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William Congreve's Dramatic Art and Style in *The Way of the World*

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Abstract

William Congreve's *The Way of the World* is one of the finest examples of Restoration comedy and the comedy of manners. The play presents a realistic picture of fashionable London society, particularly its moral corruption, artificial behaviour, complicated love relationships, and unstable attitudes towards marriage. This paper examines Congreve's dramatic art and literary style, with special attention to his wit, humour, satire, characterisation, dialogue, and poetic prose. It also considers the suitability of the title and the charge that the play is immoral. Although the drama portrays an immoral social world, Congreve's purpose is not simply to promote immorality but to represent and satirise the manners and conduct of his age. The characters of Mirabell, Millamant, Lady Wishfort, Mrs. Marwood, Mrs. Fainall, Waitwell, and Foible reveal different aspects of Restoration society. The paper argues that Congreve's dialogue is not merely ornamental but performs important dramatic functions by developing the plot, revealing character, and sustaining the comic spirit of the play. His balanced sentences, poetic expressions, witty comparisons, and refined language give the drama lasting literary value. Thus, *The Way of the World* demonstrates Congreve's mastery of dramatic construction, comic characterisation, and elegant prose style.

Keywords: Comedy, Humor, Vanity, Marriage, Money, Desire

The Way of the World is a comedy written by William Congreve and first performed in 1700. It is widely studied as a representative example of Restoration comedy and the comedy of manners ("William Congreve"). The play is interesting, witty, playful, humorous, and realistic. The title *The Way of the World* may initially appear only partly justified because the drama does not portray the whole world; it mainly presents a fashionable circle in London during Congreve's time. From another perspective, however, the title possesses a wider significance because vanity, deception,

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 1 & Issue 2 (April 2019)

sexual intrigue, selfishness, and conflicts over marriage and property are not limited to one place or period. The title also receives direct emphasis near the end of the play when Mirabell describes his legal arrangement as “the way of the world” and, more specifically, “of the widows of the world” (Congreve 5.13).

Congreve wrote during the Restoration period, and *The Way of the World* reflects the manners, habits, and social conventions associated with Restoration comedy. More precisely, the play depicts a fashionable upper-class world marked by adultery, secret relationships, financial calculation, social pretence, and complicated negotiations over marriage rather than the conduct of every person in London (“William Congreve”; Congreve 2.1, 2.4, 5.10).

The play’s representation of sexual and moral disorder has led some critics to judge Congreve and Restoration comedy in strongly moral terms. Jean Gagen observes that Mirabell, in particular, has often been treated as a rake or morally reprehensible figure, even though such a reading may misunderstand Congreve’s design (422). The existence of immoral characters and actions, however, does not necessarily make the play itself an endorsement of immorality. Congreve presents a social world in which wit, desire, money, marriage, and reputation frequently conflict, allowing the comedy to expose as well as entertain (“William Congreve”).

Mrs. Marwood secretly desires Mirabell, while Mrs. Fainall’s earlier relationship with him is revealed through her private conversation with Mirabell. Mirabell, however, seeks to marry Millamant and devises a plan to secure Lady Wishfort’s consent and preserve Millamant’s fortune (Congreve 2.1, 2.4). Lady Wishfort is a wealthy, middle-aged widow who strongly desires to marry again, and her eagerness makes her vulnerable to Mirabell’s scheme.

As part of that scheme, Mirabell arranges for his servant Waitwell to disguise himself as Sir Rowland and court Lady Wishfort. Waitwell and Foible are first married so that the false marriage with Lady Wishfort can later be invalidated, and the disguised Waitwell then performs the role of an impatient elderly suitor (Congreve 2.4, 2.8–9, 4.12). Mrs. Marwood eventually exposes the deception through a letter delivered while Lady Wishfort is entertaining the supposed Sir Rowland (Congreve 4.15).

After discovering the truth, Lady Wishfort becomes furious with Foible because the maid has cooperated with Mirabell and Waitwell. Her anger erupts in the highly theatrical command, “Out of my house, out of my house, thou viper, thou serpent that I have fostered, thou bosom traitress that I raised from nothing!” (Congreve 5.1). The scene is comic because of the exaggeration and verbal energy of Lady Wishfort’s abuse, but it also reveals the intensity of her humiliation.

Lady Wishfort is therefore both laughable and pitiable. Anthony Kaufman explains that her language separates her from the social norm: her passionate invective is vigorous and pictorial, while the elevated style she adopts with Sir Rowland becomes inflated and absurd (414–15). Her speech exposes vanity, loneliness, desire, social insecurity, and wounded pride, giving the character a degree of psychological as well as comic interest.

The play is full of brilliant dialogue, witty remarks, paradoxical statements, and poetic expressions. Millamant says that she converses with fools for her health (Congreve 2.6). Mirabell provocatively claims that “beauty is the lover’s gift,” while Millamant answers that a woman “makes lovers as fast as one pleases” (Congreve 2.5). Such exchanges fill the play with mirth, gaiety, humour, satire, and verbal play while also dramatizing conflicts over love, vanity, independence, and social power.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 1 & Issue 2 (April 2019)

Congreve's Art and Style in *The Way of the World*

Congreve is a master of comic style and dialogue. Charles H. Hinnant argues that the play's verbal wit is not valuable merely because it charms the audience; its different styles also enable the audience to distinguish true wit from affected wit and to judge the propriety of each speaker's language (373–79). Kaufman similarly maintains that the comedy is structured through a counterpoint of voices and that the characters' distinct ways of speaking reveal their personalities, create dramatic conflict, and establish a moral perspective (411–12).

The dialogue is therefore functional rather than merely ornamental. It advances the plot, reveals motives, defines relationships, distinguishes intelligence from pretension, and sustains the comic tone. The speeches of Mirabell and Millamant display intelligence, irony, and self-awareness, whereas the language of characters such as Witwoud, Petulant, Fainall, and Lady Wishfort exposes different forms of affectation, sterility, malice, or self-deception (Kaufman 412–15).

The characters are largely known through their speech. Congreve does not give every person the same kind of wit; instead, each character's language reflects temperament, intelligence, social ambition, and moral disposition. Kaufman notes that the major characters are defined by "individual and distinct language," and he identifies this differentiation as one of Congreve's principal stylistic achievements (412). Thus, dialogue performs the work of characterisation that action alone cannot accomplish.

Congreve sustains the audience's interest less through spectacular action than through verbal conflict, intricate plotting, and intelligent conversation. His language is precise, fluent, and dramatically purposeful. The play's witty exchanges are not isolated decorations; they form part of a larger pattern in which style becomes a means of measuring sincerity, judgement, self-knowledge, and social belonging (Hinnant 373–85).

Congreve's prose frequently approaches poetry through rhythm, imagery, balance, antithesis, paradox, and elaborate comparison. Its elegance does not eliminate dramatic force: the language can be light and playful in the exchanges between Mirabell and Millamant, threatening in Fainall's legal and financial demands, mechanically affected in Witwoud's comparisons, or excessive and pictorial in Lady Wishfort's invective (Kaufman 412–15; Hinnant 376–85). A passage spoken by Mirabell illustrates the imaginative and rhythmic qualities of Congreve's prose:

Gone! Think of you? To think of a whirlwind, though 'twere in a whirlwind, were a case of more steady contemplation, a very tranquillity of mind and mansion. A fellow that lives in a windmill has not a more whimsical dwelling than the heart of a man that is lodged in a woman. (Congreve 2.7)

The comparison is witty, imaginative, and poetic. Mirabell compares the changing movement of a whirlwind with the instability he associates with a lover's heart. The image of a man living in a windmill converts an abstract complaint about emotional uncertainty into a vivid comic picture. This union of figurative language and dramatic character is central to Congreve's style (Hinnant 373–75).

Millamant's statement, "Besides, sometimes to converse with fools is for my health," is another example of Congreve's compact wit (Congreve 2.6). The line converts social boredom into mock medicine: fools become a treatment for the "vapours." Its humour depends upon brevity, irony, and Millamant's confidence in her own intellectual superiority.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 1 & Issue 2 (April 2019)

The dialogue between Lady Wishfort and Waitwell is also highly entertaining. Lady Wishfort attempts to express passion and dignity in elevated language, while Waitwell, disguised as Sir Rowland, answers her with exaggerated urgency. Kaufman observes that this adopted “high-style” becomes false and absurd because it conflicts with Lady Wishfort’s actual motives and emotional condition (415). She tells the supposed Sir Rowland:

You have excess of gallantry, Sir Rowland, and press things to a conclusion with a most prevailing vehemence. But a day or two for decency of marriage— (Congreve 4.12)

Waitwell replies, “For decency of funeral, madam! The delay will break my heart—or if that should fail, I shall be poisoned” (Congreve 4.12). The scene becomes especially funny because the audience knows that Sir Rowland is actually a servant performing a role. Congreve creates dramatic irony by allowing the spectators to understand the deception while Lady Wishfort remains absorbed in the fantasy of courtship.

Thus, Congreve’s dramatic art is displayed through witty and functional dialogue, rhythmic prose, vivid characterisation, comic disguise, verbal irony, and the realistic yet stylised presentation of Restoration society. The play’s variety of voices gives its characters individuality while also enabling the audience to distinguish genuine intelligence from affectation and malice (Kaufman 411–15; Hinnant 373–85). These qualities make *The Way of the World* a major example of the English comedy of manners.

Conclusion

The Way of the World clearly demonstrates William Congreve’s mastery as a dramatist and stylist. Through the play, he presents a vivid picture of fashionable Restoration society, including its artificial manners, romantic intrigues, financial calculations, and complicated attitudes towards love and marriage. Although the title initially appears limited because the action concerns a particular social circle, it also acquires a broader meaning through its representation of vanity, deception, self-interest, and the recurring conflicts of social life (Congreve 5.13).

The play should not be regarded as morally empty merely because it contains immoral characters and situations. Its comedy exposes the weaknesses, desires, pretensions, and contradictions of its society, while Mirabell and Millamant display a greater degree of intelligence and self-awareness than many of the people around them. Gagen’s defence of Mirabell as a figure shaped by the ideals of the gentleman further demonstrates that the play’s moral structure is more complex than a simple celebration of libertinism (422–27).

The greatest strength of the play lies in its dialogue. Congreve uses conversation to develop the plot, reveal character, create humour, and distinguish true wit from affectation. His prose is balanced, imaginative, polished, and adaptable to different dramatic purposes. Lady Wishfort’s pictorial invective, Millamant’s concise irony, Mirabell’s elaborate comparisons, and Fainall’s threatening formalism show how language becomes the principal instrument of characterisation and conflict (Kaufman 411–15; Hinnant 373–85).

Thus, Congreve’s art in *The Way of the World* is marked by refined wit, skilful characterisation, functional dialogue, social satire, rhythmic language, and elegant style. These qualities establish the play as a major achievement of Restoration drama and one of the most enduring comedies of manners in English literature.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 1 & Issue 2(April 2019)

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