Fondlewifes have dealt with three subjects: a discussion of the original and

⁵³The Way of the World, V, xiii, 53-56.

continued popularity of the Fondlewife scenes, a mention of parallels between the Fondlewife episodes and similar episodes in Wycherley's plays, and a condemnation of some of the scenes in which the Fondlewifes appear. The present study of these parallels reveals that Congreve borrowed from Wycherley no more than a general pattern from which to work. Although both Meredith and Mr. Dobrée condemned the Nykin-Cocky scene of the Fondlewifes as bordering upon the humiliating, Professor Dobrée pointed out that Congreve's scene did not descend to the low level of a similar scene in Otway's Venice Preserved.

Critics also point out that Congreve borrowed from his precursors in creating the Froths, citing parallels from Molière and Wycherley. Again, the study of these parallels reveals that Congreve's debt was no more than a general one. The Froths were thought by Hazlitt to be insipid, but Professors Dobrée and Perry refuted this argument by declaring Lady Froth to be a charming picture of a précieuse.

Critics reviewing Love for Love have found no parallels to cite, and most of their interest has been centered upon the character of Foresight, the would-be astrologer. Samuel Johnson, Hazlitt, and Mr. Malcolm Ewin found Foresight to be a natural and amusing character; but Mr. John Mason Brown found him to be dull and impossible to portray on the stage. None of the critics pointed out that perhaps Congreve intended

to make Foresight dull and, in so doing, also made him amusing; nor did any of the critics point out that Congreve often allowed Foresight's manner of speech to dominate the scene in which he appears.

The Fainalls, Congreve's most original couple, are a complete departure from the old Wycherley theme. For some unexplained reason, the critics have made but few comments upon them. Hazlitt found them callous. Mr. Dobrée agreed with Hazlitt to an extent but defended Mrs. Fainall as being "more sinned against than sinning." Both husband and wife hate each other and in the intensity of their portrayal are almost tragic figures. Only by clever writing did Congreve bring them back into the realm of critical comedy.

CHAPTER V.

CONCLUSION

Although he was personally popular during his lifetime, numbering among his friends such eminent men as Dryden, Swift, Pope, and Joseph Keally, although he wrote about that coterie of which he himself was a member, and although he wrote some of his most enlightened parts for Mrs. Bracegirdle, critics have sought in vain to find in Congreve's writings direct references to his personal life. In fact, Congreve is one of the least personal of all writers. A study of his biography and a perusal of his letters reveal, however, his general outlook upon life in a sufficiently clear manner to enable the reader to choose from his plays a few lines so poignant in their meaning that they seem to be more than merely the witty observations of a hero, a heroine, or a father. Beneath the display of wit, Congreve himself seems to be speaking. Although these speeches have been quoted elsewhere in this study, they make interesting repetition at this point. Lines, for example, spoken by a lover to his mistress would have served as a message from Congreve to the capricious Mrs. Bracegirdle:

You're a Woman--One to whom Heav'n gave Beauty when
it grafted Roses on a Briar. You are the Reflection
of Heav'n in a Pond, and he that leaps at you is
sunk. You are all white, a Sheet of lovely spotless

Paper, when you first are born; but you are to be
scrawl'd and blotted by every Goose's Quill. I
know you; for I lov'd a Woman, and lov'd her so
long, that I found out a strange thing: I found
out what a Woman was good for

. . . . to keep a Secret.

Oh exceeding good to keep a Secret. For tho' she
should tell, yet she is not to be believ'd.¹

One of the wisest speeches in Love for Love, Angelica's address
to Valentine, expresses the general philosophy of the whole
Restoration era:

Wou'd anything but a Madman, complain of Uncertainty?
Uncertainty and Expectation are the Joys of Life.
Security is an insipid thing, and the overtaking and
possessing of a Wish, discovers the Folly of the
Chase. Never let us know one another better; for
the pleasure of a Masquerade is done, when we come
to shew our Faces;²

Expressive of this same view of life is Sir Sampson's speech
to Foresight:

. . . . there's no time but the time present, there's
no more to be said of what's past, and all that is to
come will happen.³

If these speeches cannot be interpreted as reflections
of Congreve's own view of life, then they certainly belie the
accusations of some critics who state that Congreve created
only heartless comedies about heartless men and women.⁴

¹Love for Love, IV, xvi, 76-90.

²Ibid., IV, xx, 6-12.

³Ibid., II, v, 29-31.

⁴John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review
of Literature, XXX:24 (14 June 1947), 20.

There are two phases of Congreve's art upon which most critics have agreed. First, echoing the unanimous acclaim from all his contemporaries except Jeremy Collier, later critics have agreed that Congreve is the undisputed master in the art of writing witty dialogue. Second, all critics except Samuel Johnson have agreed upon the fact that Congreve was unable to construct a well-developed plot. This particular phase of Congrevean criticism, the judgment of the plot, developed after Congreve's time; for, with the exception of Congreve himself, none of his contemporaries mentioned his ability to construct a plausible story. The question of the originality of his plots is quickly answered by those critics who cite parallels from Jonson, Molière, Wycherley and Etherege.

The diversity of opinion among critics with respect to Congreve's characterizations, particularly their morals, is usually traceable to the fact that the critic is judging Congreve's ability according to his own standards for writing or according to the standards of the age in which he lived. Congreve's plays were popular on the stage until late in the eighteenth century when the demand for sentimental tragedy crowded out the popular appeal of the artificial comedies. In the nineteenth century there were fewer revivals of Congreve's plays, but there were more critics who commented upon them. The last vestiges of an old era had been swept away

by the romantic movement, a movement which held that emotion was foremost and that artificiality had no place. The last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a revival of interest in the comedy of manners and in Congreve's plays in particular because conditions of this decade were similar to those conditions which had produced the comedies of manners in the first place. Important in the history of Congrevean criticism is Charles Lamb's reminder that the correct approach to the study of this particular type of drama is the approach to art, not photography. In most respects this is the approach which many modern critics have tried to use in their appraisals of Congreve's dramas. Since the twentieth century demands the use of the real and the actual in much of its literature, it is not likely that a revival of the comedy of manners would reach wide-spread proportions. Mr. John Mason Brown has, perhaps, reflected the opinion of many of those who saw the recent revival of Love for Love. He found the brilliant dialogue of the play to be "as much a bore as a delight."⁵

Ironically enough the source of literary pleasure in such a dialogue is to a certain extent its danger dramatically. The very subtleties and balances which make for superb reading demand of moderns a listening that is almost too attentive. The language itself has changed with the centuries so that at moments a translator is needed. Time, too, has contaminated our ears. They have grown lazy on the lazy stuff to which they are hourly exposed. Moreover, the playgoers are no longer members of a coterie. They are infinitely more numerous. They are the general public, and, as

⁵Ibid.

such, radio listeners and readers quite different from that fare upon which audiences fed in Congreve's day. . . . It is when comedy becomes "high," in other words Congrevean, that from a modern's standpoint the truest delights offer the truest difficulties. The speech, though witty and composed of words fitted together into a mosaic of entrancing designs, is then bloodless. Part of its elegance is its lack of emphasis. Its idiom verbally, no less than emotionally, is far removed from our times.⁶

A full appraisal of Congreve's genius must take into consideration not only his purpose in writing but also the message which he had to give. In each of his plays the central theme is love, the love of a young man and a young woman, the illicit love which goes beyond the bounds of matrimony, or the love indulged in by the wits purely for the sake of convenience or for the sake of fashion. In each of his plays love is confronted with a problem, the solution of which forms the basis for the plot, or the plots as the case may be. Congreve chose to develop this theme through a maze of intrigues, plots, and counter-plots; and herein lies his chief weakness. He did not clarify the complex relations of his plots by well-defined dramatic interaction, but was content, rather, to give only brief explanatory statements which are often so subtle that they are easily missed by the spectator. It may be said, however, that a complete understanding

⁶Ibid., pp. 21-22.

of all the various subtle suggestions is not always necessary for the understanding of the play as a whole.⁷

. . . . As we shall see, Congreve has a great deal to say that is worth our attention. . . . although the tangle of relationships is a means to an end . . . it is not the only means. That is, although we will do well to study all the lines of action and keep them straight, in one sense that is not essential; at least it is not the most important exercise demanded for us. For, ultimately, Congreve speaks less by means of the outcome of his various plots and counter-plots than by the tone created by the speech, manner, and attitudes of the participants in, and the observers of, the various actions. . . . in a play where so much is accomplished by tone, the talk is a very important kind of action. The talk develops attitudes which clash with each other, and, still better, with conventional expectations; it develops characters by revelation of basic attitudes.⁸

Bearing these facts in mind, the reader must understand Congreve's attitudes towards his creations. What Meredith found to be a group of heartless men and women without power to reach the mind through their laughter, what Lamb considered sports of a witty fancy, what Thackeray termed cynicism, and what Gosse termed careless superiority on the part of the writer is much more than all these.⁹ In the first place, Congreve assumed that the reader or the spectator had the ability to choose between the good and the bad;¹⁰ therefore he did not carefully differentiate between the types.

⁷Cleanth Brooks and Robert B. Heilman, Understanding Drama (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), pp. 441-442.

⁸Ibid., p. 442.

⁹Ibid., p. 443.

¹⁰Ibid.

Congreve does not divide his characters into heroes and villains. He does not underline the goodness of his more admirable characters. He does not burn with righteous indignation when he presents such bad characters as Mrs. Marwood and Fainall; instead, he treats them with detachment by giving due play to their motives, their insight into others, their quickness, etc. He does not deride the boobies such as the fops and Sir Wilfull; he allows them a measure of wit and acuteness.

This is characterization at an adult level, and a naive reader may think that it makes sense only if we regard the author as a sardonic observer of an insoluble human muddle. Such a reader will think that Congreve ought to have had the characters whom he regards favorably reject the artificial life of society and embrace a more direct, spontaneous way of life--especially in the matter of love. Our critical problem is to define them [the system of values operating in each play]--not altogether an easy task, though they do not coincide with, though they do not wholly differ from, the standards of conduct upon which fashionable society in the play preens itself. Yet we should not make the mistake of thinking that Congreve approvingly presents a picture of a cynically heartless society. Nor, on the other hand, does he give us, with the ease of the sentimentalist, conventional reassurances about "natural" and spontaneous love, the victory of good over evil, and the triumph of "pure love." In fact, the elimination of all traces of sentimentality is one of the striking achievements of the play.¹¹

The foregoing discussion was written about The Way of the World; yet the facts presented therein may be applicable to each of Congreve's dramas. In these plays Congreve has created a group of characters whose efforts to conform to an elaborate social code are in direct opposition to their own human emotions. Any deviation from this code furnished humor for the audience and gave Congreve an excellent opportunity to satirize social conventions. With these facts in mind,

¹¹Ibid., pp. 443-444.

it is interesting to see how Congreve made his men and women conform to these accepted principles of behavior. In The Old Batchelor, there are two pairs of lovers. The first pair, Vainlove and Araminta, are confronted with two opposing forces to their love. Vainlove is too capricious, and Araminta is too self-conscious to be spirited game. While there is a place in artificial comedy for the first quality, there is definitely no place for the second. The humor arises from the fact that Vainlove, in spite of his pretended indifference to love, is actually emotionally involved. Since such is the case he is not nearly so interesting a portrayal as is Bellmour. The problem confronting the love of Bellmour and Belinda is purely subjective. Each is in love, but neither will admit it. Bellmour's overacted protestations of love and Belinda's vehement denial of interest are carried out until their final surrender to each other. The Fondlewifes, too, are non-conformists to the code. Fondlewife is so weak that he shows his jealousy, and Laetitia is indiscrete enough to be caught in her own intrigue. Because of their lack of complete emotional stability, they are humorous characters.

In The Double-Dealer, Mellefont and Cynthia are not truly witty lovers because they have allowed their emotions to become apparent to all who know them. They have already come to an understanding, but the obstacles to their love are so strong that their battle to overcome these obstacles

borders too nearly upon the serious to be really good comedy. Such is not the case of the Froths, either of whom might have uttered the words of Bellmour:

Wit be my Faculty, and Pleasure, my Occupation; and
let Father Time shake his Glass. Let low and earthly
Souls grovel 'till they have work'd themselves six
Foot deep into a Grave--Business is not my Element.¹²

The Froths wander in and out of the scenes of The Double-Dealer being charming and nothing more, but it is their charm which endows the whole play with the spirit of comedy.

The obstacle facing the lovers in Love for Love is both subjective and objective. Valentine admits being in love, but his problems are to overcome the animosity of his father, to save his fortune, and to win Angelica, who enjoys keeping him in doubt concerning her feeling for him. The mass of intrigues in which Valentine becomes involved are almost his downfall, and the comedy lies in the fact that he is completely subdued before he is allowed to win his mistress. The portrayal of Angelica is a humorous one because she is almost caught in Valentine's intrigue. Her charm lies in the fact that she has ingenuity enough to work out her own problem. So interesting are the lovers of Love for Love that the husband and the wife are not so prominently featured as heretofore. Instead, Congreve has been content to present in Foresight one of his strong supporting characters.

¹²The Old Batchelor, I, i, 25-29.

The Way of the World is Congreve's greatest achievement. The comedy of Millamant is that she is about to be married as a woman but talks like a person of society.¹³ The excellency of her portrait lies in the fact that not once does she really descend to the level of an ordinary woman, not even in her offer to marry Sir Willful in order to save her lover, and certainly not in her final capitulation to Mirabell. The comedy of Mirabell lies in the fact that he reluctantly admits that he is jealous and is in love. He is always a match for Millamant; he could not have been her lover had he been otherwise. Their famous bargaining scene is proof of his strength as a character as well as Millamant's.

Why is the bargaining scene so successful? For one thing, because the various stipulations and demands, though made in a manner that may suggest selfishness or indulgence of whim, actually embody sound critiques of conventional matrimony, of its trivialities and hypocrisies. . . .

The Way of the World represents, then, almost a symphonic pattern in which the theme of love receives a variety of treatments, ranging from the somber--the Fainall-Marwood affair is bitter, perhaps, as Bonamy Dobrée has suggested, even verging on the tragic--to the burlesque, which we see in Waitwell's pretended assault on Lady Wishfort. Somewhere between those extremes Mirabell and Millamant must plot their course--facing the opposition not merely of the Marwoods who would "mar" their affair and of the Fainalls scheming to get their money, but, more importantly, of a society which, because of its own addiction to extremes

¹³Palmer, op. cit., p. 118.

must naturally be opposed to their search for balance and discipline. But this latter struggle becomes also a struggle with themselves: have they the inner stamina to adhere to standards of their own? If not, Millamant will "dwindle into a wife"¹⁴ and Mirabell be "enlarged into a husband"--

In confining this study to a discussion of Congreve's major characters, I have omitted several interesting studies. First of all, there is the parade of wits and would-be wits without whom no comedy of manners could exist. Then there is Congreve's most perplexing character, the villainous Maskwell. Many critics believe that he exceeds the bonds of comedy, while others point out that since he was not given sympathetic treatment by Congreve, he is, therefore, a comic character. Ben, "the absolute sea wit," is certainly worthy of study because of his importance to the drama and because of his unusual manner of speech. There is also the question of whether or not Ben is an original creation or a descendant of other sailors created by Dufey and Ravenscroft. Miss Prue, Congreve's only child character, is a strange mixture of adolescence and young womanhood. Ben says that she ought to "learn her Sampler and make Dirt-Pies,"¹⁵ but Tattle finds her an apt pupil to whom he can teach the art of making love. In any study of supporting characters the name of Lady Wishfort should appear--Lady Wishfort, whose "flow of boudoir

¹⁴Brooks and Heilman, op. cit., pp. 445-446.

¹⁵Love for Love, IV, xiii, 22-23.

Billingsgate is unmatched for the vigour and pointedness of tongue."¹⁶ A tyrant over her servants but a slave to the drawing room, she is very much afraid of offending against decorum. Among the supporting characters should come, also, Sir Willful Witwoud, the country squire whose attempt to be "natural" among a group of affected characters is as amusing as the attempt of his half brother to be witty. All these figments of Congreve's imagination present interesting problems for other students who are interested in analyzing Congreve's characters.

¹⁶Meredith, op. cit., p. 33.

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