

William Congreve's *The Way of the World* and Restoration Drama

The Restoration, as a period, takes its name from the Restoration of the monarchy, with Charles II assuming the throne in 1660. The Restoration of the monarchy meant the end of the Puritan Parliament's rule, but it also meant the return of the theatre. Because of the theatre's long-standing connection with royalty and aristocracy and because of the Puritans' view of the theatre as licentious and blasphemous, theatrical performances were banned during parliament's rule. In 1662, the theatres re-opened, and play-going became an important part of the reaction against the Puritanism of the previous decades. Restoration theatre, for many cultural historians, epitomizes the era. While many plays from the Shakespearean era were reproduced, new plays commenting on the renewed monarchy and a new culture of performance, wealth, and more open sexuality flourished. In a variety of forms, the entire culture seemed to see itself as a kind of play, as commentators repeatedly emphasized the ways everyone seemed to be playing roles as they negotiated new mores and social conditions.

While the theatre of the Restoration era attempted to return to its earlier form, it innovated on the theatre of the first part of the 17th century in many ways. First, it became accessible and respectable, as the theatres themselves moved into better parts of London and started to attract a broader array of patrons. At the same time, playhouses opened up professionally for women, as they began to appear on stage in large numbers for the first time and several women, most famously, perhaps, Aphra Behn, became successful playwrights. The presence of women on the stage and in larger numbers in the audiences directly contributed to the intensive exploration of sexual themes in the theatre of the period. Actresses were often seen as little more than prostitutes, and many famous actresses were well-known consorts of the king and other nobles. Their performances on stage often played with their supposed sexual availability, while women in the audiences often similarly were seen or displayed themselves as performers as they traded witty conversation laced with double entendre with men about town. In many accounts, the flirtations in the audience mirrored or rivaled the performances on stage.

The Restoration comedy of manners reflected and commented on this culture of performance. These plays often featured rakes—men on the prowl for sexual conquest—who elaborated complicated schemes for bedding as many women as possible. Over the course of the play, their attempts were often forwarded, rebuffed, and foiled by various women whose sexual knowledge and wit frequently equaled their male counterparts. These comedies usually featured incredibly complex plots and counterplots—emphasizing their characters' ability to manipulate others through their self-display, control of language, and psychological calculations as they attempted to win both sexual favors and wealth. Yet, even as the plays displayed the power of performance that their very audiences indulged in, they often critiqued that culture for its duplicity and depravity. With the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the return to power of parliament, a reaction against the excesses of the Restoration set in, with much of the

focus on the theatre and the culture of performance and display and, in particular, its sexual licentiousness.

Appearing in 1700, Congreve's play represents a late version of the Restoration comedy of manners, one that consolidates many of the features of earlier plays even as it responds to increasing critique of the theatre (the play mentions one of the most famous critiques in Act 3). Implicitly describing the way of the world as one of cynical self-interest, the play follows the reformed rake Mirabell as he attempts to win the hand of Millamant, the woman he actually loves. Before the play begins, Mirabell, we later learn, has had an affair with Mrs. Fainall, whose husband married her only for her wealth and is having an affair with Mrs. Marwood; we only learn most of this in the second act. Millamant is the niece and ward of Lady Wishfort, who is Mrs. Fainall's mother, and stands to inherit a great deal of money, but only if Lady Wishfort approves of her suitor. Mirabell has offended Lady Wishfort, so he needs not only to win Millamant's hand but also to win over Lady Wishfort.

As with most Restoration comedies, Mirabell creates a complicated scheme involving impersonation and artifice to get both wealth and love. He has his valet, Waitwell, pretend to be his uncle and woo Lady Wishfort. His plan is to then rescue Lady Wishfort from being seduced by a servant and thus gain her approval. While Millamant knows of the plot and does love Mirabell, she takes pleasure in teasing him about the uncertainty of their eventual union.

However, things go awry for Mirabell when Mrs. Marwood learns of the plot and of Mirabell's former affair with Mrs. Fainall. Mrs. Marwood informs Mr. Fainall, and they begin a plot against Mirabell. Millamant has accepted Mirabell's proposal, turning down Sir Witful Witwoud (Lady Wishfort's choice). Fainall uncovers the plot to Lady Wishfort and attempts to blackmail her by threatening to reveal her daughter's (Mrs. Fainall's) adultery. He wants all of Millamant's fortune as well as complete control of Mrs. Fainall's potential inheritance. Millamant then decides she will marry Sir Witwoud in order to save her fortune, and Mirabell appears with two servants to prove Mr. Fainall's adultery with Mrs. Marwood. Fainall, however, is not cowed and continues to threaten Mrs. Fainall's reputation. Then, Mirabell plays his last card. Before she married Mr. Fainall, Mrs. Fainall, out of fear of Mr. Fainall's character, had made Mirabell the trustee of her fortune. Without control of that money, Mr. Fainall is left without any resources, and the play ends with Mirabell and Millamant engaged.

The Way of the World exemplifies many of the key features of the Restoration comedy of manners—complex, multi-faceted characters who combine urbanity and wit in treating love and wealth as a game they play through concealment, artifice, and plotting. Unlike some of the plays from the first decade of the Restoration, however, Congreve's play does not end up embracing the cynicism of some of its characters; instead, true love—while far from sentimentalized—wins out and leaves with wealth. His characters have their moral failings and they more than handle themselves in a world of false appearances, banter, and sexual double-dealings, but they are redeemed in the end.

Summary

- Restoration drama was characterized by its intricate plots, sexual intrigues, moral duplicity, and feigned identities.
- Through these characteristics, the comedies of manners both mirrored and criticized a society becoming more fluid in terms of sexual mores, gender roles, and class standing.
- Appearing later in the period, Congreve's *Way of the World* epitomizes many of the key features of these dramas, with its multiple plots, morally questionable characters, and depiction of love and money as a game of wits.