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Wit, Marriage, and Moral Consciousness in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*

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Abstract

William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) is widely regarded as the most accomplished comedy of the Restoration period, combining intellectual brilliance with ethical seriousness. Unlike earlier Restoration plays that glorified libertinism and sexual license, Congreve's drama presents a restrained yet penetrating critique of aristocratic society. This paper explores how Congreve interrogates marriage, wit, and social conduct in a world governed by property, reputation, and performance. Marriage is portrayed as a legal and economic contract, yet the relationship between Mirabell and Millamant offers a progressive alternative based on equality and mutual consent. The famous proviso scene becomes central to understanding feminine agency and negotiated marital identity. Using a textual and socio-historical methodology, the study argues that Congreve neither idealizes nor condemns Restoration society but exposes its contradictions with moral clarity. The play's enduring relevance lies in its balanced vision of intelligence, ethics, and social responsibility.

Keywords: Restoration Comedy, Congreve, Wit, Marriage, Gender, Social Satire

Introduction

William Congreve occupies a unique position in the history of English drama. Writing at the close of the Restoration era, he refined the comedy of manners into a form that combined elegance, psychological depth, and moral inquiry. *The Way of the World* is not merely a comedy of intrigue; it is a social document that reflects the anxieties and values of late seventeenth-century England.

Earlier Restoration comedies by writers such as Wycherley and Etherege often celebrated sexual freedom and cynical attitudes toward marriage. Congreve, however, introduces restraint and introspection into the genre. His characters are witty, but wit is no longer purely playful; it becomes a measure of moral intelligence. This paper argues that *The Way of the World* represents a mature stage of Restoration comedy where wit, ethics, and social awareness coexist.

Review of Literature

Critical responses to *The Way of the World* have been diverse and evolving. Early critics such as Bonamy Dobree viewed the play as the height of aristocratic refinement, praising its verbal brilliance and social elegance. Thomas H. Fujimura emphasized the ethical seriousness beneath the play's wit, arguing that Congreve sought to reform rather than merely entertain.

Feminist critics have focused on Millamant's character, particularly her proviso speech, interpreting it as an early articulation of female autonomy within marriage. Modern critics also examine the play through New Historicist and cultural materialist perspectives, emphasizing marriage as a reflection of property relations and legal structures in Restoration England. These varied interpretations confirm the play's richness and its capacity to sustain multiple critical approaches.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To analyze marriage as a social, legal, and economic institution in *The Way of the World*.

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2. To examine the role of wit as a marker of moral and intellectual superiority.
3. To explore feminine agency through Millamant and other female characters.
4. To evaluate Congreve's ethical vision of Restoration society.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of *The Way of the World*, supported by historical and socio-cultural context. The primary text is analyzed in relation to Restoration marriage customs, gender norms, and theatrical conventions. Secondary sources from Restoration criticism, feminist theory, and literary history are used to strengthen the interpretation.

Restoration Society and Social Background

The Restoration period witnessed profound social changes. The reopening of theatres after the Puritan ban led to a vibrant dramatic culture. Marriage during this period was largely governed by property, inheritance laws, and social alliances. Women's legal identities were subsumed under their husbands, making marriage a crucial economic decision.

The Way of the World reflects this reality through its emphasis on settlements, dowries, and legal documents. Congreve situates personal relationships within broader social and economic frameworks, revealing the transactional nature of aristocratic life.

Marriage as a Social Contract

Marriage in *The Way of the World* is rarely portrayed as romantic. Lady Wishfort seeks marriage to secure social validation, while Fainall views it as an opportunity for financial gain. These relationships expose the moral corruption underlying social respectability.

Yet Congreve does not entirely reject marriage. Through Mirabell and Millamant, he offers a model of marriage based on reasoned agreement rather than coercion. Their relationship acknowledges social realities while striving for emotional and intellectual compatibility.

The Proviso Scene and Feminine Agency

The proviso scene (Act IV) is the ideological heart of the play. Millamant lists conditions that preserve her individuality after marriage. She demands freedom of speech, social interaction, and personal space. These demands challenge patriarchal expectations of female submission.

Millamant's negotiation transforms marriage into a partnership. Congreve presents her not as rebellious but as rational, suggesting that equality strengthens rather than threatens marital harmony. This scene marks a significant departure from earlier Restoration heroines.

Wit as Moral Intelligence

Wit in Congreve's play functions as more than verbal dexterity. Characters such as Mirabell and Millamant use wit responsibly, demonstrating balance and judgment. In contrast, false wits like Witwoud and Petulant misuse language, exposing their superficiality.

Congreve thus aligns true wit with moral awareness. Intelligence without ethics becomes empty display, while genuine wit reflects self-control and social responsibility.

Hypocrisy, Deception, and Social Performance

Social life in *The Way of the World* resembles theatrical performance. Characters adopt disguises, manipulate appearances, and conceal intentions. Reputation is valued more than truth. Lady Wishfort's fear of scandal highlights the power of public opinion.

Congreve exposes hypocrisy without offering simplistic moral resolutions. Even Mirabell relies on deception, suggesting that ethical purity is difficult to achieve in a compromised social system.

Moral Ambiguity and Ethical Vision

Unlike earlier Restoration comedy, Congreve's play does not celebrate moral excess. Yet it also avoids moral preaching. The play's resolution restores order but does not eliminate ethical tension. Marriage offers stability, but it remains grounded in negotiation and compromise.

Congreve's ethical vision emphasizes awareness rather than reform. He encourages audiences to recognize social contradictions and navigate them intelligently.

Findings

The study reveals that

- Marriage in Restoration society is contractual and property-driven.
- Wit functions as both social power and moral indicator.
- Millamant represents negotiated feminine autonomy.
- Congreve presents ethical ambiguity rather than moral absolutism.

Conclusion

The Way of the World stands as the most refined achievement of Restoration comedy. Congreve combines wit with ethical seriousness to critique social hypocrisy and marital conventions. By presenting marriage as a negotiated partnership and wit as moral intelligence, the play transcends its historical moment. Its balanced vision of reason, autonomy, and social responsibility ensures its lasting relevance in English literary studies.

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