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The Contemporaneity of Congreve's "The Way of The World"

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Abstract: Congreve's Restoration Comedy, *The Way of the World* is an epitome of refinement and scintillating wit. He is a classic not merely to be read for his polished and elegant prose style, but he must be read by younger generations for the quality of emotional life and significant ideas. Its immense entertainment value is to be gained through his characters who live life sometimes riotously, sometimes meditatively about the quality of felt living relationships. Congreve should be approached as if he were Ibsen, or Shaw or Brieux reflecting in their plays the social realities around them. Congreve's exquisite style transforms into art the absolute realism of the Diarists of his times, who recorded the dissolute lifestyle of the Rakes of the Restoration Court of Charles II. But the dramatist was writing to please the world of the beau monde, of the high society he knew so well. Though the play was not a success in his times, yet it finds favour with the contemporary palate.

Keywords: Comedy of Manners, morals, licentious, witty

INTRODUCTION

Restoration Comedy is "a brilliant picture of its time" writes Bonamy Dobree (RC,171). Upon his Restoration as Monarch of England in 1660, Charles II, with his keen patronage of dramatic arts, granted Royal Patents to two of his loyal courtiers, Thomas Killigrew and William D'avenant, to reinstate the English theatre shut down by the Puritan Regime in 1642. Some members of the aristocratic coterie and wealthy sections of society living in exile with their King in France had been previously patrons of the English stage; Charles II himself maintained a company of actors in Paris. This sophisticated coterie avidly followed and enjoyed the brilliant plays of Corneille, Scarron and Moliere, the French and Italian opera and ballet, the intrigue filled Spanish comedies, the popular *commedia dell'arte* of Italy, the actresses on stage, the music and colourful spectacle of Continental Drama. The French Court of Louis XIV was the most glamorous European Court celebrated for its pomp and ceremony and its patronage of the Arts. When the Royalists returned to England, they were determined to create a theatre that "would compliment the King and celebrate his social and monarchical ideals" (Bevis, 25).

Besides these continental models there were other multifold perspectives available to a resurgent theatre. D'avenant and Killigrew revived the romances of Beaumont and Fletcher with their intrigue- filled sceptical spirit; the plays of Middleton and Shirley too were known for plots replete with intrigues as well as the local colour of London; Ben Jonson was respected for his Comedy of Humours and low comedy elements, while the influence of Plautus and Terence was deep-seated in European drama. Restoration Comedy or the Comedy of Manners aimed at entertainment and laughter primarily, with the comic elements springing out of an aberration of manners associated with class behaviour of the social strata. It was a reaction against the moral fanaticism of Puritanism and catered to the elite court coterie. The spirit of Restoration Comedy was extreme profligacy and laxity as reflected in the manners of the court of Charles II. On his restoration as king, Charles II brought with him the manners of the French Court and its spirit of "laissez-faire" which banished all restraints. It also reflected the cynical gaiety of the aristocratic class caught between growing democratisation of society, the growing financial clout of the burgher class, the dominant discourse of the Hobbesian mechanistic concept of the universe with its justification of Power and Appetite. It was a time of great social mobility with the selling of peerages by the monarch and other economic factors, as well as, aspirations of high social status. Social churn and anxieties born out of materialism, affectation and hypocrisy are the underlying currents of the glittering world of the Comedy of Manners.

DISCUSSION

The leitmotif of Restoration Comedy is “divertisement and delight” as Dryden states in the Preface to *An Evening's Love* (Preface, l, 229). This comedy is devoid of moral instruction although with Wycherley and Farquhar it does contain elements of satire on the follies and vices of society. But Congreve's opinion in *The Way of the World* is that:

“Satire, he thinks you ought not to expect
For so reformed a town, who dares correct?
To please, this time, has been his sole purpose
He'll not instruct lest it should give offence” (Prologue,31-34)

Restoration Comedy aimed at pleasing its polished audience. Congreve in *The Old Bachelor* writes:

“Come, leave Business to Idlers, and
Wisdom to Fools: they have need of them:
Wit be my faculty, and pleasure, my occupation” (I.i,p13)

Women, visits, conversation, wit, manners and love are the chief themes. It is essentially a class comedy with comic implications arising from patterns of social class divisions. Every class had its typical pattern of conduct and to affect the mannerisms of a higher class had comic implications. Etherege's *Comical Revenge* has four plots associated with the noble class, a genteel society plot, a low comedy plot and a servant class plot. The background was the fashionable spots of London city. It dealt with urbane society and made fun of country simpletons and rustics. It is a fashionable world of the “beau-monde” where love and sex are freely spoken of. It is the world of high fashion, of women using cosmetics of “hog's bones and hare's gall” (IV.1,216-17). The social world is important: Millamant is the “sole empress of my tea table” and hers is the “dominion of the tea-table” (IV. 1,192,228). Conversation hence is an important ingredient of the social world. Dryden in Preface to *An Evening's Love* writes that repartee is the very essence of conversation. The dialogue is cool and witty. Congreve is the master of brilliant wit which he defines as “an epitomizer of words” and “a retailer of phrases”. (IV.1,295,298). Millamant is the wittiest heroine in Restoration Comedy. Congreve's wit is subtle, the repartee pungent, and the humorous effect is dazzling. Millamant wittily says:

“What is a lover...one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases; and then, if one pleases, one makes more” (II.1,352-55).

Restoration Comedy rejects the idealised romanticism of Shakespearean Comedy. It replaces ‘wooing’ with ‘solicitation’. Charlton in *Shakespearean Comedy* explains that solicitation is a conventional social institution whereas wooing is a magical and mystical experience. Millamant declares: “I'll be solicited” (IV.1,137). Hence there is a hard and cynical nonchalant attitude to feelings and emotions. Life seems to be a frivolous game for the polite society. Although the married women freely indulge in sex, the well-bred heroine remains chaste. The married state, “scurvy wedlock”, is a matter for derision and mockery (III. 1, 532). Marriage was a convenience usually economic and extra-marital affairs became a source of intrigue in these comedies. Etherege says that “a single intrigue in love is as dull in a single plot in a play” (Baugh,766). There is a lot of intrigue and multiplicity of plot and this adds to the diversity and entertainment value of these plays.

Love is primarily treated as a physical appetite. The amorous old woman and the Rake are stock characters. Lady Touchwood pursues her husband's nephew and Lady Wishfort would have liked her niece's lover. They have unseasonable appetite. In Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, Dorimant the rake says: “Next to the coming to a good understanding with a new Mistress, I love a quarrel with the old one” (Baugh,766). Hence there is an element of licentiousness in Restoration Comedy.

Stock characters of Restoration Comedy are the well-bred, witty and rich heroine, her gallant, the fops to the gallant, female fops, witless country folk, amorous married women. It presents the ‘new woman’ who is equal to her male counterpart. Millamant wants “my dear Liberty” (IV.1,157). Congreve's heroine is the new woman: independent, frank and fearless to choose or reject her lover or husband. The heroine is beautiful, chaste and uninhibited. The gallants are well-bred gentlemen who solicit the heroine's attentions and love. The gallant was genuinely witty or a ‘true wit’. There was also the ‘gentleman's gentleman’ who was comic because he was more dignified and well-informed than his master. Congreve's Waitwell and Jeremy are two such examples prefiguring Jeeves the famous butler: the conversations between the gentlemen and their waiting men are very humorous. The fool's counterpart in Restoration Comedy was the ‘fop’ or foil to the gallant hero. These fops tried to imitate the dress, breeding and elegance of the gallants and become ridiculously comic figures. Sir Fopling Flutter is a memorable fop of the mode of dress. The fop who tried to be witty like the gallant was termed a ‘false wit’. Dapperwit of Wycherley and Congreve's Witwoud are notable false wits. Wycherley writes that “every wit has his cully” (Baugh,767). There were also female fops who tried to cultivate the grace, wit and poise of the heroines. Lady Fidget, Lady Plyant and Lady Wishfort are some famous examples. Also, there was the witless character or country simpleton who was continuously being gulled by the town or city people. Farquhar aptly sums up that “a play without a beau, cully, cuckold, or coquette” is poor entertainment (Baugh,777).

The Way of the World exhibits an array of characters staple to the genre, nevertheless interesting in their vitality, and whose manners and conduct justify the title of the play. The plot is intricate and complex with the entanglement of relationships, and amorous interests and play, legacy issues on account of complicated Wills, intrigues arising due to this complicatedness. The action takes place in the fashionable haunts of the ‘beau monde’ in London: the Chocolate House, St. James Park and the large mansion of Lady Wishfort. A rich aristocratic widow, Lady Wishfort, has a widowed daughter Arabella Lovelace now married to the retrograde villain Mr. Fainall who enjoys an illicit relationship with the middle aged Mrs. Marwood who in turn is a close friend of Lady Wishfort. Millamant is Lady Wishfort's niece and she is the legal custodian of Millamant's fortunes and could withhold it if her niece made an unacceptable marriage. The lady also has two nephews: Witwoud living in London and vying for Millamant's hand; Sir Wilfull Witwoud is his half-brother and is a country gentleman visiting London en route to the Continent for a jaunt. Mirabell the young and polished hero and society gentleman is keen to marry Millamant and has a history of amorous engagements with Lady Wishfort, her daughter Arabella, and her friend Marwood. Mirabell's strange and convoluted machinations of his situation with Lady Wishfort land him in trouble, with the lady resolving to ruin him. Not to be outdone, Mirabell cooks up an ingenious

plan to masquerade his servant Waitwell as Sir Rowland and woo Lady Wishfort out of his path. Mirabell had engineered the marriage between his cast-off pregnant mistress Arabella, and his companion-- the disreputable, opportunistic Mr. Fainall. The insidious couple Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood plot to acquire the fortunes of Lady Wishfort, of her daughter's and of Millamant. Fainall suspecting his wife to be still carrying on her affair with Mirabell, threatens Lady Wishfort with dire consequences of turning Arabella out on the streets and casting ignominy on them. At the height of this imbroglio, Mirabell in furtherance of his intrigue, produces a Black Box proving the true identity of 'Sir Rowland' to be his obedient servant, Waitwell, married to her servant Foible and so a harmless prop. But Mirabell redeems himself as an honest gentleman who had taken pains to legally ensure that Arabella's fortunes would only belong to her and also offers to negotiate peace with her husband Fainall. Lady Wishfort in gratitude, grants permission for the marriage of Millamant to Mirabell.

Millamant and Mirabell come across as a modern couple negotiating their way to marriage. Millamant has given a good deal of thought to marriage given the scenario of tottering marriages and predatory sexuality she witnesses around her. Elegant, rich with high status, witty and well-read she deliberately wears the mask of a cruel beauty, whimsical and indifferent towards her innumerable suitors while all the time gauging their true worth and intentions. Mirabell appears to her to be on the same plane: handsome, well-read, suave, with a ready responsive wit and a certain sensitiveness. She mocks him for his sententious views and yet sighs that "if Mirabell should not make a good husband, I am a lost thing—for I find I love him violently" (IV.1,273-4). A sophisticated society girl, she is well aware of his rakish escapades and acts pragmatically. When she senses his genuine feelings towards her, she throws down her armour and frankly puts her cards on the table laying down her expectations in marriage. In the famous Proviso Scene, she negotiates her space in the married relationship. She desires to preserve her intellectual and other freedoms of maintaining her individuality. Mirabell has only one condition that she be forever her natural and graceful self. Mirabell comes across as the reformed rake who too was somewhat out of sync with the cynical outlook of his social milieu: "I banish all foreign forces" of fashionable excesses and entreats her to maintain her "own face", to "restrain yourself to native and simple" habits: "these provisos admitted, in other things I may prove a tractable and complying husband" (IV. 1,212,229-241). They hope to be parents "with a blessing on our endeavours" (IV.1,223).

CONCLUSION

Restoration Comedy has been castigated by Jeremy Collier as immoral and licentious, a branding that still persists. L.C. Knights described them as "trivial, gross and dull" (*Explorations*, 168). Many other critics fault it for its immorality, lack of the essential substance of human emotions and that it is only concerned with the social veneer of a polished emancipated elite society. Charles Lamb famously pronounced it as "the land-- of cuckoldry --- the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is a duty, and the manners perfect freedom" (*Works*, 142-43).

This Comedy of Manners though it may lack moral intention, nevertheless reflects the age vividly, catching its tone and tenor perfectly. Norman Holland, an ardent supporter of this genre calls them "the first modern comedies". The question arises whether Restoration Comedy is an interesting artefact of the lifestyle of the Court coterie of the Restoration era, an unmoded representative of frivolous diversions of the stage, or, is it an insight into the conditions of life? Rather it is a comedy that has contemporary resonances as it springs out of the anxieties of society, gender inequalities and the issue of women's empowerment.

Though Congreve's play was not a stage success in the aftermath of Collier's visceral attack and the turning of the tide of popular taste in favour of Sentimental Comedy, yet it has stood the test of time and is "the triumphant quintessence" of this genre of comedy, writes Norman Holland (FMC, 175). Lytton Strachey ranks it "among the most wonderful and glorious creations of the human mind" (*Portraits*, 49). Congreve is the most brilliant writer of the Comedy of Manners and in the words of Hazlitt: "his style is inimitable, nay perfect...every page presents a shower of brilliant conceits, is a tissue of epigrams in prose, is a new triumph of wit, a new conquest over dulness" (Lecture IV, 71). The affectations of Lady Wishfort, with her hollow emphasis on decorum alternating with her 'boudoir Billingsgate' abusiveness is a figure of pure fun; the pointed and keen exchanges of wit especially between Millamant and Mirabell are to be relished; the gulling of the country squire Sir Wilfull, by his city bred half- brother Witwoud, how the condescending manner of the latter is punctured effectively by the former; the good-heartedness of Sir Wilfull and the integrity of the servants, Foible, Mincing and Waitwell; the pathos of Mrs. Fainall's situation and the dark machinations of Fainall and Marwood are all highly entertaining.

The Way of the World has seen a revival in the theatre today. The **Red Bull Theatre** website had listed a performance of the play on this June 27, at 7.30pm. It was directed by Jessie Berger and the description of the play ran as follows:

"Do money and marriage mix? The pinnacle of riotous Restoration Comedies, Congreve's play is an unexpectedly moving tale of the trials and tribulations of true love and true riches...The wonderful ways of the world---greed, duplicity and lechery—are all on delicious display in this timeless comedy...Representing both the pinnacle and the conclusion of Restoration drama, *The Way of the World* epitomizes the psychology of manner—the way people behave..." (Ref: website).

'Dramaturg's Notes: *The Way of the World*---The Folger Spotlight' has the following write-up for the play:

"Theresa Rebeck's hilarious new play, *The Way of the World*, is loosely adapted from William Congreve's Restoration Classic of the same name. What can a comedy of (bad) manners from 1700 tell us about contemporary society? Folger Resident Dramaturg Michele Osherow offers her insights on Congreve's connection to audiences today...Congreve's plays flaunt both male and female desire, and attend particularly to cravings for cash and copulation". Though it is has not much to do with morality, yet it is not absent from the play. Congreve "makes intelligence sexy...Congreve is our contemporary". The obsession with fashion and appearances resonates with us. Mae, the heroine of this adaptation is "virtuous and disturbingly rich" but she shows resistance to material "objects as well as to her own objectification". Harry the hero is a "cad" greedy for her money but "is startled by the depth of his affection for her" and begins to pursue a goal beyond money; other characters too experience "tiny

epiphanies ...to examine their own imperfect behaviour...the desire to do and be better is potentially heroic...If that's not the way of the world then it should be". (Ref: website). The limitless theatrical possibilities, the frank emancipated discussion about marriage and questions about identity resonates with us today and make high the entertainment value of this Restoration Classic.

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