

The Way of the World by William Congreve

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

William Congreve was one of the most influential playwrights of the English Restoration period, known for his sharp wit and mastery of the comedy of manners. His plays satirized the aristocratic society of his time, exposing hypocrisy, vanity, and the complexities of love and marriage. Congreve refined the genre by introducing sophisticated dialogue, clever wordplay, and nuanced character development. His first major success, *The Old Bachelor* (1693), immediately established him as a leading dramatist. He followed this with *The Double Dealer* and *Love for Love*, both of which continued to explore themes of deception and social pretensions. However, it was *The Way of the World* (1700) that became his most celebrated work, though it was not immediately well received. This play, particularly the famous proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant, offered a brilliant critique of marriage, gender roles, and personal freedom, making it one of the finest examples of Restoration comedy.

Despite his talent, Congreve's career as a playwright was relatively short. The early 18th century saw a decline in the popularity of Restoration drama, as audiences began to favor sentimental comedies over witty, satirical works. Disheartened by this shift and the lukewarm response to *The Way of the World*, Congreve largely withdrew from the theater and focused on other literary pursuits. Nevertheless, his influence endured, and his plays remain some of the most refined and enduring examples of Restoration comedy.

The Way of the World as Restoration Comedy

William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, written in 1700, stands as the most sophisticated achievement of the Comedy of Manners. This sub-genre of Restoration drama flourished in an era that prioritized the "manners"—or the social behavior, speech, and moral codes—of the London aristocracy. While earlier plays of the period often relied on crude situations or "bawdy" humor, Congreve refined the form into a sharp, intellectual satire. It is essential to recognize that the play does not just depict society; it critiques the artificiality of a world where one's status is determined more by the sharpness of their tongue than the goodness of their heart.

At the center of this social critique is the concept of 'wit'. In the world of the play, wit is the ultimate currency. Congreve distinguishes between 'Truewits' like the protagonists Mirabell and Millamant, and the "Witwouds," such as Anthony Witwoud and Petulant. The truewits possess a genuine, effortless intelligence and use language with precision and grace. Their conversations are not merely dialogue but are structured like a fencing match, where ideas are parried and thrust with elegance. On the other hand, the Witwouds are 'fops' who try too hard to be clever but lack the judgment to carry it off, serving as a satirical reminder that in high society, many people are merely wearing a mask of sophistication.

The play further explores the theme of vanity and the obsession with appearances through the character of Lady Wishfort. As an older woman desperately clinging to her youth, she represents the "superannuated beauty"—a common target in Restoration comedy. Her exaggerated use of cosmetics and her susceptibility to flattery highlight the insecurity of an aristocratic class that fears losing its social power. Through her, Congreve mocks the hypocrisy of a society that demands a perfect public reputation while its members simultaneously engage in secret affairs, blackmail, and financial manipulation. This creates a world where trust is a rare commodity and deception is the standard "way of the world." Perhaps the most significant element is the play's portrayal of marriage as an economic and social contract. In the 18th century, marriage for the upper class was rarely about romantic sentiment; it was a legal arrangement to secure property and inheritance. The entire plot of the play revolves around Millamant's £6,000 fortune. Even though Mirabell and Millamant are genuinely in love, their union cannot proceed without securing this wealth. This reflects the harsh reality of the time: love without

financial stability was considered impractical, and marriage was often a strategic battleground where men sought to control women's assets.

This battleground is most famously depicted in the "Proviso Scene," where Millamant and Mirabell negotiate the terms of their future life together. Unlike traditional brides of the era, Millamant refuses to be submissive. She sets specific conditions—her "provisos"—demanding her own tea table, the right to choose her own friends, and total privacy within her home. Mirabell, in turn, sets his own conditions, and their agreement transforms marriage from a hierarchy into a partnership of sorts. This scene is revolutionary because it asserts female agency and independence within a social structure that usually denied women both.

Ultimately, *The Way of the World* serves as the pinnacle of the Comedy of Manners because it balances biting satire with a more refined moral outlook than its predecessors. While it exposes the corruption and greed of the elite, it rewards characters who possess both wit and a sense of self-respect. It marks the transition from the scandalous plays of the late 17th century to a more thoughtful, polished form of theater. By understanding these layers of wit, financial realism, and gender dynamics, one can see why Congreve's work remains the definitive portrait of a society where everyone is playing a game, and only the most clever can win.

Some key quotes from the play:

On Wit and the Power of Language

These quotes illustrate how intelligence and "wit" are used as social weapons and indicators of status.

- **Millamant:** *"One no more owes one's beauty to a lover than one's wit to an echo."*
 - **Context:** She asserts that her brilliance and beauty are hers alone; a man's praise doesn't create them, it only reflects them.
- **Mirabell (to Millamant):** *"You would affect a cruelty which is not in your nature; your true vanity is in the power of pleasing."*
 - **Context:** Mirabell sees through the social "mask" of the distant, cruel lady that Millamant pretends to be.
- **Witwoud:** *"I had like to have lost my comparison for want of breath."*
 - **Context:** This shows the "Witwoud" (false wit) character. He is more concerned with finding a clever metaphor than with the actual meaning of the conversation.

On Vanity and Social Satire

These quotes are perfect for discussing Lady Wishfort and the obsession with appearances.

- **Lady Wishfort:** *"I look like an old peeled wall. Thou must repair me, Foible, before Sir Rowland comes."*
 - **Context:** A hilarious and biting look at her vanity. She views her own face as an architectural project to be "fixed" with makeup to deceive a suitor.
- **Mirabell:** *"An old woman is to be flattered... unless a man should endeavor downright personally to debauch her."*
 - **Context:** Highlighting the hypocrisy of the era—that the only way to get what you want from the older generation is through extreme (and often false) flattery.

On the Financial Reality of Marriage

These show that beneath the romance lies a very cold, hard business deal.

- **Fainall:** *"I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune than I'd make love to a woman who undervalued the loss of her reputation."*

- **Context:** Fainall views both gambling and love as games of risk where "reputation" (social capital) is the only thing that matters.
- **Mirabell:** *"Courtship is to marriage, as a very witty prologue to a very dull play."*
 - **Context:** A cynical view of the era—suggesting that while the "chase" is exciting and witty, the actual marriage is often a boring, stagnant contract.

The Proviso Scene (Independence and Agency)

- **Millamant:** *"My dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you then adieu?"*
 - **Context:** She laments the loss of her single life, showing that she values her mental freedom more than the status of being a wife.
- **Millamant:** *"I may by degrees dwindle into a wife."*
 - **Context:** One of the most famous lines in English drama. She views traditional marriage not as a "growth," but as a "dwindling" or shrinking of her personality.
- **Mirabell:** *"I covenant that your acquaintance be general... that you admit no sworn confidante or intimate of your own sex."*
 - **Context:** Using legal language (*covenant*), Mirabell treats the marriage like a treaty, showing the blend of love and legalism.

THE PROVISO SCENE

In *The Way of the World*, the 'proviso scene' stands as a landmark moment where the protagonists, Mirabell and Millamant, engage in a witty and strategic negotiation over the terms of their future marriage. This scene departs dramatically from the conventional love declarations of the era, focusing instead on Millamant's assertive demand for personal freedom. She insists that she must be allowed to have a say in her own affairs, not be subjected to Mirabell's excessive authority. Her clever demands reflect the Restoration era's evolving views on love and marriage, where women, particularly in comedies of manners, were beginning to challenge the rigid expectations placed upon them. Mirabell, while willing to agree to some of her requests, also presents his own conditions, emphasizing the need for mutual respect and fidelity. This exchange is not merely a humorous battle of wits but also an insightful commentary on relationships, suggesting that a successful marriage should be built on negotiation and mutual understanding rather than blind submission. The scene is significant because it highlights Millamant's intelligence and independence, setting her apart from conventional female characters of the time. It also reinforces Mirabell's role as a progressive male protagonist who values his partner's consent. Their verbal duel is not a conflict but a sophisticated dance of courtship, leading to a marriage based on respect rather than control.

Through this pivotal scene, Congreve masterfully critiques the social norms of his time, using humor and sharp dialogue to present an ideal of marriage that is ahead of its time. The proviso scene remains one of the most celebrated moments in Restoration comedy, showcasing Congreve's keen understanding of human relationships and his ability to blend wit with deeper social commentary. Congreve's keen understanding of human nature and his willingness to challenge societal norms contribute to the enduring relevance and significance of this remarkable dramatic moment.

How does the play reflect the changing attitudes toward marriage and relationships during the Restoration period?

The Way of the World beautifully captures the shifting attitudes toward marriage and relationships at the close of the Restoration period. By 1700, English society was no longer fully in the grip of the wild, libertine spirit that had defined the early years after Charles II's return. Throughout most of the drama, we still see the classic Restoration view of marriage as essentially a mercenary contract. Characters treat wedlock primarily as a means of securing money, property, status, or sexual convenience. Fainall, for example, has married Lady Wishfort's daughter solely for her fortune, and he is busy plotting with his mistress Mrs. Marwood to cheat his wife out of even more wealth. Lady Wishfort herself regards marriage as an instrument of control and social maneuvering, desperately trying to arrange matches that will preserve her own power and vanity. In the background of the play runs the familiar Restoration assumption that love is often secondary, that husbands and wives routinely deceive one another, and that appearances and self-interest govern relationships far more than genuine affection. This world is still one in which marriage can feel like a trap or a battlefield rather than a union of hearts.

Yet Congreve quietly introduces something fresher and more hopeful through the central couple, Mirabell and Millamant. Their relationship stands apart from the mercenary games around them. They genuinely care for each other, and their affection is built on mutual intelligence, respect, and admiration rather than lust alone or financial calculation. The most striking expression of this newer attitude comes in the famous proviso scene in Act IV. Here, instead of rushing into marriage with romantic declarations or cynical bargains, the two lovers sit down and calmly, wittily negotiate the terms on which they are willing to live together as husband and wife. Millamant, in particular, speaks with remarkable independence. She refuses to be "dwindled" into a conventional, submissive wife who loses all individuality after the wedding. She insists on keeping her own friends, her own hours, her own habits, her own liberty to receive visitors and go about as she pleases. She will not allow Mirabell to dictate her behavior or force her into artificial roles. Mirabell, in turn, makes his own reasonable requests—he asks her not to paint her face too heavily or to become overly affected—and both of them listen, bargain, and ultimately agree to a set of mutual conditions. The tone remains playful and teasing, yet beneath the banter lies a serious recognition: marriage should not mean the erasure of one person by the other. It should be a partnership in which both retain dignity, freedom, and self-respect.

This conversation marks a clear departure from the earlier Restoration habit of treating women as property or prizes. Millamant is no passive heroine waiting to be claimed; she is a match for Mirabell in wit and spirit, and she demands to be treated as an equal. Their relationship points toward a more modern ideal in which love is rational, companionate, and based on esteem rather than domination or mere physical desire. Congreve does not preach or sentimentalize—he keeps the lightness and sharpness of Restoration comedy—but he quietly suggests that intelligence and mutual consideration can produce a happier and more enduring bond than the old patterns of deceit and greed.

In this way, *The Way of the World* stands at the turning point of the period. It still delights in exposing the hypocrisy, vanity, and materialism of fashionable society, yet it also offers a refined, optimistic alternative through Mirabell and Millamant. The play gently criticizes the harsher "way of the world" while holding out the possibility of something better: a marriage grounded in wit, trust, and equality rather than calculation or coercion.

HOW DOES CONGREVE REDEFINE THE IDEA OF A "HERO" THROUGH THE CHARACTER OF MIRABELL?

In William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, the character of Mirabell represents a subtle but significant redefinition of the traditional Restoration hero. Earlier Restoration comedies often celebrated the rake as the central male figure—a charming, cynical libertine who pursued pleasure, seduced women without remorse, and triumphed through wit, manipulation, and a complete disregard for conventional morality. This hero embodied the era's reaction against Puritan restraint, reveling in sexual conquests, deception, and self-interest as marks of sophistication. Congreve, writing at the very end of the period, moves away from this pure rake figure by refining and moralizing the archetype through Mirabell, creating a more balanced, principled gentleman who navigates the corrupt "way of the world" without fully succumbing to its vices. Mirabell retains many of the attractive qualities of the classic Restoration hero: he is fashionable, intellectually sharp, socially adept, and experienced in the ways of love and intrigue. He has had past affairs, including one with Mrs. Fainall, and he devises elaborate schemes, such as the disguise of his servant Waitwell as Sir Rowland to deceive Lady Wishfort and secure Millamant's fortune. These traits show that he is no naive innocent—he understands and even employs the cynical games of high society, using wit and foresight to

outsmarts opponents like Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Yet Congreve distinguishes him sharply from true villains or mere rakes by giving him genuine moral restraint and a capacity for authentic affection. Unlike Fainall, whose cynicism leads to malice and exploitation, Mirabell uses his cleverness responsibly. His schemes serve a higher purpose: winning Millamant through honorable means rather than pure self-gratification, and protecting the vulnerable, such as safeguarding Mrs. Fainall's estate in trust long before the plot unfolds.

The most striking evidence of this redefinition appears in Mirabell's relationship with Millamant, particularly in the proviso scene. Here, the hero does not seek to dominate or "conquer" his beloved in the libertine sense; instead, he engages her as an equal in a rational, witty negotiation of marriage terms. He listens to her demands for independence and personal freedom, offers his own reasonable conditions, and accepts a partnership based on mutual respect, trust, and esteem rather than possession or coercion. This contrasts sharply with the predatory, conquest-driven romances of earlier Restoration heroes. Mirabell's love is passionate yet controlled—he values Millamant's faults because he knows them intimately, and he seeks a balanced union that preserves individuality on both sides. Through this portrayal, Congreve suggests that true heroism in a flawed society lies not in ruthless libertinism but in combining worldly intelligence with ethical calibration, generosity, and a commitment to decency. Ultimately, Mirabell emerges as Congreve's ideal gentleman: a descendant of the rake who has evolved into something more refined and forward-looking. He accepts the necessities of social maneuvering but resists its dehumanizing extremes, demonstrating that sophistication and morality need not be incompatible. In doing so, Congreve gently critiques the excesses of Restoration comedy while offering a more hopeful model of manhood—one that anticipates the shift toward greater moral seriousness and companionate relationships in eighteenth-century literature. Mirabell is victorious not merely through clever trickery but through a deeper integrity that allows him to thrive in a hypocritical world without losing his humanity.

How does the subplot involving Waitwell and Foible contribute to the main plot?

The subplot involving Waitwell and Foible plays a vital role in advancing and resolving the main plot of *The Way of the World*. It is not merely comic relief or a side story; Congreve weaves it tightly into the central action, making it essential for Mirabell's success in winning Millamant and her fortune. The main plot centers on Mirabell's desire to marry Millamant, who is under the guardianship of her aunt, Lady Wishfort. Lady Wishfort hates Mirabell because of his earlier mockery of her, and she controls Millamant's inheritance. She refuses to consent to the match and even tries to force Millamant into marrying the foolish Sir Wilfull Witwoud instead. To overcome this obstacle, Mirabell devises an elaborate scheme: he arranges for his loyal servant Waitwell to disguise himself as Sir Rowland, a wealthy uncle Mirabell supposedly has, and to woo and propose marriage to Lady Wishfort. The plan is to let Lady Wishfort believe she is about to marry this rich suitor, then reveal the deception at the right moment—showing that she has nearly committed bigamy and social disgrace by marrying a servant. In exchange for Mirabell's promise to keep the humiliation secret, Lady Wishfort will have no choice but to approve his marriage to Millamant and release the fortune.

The subplot with Waitwell and Foible supports this scheme in several key ways. First, Mirabell has Waitwell and Foible (Lady Wishfort's trusted maid) secretly married at the beginning of the play. This marriage is a clever safeguard: it ensures Waitwell's loyalty and prevents him from betraying Mirabell by actually trying to marry Lady Wishfort for real and claim her wealth. With Foible as his wife, Waitwell is bound to Mirabell through shared interest and affection. Second, Foible becomes Mirabell's inside agent in Lady Wishfort's household. As the lady's personal maid, she has easy access and influence. She plants the idea of Sir Rowland's arrival, flatters her mistress into believing the suitor is genuine, feeds her vanity with lies about Mirabell's supposed insults, and keeps the deception going by managing Lady Wishfort's preparations and emotions. Without Foible's active participation—convincing her mistress, smoothing over suspicions, and even intercepting dangers like Mrs. Marwood's revealing letter—the Sir Rowland plot would collapse almost immediately.

The subplot also adds layers of comedy and irony while reinforcing the play's themes. Waitwell and Foible are lower-class characters who mirror the wit and cunning of their betters, showing that cleverness is not limited to the aristocracy. Their genuine affection contrasts with the mercenary marriages and affairs among the upper class, providing a small, warm counterpoint to the cynicism elsewhere. Their scenes bring lively humor—Waitwell's nervousness in his disguise, Foible's quick thinking, their teasing banter—and heighten the farce when the scheme nearly unravels. In the end, when Fainall and Mrs. Marwood expose the disguise and have Waitwell arrested, the subplot's threads help Mirabell turn the tables. Mirabell reveals his trump card: he had earlier secured Mrs. Fainall's (Lady Wishfort's daughter) property in trust to protect her from Fainall's schemes. This, combined with the humiliation Lady Wishfort has already suffered through the Sir Rowland plot (which Foible and Waitwell enabled), forces a resolution. Lady Wishfort, desperate to avoid further scandal, consents to Mirabell and Millamant's marriage.

Thus, the subplot of Waitwell-Foible is integral: it drives the main intrigue forward, provides the mechanism for Mirabell's victory, supplies comic energy, and underscores the play's satire on social hierarchy, deception, and the power of wit across classes. Without it, Mirabell's plan would lack both the practical means and the delightful complexity that make *The Way of the World* a masterpiece of Restoration comedy.

Discuss the significance of money and inheritance in the play. How does wealth influence relationships and decisions?

In *The Way of the World* by William Congreve, money and inheritance are central to the plot and to the relationships between characters. Unlike tragedies where wealth leads to violence, in this Restoration comedy money influences marriage, love, and social behaviour in a clever and satirical way. Almost every important decision in the play is connected to property, fortune, or financial security.

The main issue in the play is Millamant's inheritance. She will receive a large fortune of six thousand pounds only if she marries with the approval of her aunt, Lady Wishfort. If she marries without her aunt's consent, she loses half of her fortune. This condition makes marriage a financial contract rather than a purely romantic choice. Mirabell loves Millamant, but he also knows that her wealth is important for their future security. Therefore, he carefully plans a strategy to win Lady Wishfort's approval so that Millamant can receive her full inheritance. Lady Wishfort herself is deeply influenced by money and property. She controls Millamant's fortune and uses it as a tool of power. She tries to arrange marriages to maintain control and protect her own interests. Her fear of losing authority shows how wealth creates tension even within families. In this way, inheritance becomes a source of manipulation and conflict.

Other characters are also motivated by financial gain. Fainall marries Mrs. Fainall mainly for her money, and later he attempts to blackmail Lady Wishfort in order to gain control over her property. His actions show greed and moral corruption. Marriage, in his case, becomes a business transaction rather than a relationship based on love. However, Congreve does not present money only negatively. Through the famous 'Proviso Scene' between Mirabell and Millamant, we see that they try to balance love and independence. Millamant wants freedom within marriage, and Mirabell agrees to her conditions. Their relationship suggests that love and financial security can coexist, but only with mutual respect and understanding.

Overall, in *The Way of the World*, wealth strongly influences relationships and decisions. Marriage is closely linked with inheritance and social status. Congreve satirizes a society where love is often mixed with calculation and financial interest. The play shows that in Restoration society, money shapes behaviour, power, and even personal emotions, making it one of the most important forces in the world of the play.