About *The Way of the World*

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The Restoration Period

The term *Restoration drama*, usually applied to the plays written during the period from 1660 to 1700 or 1710, is not really satisfactory. Charles II was restored to the English throne in 1660. By 1700, Charles II had died, his brother James had reigned for five years and had been deposed in the "glorious revolution," or "bloodless

revolution," of 1688, and William and Mary had reigned for twelve years. Congreve was not born until ten years after the Restoration; *The Way of the World* was first presented when he was thirty. By that time, some of the most obvious and most notorious features of the period no longer existed or existed only in much weaker forms.

The easiest way to grasp the particular tone of the Restoration period is to think of it as a reaction against the Puritanism of Cromwell and the period of the Commonwealth. The dissolute court of Charles II is well known in history and legend. It was the result of a blend of world-weariness, cynicism, and debauchery, dominated by a group of exiles who returned to their country determined to make up for the lean years history had imposed upon them. In general, the people of England welcomed the change. But such a reaction had only a limited life; the court gradually shifted from undisguised dissipation to the pattern of covert intrigues, political and domestic, and the clandestine adulteries that always existed in English courts.

The relations between the court and the theater were more than merely casual. Among Charles II's first acts after he returned to the throne was the reopening of the playhouses that had been closed by the Puritans. He was a patron of the theater, attended frequently, and was fond of "a very merry play." Since, in fact, in the early years of the Restoration the theater depended very greatly on the support of the nobility and its hangers-on, it reflected the taste of the court and its activities. For the courtiers, "tis a pleasant, well-bred, complaisant, fine, frolic, good-natured, pretty age; and if you do not like it leave it to us that do," as one of Wycherley's characters says. Many characters in the comedies were based on well-known figures in the court; many episodes echoed scandals that were known.

By the 1690s, if not earlier, a change in the court's attitudes occurred that inevitably affected the theater. William and Mary did not follow in the footsteps of the queen's uncle, Charles II. The over-reaction to Puritanism had run its course, and respectability was reasserting its importance in the life of the upper and middle classes. A Society for the Reformation of Manners was organized; laws were passed to suppress licentiousness. At the same time, the audience changed. In the 1660s and 1670s, the solid and wealthy middle class had ignored or deliberately avoided the theater; they now became an important part of the audience. This was due to their increased sophistication, but inevitably they imposed their values on the playwrights as well. And the English merchant was not prepared to condone a cynical acceptance of loose behavior.

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Influences on Restoration Comedy

The nature of the audience is a very important influence on all art forms, theatrical arts especially. But it is only one factor. Attempts to explain — if such a thing is possible — Restoration drama must consider other threads of influence as well. Because the theaters were closed between 1642 and 1660, there was at one time a tendency to treat the Restoration drama as if it had no connections with the main stream of English drama. This was, on the face of it, inaccurate. People had seen Jacobean plays; the plays were there to read; and Jacobean plays formed the bulk of the repertoire of the two theatrical companies after the Restoration. At the same time, the courtiers, returning after varying lengths of time spent in France, had seen French plays. We might, therefore, list the main threads that made up that many-splendored thing, Restoration comedy.

There existed an English tradition of social comedy that treated the love game with lightness, humor, and some ribaldry. Such comedies are associated with Beaumont and Fletcher, among others. The plays included satire of social types: the fops, the pedants, and the vain women. At the same time, the English comic tradition included a different comedy of character types, Ben Jonson's comedy of "humours," which emphasized the way in which people's characters would be strongly bent in one direction. Jonson's plays were also intensely satiric, attacking above all the sins of avarice, lechery, and hypocrisy.

There was a strong French influence which led to elegance of plotting, characterization, and acting. The French emphasis on correctness was probably a salutary antidote to the casual attitude to structure of many Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. However, one characteristic of French comedy, unity of plot, was never adopted; English comedies had plots and subplots, and generally an excess of action.

The third most important influence on the comedy was the patronage of the court. Very often what occurred in the play had to be thought of as a private joke, comprehensible only to those "in the know."

The ways in which these various threads of influence showed themselves varied from dramatist to dramatist. One dramatist, Wycherley, might borrow a plot from Molierè but then add subplots and make the sympathetic characters coarser and their antagonists more crudely vicious to intensify the satire: *Le Misanthrope* is a brilliant French comedy, and *The Plain Dealer* is a brilliant English comedy based on it, but very different indeed. Some comic writers attempted to follow in the footsteps of Ben Jonson, and Congreve himself professed an occasional dependence on the Jonsonian "humour." Other dramatists, whose works are not generally anthologized, for their plays are not among the best, depended on scandal, bawdry, and the mirroring of their narrow world's activities.

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Congreve represents the attitude of the period at its best. The rakehell was no longer a hero; Mirabell is a descendent of the rakehell, but compared with earlier specimens he displays urbanity, grace, and decorum. Congreve's love passages can be graceful and dignified; he treats love with an objective rationalism that is quite apart from the concept of lechery. His comedies are concerned, as comedies have been through the ages, with love and money, frequently complicated by parental opposition. His approach, however, is balanced: Love without money would be a problem, but money without love, the cynic's aim, is not the goal. Likewise, Congreve abhors the sentimental attitude that love will result in the individuals' somehow being submerged in each other; he insists that lovers preserve their integrity as individuals. Love is not metaphysical, not sentimental, not a form of sacrifice. On the other hand, within this context, it is not merely carnal nor a thinly disguised lust; it includes trust, dignity, and mutual respect.

The Problem of the Plot

Because of its striking characterization and brilliant dialogue, *The Way of the World* is generally considered to be the finest example of Restoration comedy, as well as one of the last. Nevertheless, it was not successful when it was first presented in 1700. Although the English audiences, unlike the French, were accustomed to plots and subplots and to a great deal of action in their plays, they were confused by the amount of activity crammed into a single day. *The Way of the World* had only a single action to which everything was related, but it included a scheme, and a counterplot to frustrate the scheme, and then moves to foil the counterplot. There were too many episodes, events, reversals, and discoveries, most of them huddled in the last acts, and they demanded too much of the audience. If the difficulty was ever overcome in a performance, it was only when actors and director were completely conscious of their problem.

Every play must start, in the traditional phrase, *in medias res;* that is, some events must have occurred before the opening curtain. The devices, called exposition, used to inform the audience or reader of these events could be as obvious as a character addressing the audience directly, or could be an important part of the action, as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or in Ibsen's plays, or in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night.* In Restoration drama, exposition was usually straightforward; two characters might meet and gossip, or a man might talk to a servant; but in *The Way of the World,* exposition is highly ingenious and long withheld. In Act I, we are told that Mirabell is in love and that there are obstacles to the courtship, but most of the significant facts are hidden until Act II so that the first part of the

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play is obscure. Then, just as Mirabell's scheme becomes clear, it loses significance, for Fainall's counterplot becomes the machinery that moves the action forward. It is, therefore, worthwhile to trace the story in chronological order.

Loose Ends of the Plot

Although there seems to be the usual happy ending to this comedy, *The Way of the World* leaves a number of loose ends that add to the confusion.

It is difficult to see where Mrs. Fainall's future is satisfactorily resolved. At one point in Act V, she says that this is the end of her life with Fainall; that is one comfort. But at the end of the play, it seems that she will continue to live with Fainall in an obviously very awkward domestic situation.

It is not clear that Fainall is completely foiled. He could still demand control of Lady Wishfort's fortune or disgrace her daughter. Mirabell's statement that "his circumstances are such, he [Fainall] must of force comply" is hardly adequate.

Some problems of motivation in the play are not clear. Why didn't Mirabell himself marry Mrs. Fainall when she was a widow? Mirabell is not wealthy, and Mrs. Fainall apparently inherited a considerable fortune from her first husband.

Is the affair between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall at an end? She married Fainall only to forestall scandal if she became pregnant. If it is at an end, why has it ceased? Why should she help Mirabell with his wooing of Millamant? Has he perhaps convinced Mrs. Fainall that he is marrying Millamant for money?

Apparently Mirabell had wanted to marry Millamant the year before, but the match was forestalled by Mrs. Marwood's interference. Fainall suggests that, had they married, Millamant would have lost half her fortune. Why then the elaborate plot now, to save the 6,000 pounds that Mirabell was prepared to sacrifice before?

There no real answers to these questions. They seem to be loose ends that the dramatist never bothered to tie together.

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