

Comedies of Manners

Discussion Questions:

1. Please read the following two quotes from Horace's *Satires*, which appear in the play's epigraph, and ask yourself what they convey about the play that is to follow?

"It is worthwhile, for those of you who wish adulterers no success, to hear how much misfortune they suffer, and how often their pleasure is marred by pain and, though rarely achieved, even then fraught with danger"

"I have no fear in her company that a husband may rush back from the country, the door burst open, the dog bark, the house shake with the din, the woman, deathly pale, leap from her bed, her complicit maid shriek, she fearing for her limbs, her guilty mistress for her dowry and I for myself"

2. In what ways is this play a quintessential comedy of manners? How does this form relate to the historical changes that occurred around the time of the Restoration?
3. How does the play satirize marriages of convenience?

Guide for Responding:

1. The quotes foreshadow the chaos that will occur over the course of the play as a result of adultery and deception. The fact that these quotes were taken from Horace's *Satires* also implies that these very serious issues will be treated as comedy.
2. Whereas earlier rulers were hostile to drama, Charles II had a much more tolerant attitude towards the theater. In particular, he allowed the theater to discuss sexuality more openly than it had during the Puritan Era. Thus, *The Way of the World* centers upon sexual relationships, which are dealt with frankly and explicitly. The play also features the witty banter and class satire that was typical of a comedy of manners.
3. The play represents the institution of marriage as one riddled with manipulation, trickery, and deception. The marriages in the play often have little to do with love, and are instead portrayed as the aftermath of impersonal financial concerns (especially through the use of economic language). Ultimately, the love represented here is "pretend," like Millamant's pretend love for his Lady Wishfort. The play calls into question the social construction of love, exposing marriage as a matter of convenience.

