THE MORALITY AND WIT OF CONGREVE AND SHERIDAN

IN THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Definitions and Objectives

That which makes us laugh is not easily analyzed because the comic spirit has an illusive, nebulous quality which changes in form according to the literary traditions of the time. A comic situation which would have convulsed a Restoration audience would probably leave most modern audiences unmoved. But the comic spirit of a particular age does not die suddenly. It lingers on to be modified and revitalized. Therefore, in a general sense , we should not

> aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. . . . We shall disdain nothing we have seen. . . . And. . . we may also find that, unintentionally, we have made an acquaintance that is useful. For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities.[1]

Nevertheless, the analytical mind of the literary critic is forever pruning the vastness of art into the limitations of a definition. Critical tradition would have it so. But however compendious and precise, most literary definitions of the comedy of manners are merely symptomatic

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[1] Henri Bergson, Laughter (New York, 1911), p. 2.

and touch only the surface of the analysis.[2] Consequently, an adequate criterion for evaluating it is, like a panacea, for strictly objective purposes, difficult to find. The comedy of manners is "a peculiar, intangible sort of thing."[3] Even so, one may describe the symptoms as objectively as possible and thereby obtain a reasonably workable definition of the comedy of manners and hope, unwittingly, to capture its spirit.

The term comedy of manners is itself somewhat of an enigma, and although it is "rather difficult to explain. . . there are indications which point to the characteristics of the type."[4] Thomas H. Fujimura believes that the weakness in the term lies in the confusion which results in the modern, as opposed to the seventeenth century, interpretation of manners. The modern concept, he logically contends,

> implies the whole contexture of fine society, with its mores, affectations, conventions; all the outward form, and even more, the style, of fashionable life by which the individual is bound. The comedy of manners, then, is the laughable born of the inability of men to conform to an artificial social standard (as in the country bumpkins), or of excessive attempts at conformity so successful that the individual loses his human elasticity. 5

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[2]Andrew Schiller, "The School for Scandal: The Restoration Unrestored," PMLA (September, 1956), LXXI, 695.

[3]Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama, 1660-1700, 4th ed. (Cambridge, 1952), I, 196.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Thomas H. Fujimura, The Restoration Comedy of Wit (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952), p. 5.

Contrasted to this, the seventeenth-century concept of manners is quite another thing. It is based upon a psychological rather than a sociological premise.[6] In the seventeenth-century sense "manners was about equivalent to ethos, or character."[7] Manners, then, were the motivating forces behind character or the concomitant qualities or, in the phrase of Dryden, "inclinations, as they appear in the several persons. . . ; a character being thus defined--that which distinguishes one man from another."[8] In this psychological interpretation

> manners. . . represents the basic, underlying motives and causes of human action; and character is the outward mark of distinction which is the product of manners, . . . the social matrix of customs and modes into which the individual conforms. 9

The result of these two interpretations of manners, the psychological (seventeenth century) and the sociological (modern), has led to a certain ambiguity of definition, a

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6 Ibid., p. 7.

7 Ibid., p. 6. (In using this definition, Fujimura cites A New English Dictionary as his authority.)

8 John Dryden, "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy," The Works of John Dryden, edited by Sir Walter Scott and George Saintsbury (Edinburgh, 1882-1893), VI, 266-269. Unless otherwise specified, references to Dryden's works will be to this edition.

9 Fujimura, p. 7.

dilemma which Fujimura would remedy by disposing of the term entirely and substituting wit in place of manners.[10]

An often quoted passage from Congreve's The Double-Dealer may further illustrate the insuperable task involved in adequately defining manners:

> L. Froth: I vow Mellefont's a pretty Gentleman, but methinks he wants a Manner.
> Cynthia: A Manner! What's that, Madame?
> L. Froth: Some distinguishing Quality, as for Example, the bel air or Brillant of Mr. Brisk; the Solemnity, yet complaisance of my Lord, or something of his own that should look a little Je-ne-scay-quoysh. . . .[11]

Manners as something a little "Je-ne-scay-quoysh" leaves much to be desired as a basis of a definition; it is too superficial a symptom; yet it has been one of the primary starting points for critics in defining the comedy of manners.[12] As a result, most critical definitions of this genre are little more than a series of non sequiturs and generalities

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[10] Fujimura effectively supports this thesis by further pointing out that Jeremy Collier in his famous attack on the English stage conceived of manners in the psychological sense as "Causes and Principles of Action," whereas Hazlitt in the nineteenth century spoke of it in sociological terms as "the very web and texture of society" (Ibid.).

[11] William Congreve, The Double-Dealer, II, i. Unless otherwise specified, references to Congreve's plays are to Comedies by William Congreve, edited by Bonamy Dobrée (London, 1925). The Roman numerals refer to act and scene.

[12] For a discussion of this matter see Fujimura, p. 2, footnote 5.

describing it in such terms as "artificial. . . trivial. . . life in terms of a muffin."[13]

The comedy of manners may be set apart from the main body of comic drama from both a sociological and psychological point of view. It may be said sociologically to "reproduce the life of a particular coterie, high in the social scale"[14] in a very special psychological way. This coterie of the elect is characterized socially by a satiric contempt for the parvenu, by an atmosphere of leisure, by a complete emancipation of women, and by an attitude of naturalistic amorality; it is further characterized psychologically by a conspicuous aura of cynicism in an emotional vacuum and by a cultivation of the intellect--a veritable logorrhea of contrived epigrammatic conversation, and a perpetual combat of wit.[15]

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[13] John Palmer, Comedy (New York, 1914), pp. 33-35.

[14] Rose Snider, Satire in the Comedies of Congreve, Sheridan, Wilde, and Coward (Orono, Maine, 1937), p. ix.

[15] This summarized definition does not propose to be all-inclusive. There are also certain dramatic devices which characterize the comedy of manners. There is usually one pair of young lovers who are witty and innocent but at the same time wise in the way of the world. There is a highly contrived plot which is of slight consequence and which is motivated by a love pursuit or sexual intrigue. See Fumimura, pp. 5-9; Nicoll, p. 197; Schiller, p. 696; and Snider, p. ix.

This dilemma of definition is born of a misunderstanding. The key to a valid definition and adequate understanding of the comedy of manners is an objective historical revaluation, both sociological and psychological, of the moral attitudes expressed in the plays themselves and by the critics of the plays and, further, a more accurate and illuminating interpretation of the seventeenth-century concept of wit.

Considering the comedies of the Restoration, and those of Congreve in particular, as the prototype of the comedy of manners and as the model for Sheridan later to revive and emulate, this thesis proposes to point out how the concepts of morality and wit have been a major obstacle to literary critics in analyzing the comedy of manners from its very beginnings, to discuss morality and wit as the basis of a proper evaluation of the comedy of manners both from the standpoint of seventeenth-century precepts and those of a century later, and, finally, to show how, during the early periods in which the comedy of manners flourished,--that of Congreve, 1693-1700; and of Sheridan, 1775-1779[16]--morality and wit were modified and used to suit the divergent sociological and psychological conditions of each period.

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[16] Snider, p. vii.

Morality and the Critical Tradition

> O, believe me, 'tis a filthy play: and you may take my word for a filthy play as soon as another's. [17]

The comedy of manners, especially that of the Restoration, has never been universal in its appeal, a fact which has prompted a relatively meager and anemic body of literary criticism and a general lack of qualitative evaluation.[18] L. C. Knights, obviously bored, calls Restoration comedy "insufferably dull."[19] And after assuming that dullness and bad literature are analogous, Knights rightly asserts that since Jeremy Collier's famous attack against the Restoration theater, A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage,[20] "opponents of Restoration comedy have conducted their case almost entirely in moral terms."[21] This

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[17] William Wycherley, The Plain Dealer, II, i. Unless otherwise specified, references to Wycherley's plays are to Plays by William Wycherley, edited by W. C. Ward (New York, 1896).

[18] "Before 1923, apart from chapters in general histories of literature, the only accounts of the Restoration drama appeared in the 1660-1700 sections of John Genest's Some Account of the English stage, from 1660 to 1830 (1832, 10 vols.), Sir A. W. Ward's A History of English Dramatic Literature to the Death of Queen Anne (1875; revised edition, 1899, 3 vols.), and G. H. Nettleton's English Drama of the Restoration and the Eighteenth Century (1914)" (Nicoll, I, 2, footnote 3).

[19] L. C. Knights, "Restoration Comedy: The Reality and the Myth," Explorations (London, 1946), p. 131.

[20] For a detailed, authoritative account of the Collier controversy, see Joseph W. Krutch, Comedy and Conscience After the Restoration (New York, 1949).

[21] Knights, p. 131.

fact has consistently brought forth vituperative denunciations from critics, who, like zealous disciples of a pious creed, feign a squeamish righteousness in the presence of contaminating evil. That Restoration comedy was licentious in terms of Victorian moral propriety, there can be little doubt, for in those terms "anything that mentions the unmentionable is immoral."[22] But that an artistic evaluation solely on a moral basis is valid may be seriously questioned. Even if a literary artist does not concern himself with Christian morality, he may conceivably have an artistic morality by which he maintains a consistent level of aesthetic excellence. Too much moral discernment, especially in the consideration of Restoration comedy, is often inconsistent with objective critical evaluation. Certainly moral values "are, in the long run, decidedly relevant--but only in the long run: literary criticism has prior claims."[23]

This squeamishness during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when an ostentation of moral propriety was fashionable, may be more readily understood than the righteous indignation of some modern critics.[24] "The inhibition removed, we expect due and favorable examination of the age

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[22]John Wain, "Restoration Comedy and Its Modern Critics," Essays in Criticism (October, 1956), VI, 377.

[23]Knights, p. 131.

[24]Marvin Murdrick, "Restoration Comedy and Later," English Stage Comedy (New York, 1955), p. 98.

of Wycherley and Congreve [rather than] an . . . outraged dismissal of what was taken for the accurate reflection of a debauched society."[25] Yet despite modern moral liberalism, as late as 1956 John Wain, somewhat impertinently censuring Thomas H. Fujimura's brilliant critical defense, spoke of Restoration comedy as "the never-ending stream of filth that splashes across the stage."[26] Such moral condemnation may be taken as typical.[27] Charles Lamb, in his famous Essays of Elia, cleverly parodied this pious critical attitude as of those who "bark like foolish dogs at shadows. . . [dreading] infection from the scenic representation of disorder. . . [and anxious] that our morality should not take cold, . . . [they] wrap it up in a great blanket. . . against the breeze."[28]

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Wain, p. 376.

[27] For a detailed discussion of traditional adverse criticism, most notably that of Macaulay, see John Palmer, The Comedy of Manners (London, 1913), pp. v-vii, 1-29. For an example of outraged moral hyperbole describing Restoration comedy as "stupid, nauseous and abominable beyond anything else that can be found in the world's literature," see William Archer, The Old Drama and the New (Boston, 1923), pp. 172-178.

[28] Charles Lamb, "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," The Essays of Elia, edited by Homer E. Woodbridge (New York, 1927), p. 212.

The Restoration comedy of manners represented the attitudes of a small segment of society--that of the court of Charles II.[29] It was in a sense a reactionary type of drama directed against what had been the Puritan tyranny of the Interregnum. It was "not even trying to be impartial or to make any constructive suggestion. . . . It. . . /was/ partly a yell of triumph--"We're back, and the king's back, and we'll see you don't forget it. . . ."[30]

Alexander Pope, in his "Essay on Criticism" (1711), condemned licentious vogues of the reign of Charles II:

> In that fat age of Pleasure, wealth and ease,
> Sprung the rank weed, and thrived with large increase:
> When love was all an easy Monarch's care;
> Seldom at council, never in a war:
> Jilts ruled the state, and statesmen farces writ;
> Nay, wits had pensions, and young lords had wit:
> The fair sat panting at a courtier's play,
> And not a mask went unimproved away:
> The modest fan was lifted up no more,
> And virgins smiled at what they blushed before. 31

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29 ". . . The theatre, to an extent probably never true before or since, was the affair only of the court and of the fashionable class. . . . Under Charles. . . the great middle class neither frequented the theatre nor was represented upon the stage, except, perhaps, as an object of ridicule. . . . The Restoration stage was a fashionable entertainment where the most reckless of the upper class saw their follies and vices wittily and realistically presented." (Krutch, pp. 38-39).

30 Wain, p. 369.

31 Works, edited by Whitwell Elwin (London, 1871), II, 66-67.

However, Pope is here speaking generally of the characteristics of the age, not attempting specifically to castigate the artistic accomplishments of men like Congreve on a moralistic basis.

But in 1698 when Jeremy Collier voiced his rancorous antagonism against the drama, he based his thesis on a strict black-and-white, good-and-evil viewpoint, an approach which in its simplicity is overdrawn but which was sure to have a wide appeal among those who did not concern themselves with artistic concepts and aesthetic judgment. Collier obviously was not interested in evaluating Restoration drama in any other sense than as a moral anathema. In his preface to A Short View he clearly set the tone and limitations of his argument, speaking solely as a moralist, a monomaniac possessed.

> As Good and Evil are different in Themselves, so they ought to be differently Mark'd. To confound them in Speech is the way to confound them in Practice. Ill Qualities ought to have ill Names, to prevent their being catching. . . . To Guild over a foul Character, serves only to perplex the Idea, to encourage the Bad, and mislead the Unwary. To treat Honour, and Infamy alike, is an injury to Virtue, and a sort of Levelling in Morality. I confess, I have no ceremony for Debauchery. For to Complement Vice is but one Remove from worshipping the Devil. 32

This fear of "worshipping the Devil" has colored the

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32 Jeremy Collier, A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage, 3rd ed. (London, 1698), sig. A 3.

criticism of Restoration drama ever since, and the reputation of the comedy of manners has never fully recovered.[33] The effectiveness of the Collier attack lay partly in the genius of his rhetoric, but it should also be pointed out that its widespread influence and acceptance was partly a result of the "ripeness of the time. His contemporaries were just ready to discover that they were better men than their predecessors."[34]

When morality becomes a fashion, like a fashipn it passes out of vogue. Likewise the amoral attitudes expressed in the comedies of the Restoration were but part of the anti-Puritan reactionary fashion, and because the theatre was the spokesman for the fashionable court, "it is clear that Restoration comedy could hardly have developed in any other way than it did: 'witty,' immoral, and reflecting class interests."[35] If, then, the comedy reflected the fashionable debauchery of a depraved and sick society, as Collier and his school insisted, it is quite obvious that "one of the things that society was sick of, naturally, was too much morality,"[36]

Because of a similar moralistic bias, the critic has seldom been able to go beyond the pettiness of the Collier

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[33] John Palmer, Comedy of Manners, p. 4.

[34] Ibid., p. 6. [35] Wain, p. 368. [36] Ibid.

attack and draw sensible conclusions about the merits of the comedies. This moral attitude has been so thoroughly inculcated into the basic fiber of the critical tradition that it would not be too far wrong to assert that most of the critics resemble what George Meredith calls the "age-lasts" or "non-laughers," who have become "misogelastic" and have dignified their "dislike as an objection in morality. . . [and these] angry moralists have traced the national taste for tales of crime to the smell of blood in our nursery-songs."[37]

Thus the comedy of the Restoration is popularly associated with the boudoir intrigues of Charles II and Nell Gwynn.[38] This generalization is not particularly illuminating nor even historically correct. The spirit of the comedy was more extensive than simply a superficial reactionary vogue ensconced in the court of a profligate king. Congreve, for instance, who represents the most brilliant culmination of this Restoration comic spirit, wrote and produced his plays after the Revolution of 1688. "To describe Congreve's comedy as the fruit of reaction against the Puritan severities of Cromwell is absurd. . . . He had neither personal

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[37] George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy (New York, 1897), pp. 76, 77, 80.

[38] Palmer, Comedy of Manners, p. 3.

nor literary connexion with the court life that included Nell Gwynn. . . ."[39]

Restoration comedy, more than merely a reaction against moral inhibitions, served in part the basic function of comedy, in the Aristotelian tradition, as "an image of common life; its end is to show on the stage the faults of particulars, in order to amend the faults of the public and to correct the people by a fear of being ridiculous."[40] This "image of common life," limited, however, to the court, was faithfully reproduced for us by the Restoration playwrights, and because they strove to represent the life of a prurient society in a realistic way, it was inevitable that their subject matter would be ostensibly snobbish, urbane, and decidedly unmoral and, as a result, would come under the stigma of the moralists. "It was natural that . . . [the courtier] should enjoy seeing plays in which men like himself were . . . wittier, handsomer, and more successful than his antitype. . . . [Restoration comedy] was aimed at a prepared audience, who knew in advance what they wanted."[41] Thus, the comedy simply

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[39] Ibid., p. 4.

[40] Rene Rapin, "Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poetry," as quoted in Krutch, p. 41.

[41] Wain, p. 370.

reflected the tastes which pervaded the scene and, therefore, did not satirize vice in an attempt to laugh it out of existence. The dramatist did not emulate the virtuous life, nor did he deprecate it.

> The truth of the matter seems to be that the poets were not interested in morality either one way or the other. They were not, as Collier tried to prove, actively engaged in any systematic attempt to destroy it; but neither were they engaged in any attempt through the employment of satire . . . to recommend it. They wished their plays to be realistic, to be witty, to be polished, . . . to be penetrating; but they were expositors rather than preachers, and they set forth the ideas of the time without attempting either to improve or to debase them. [42]

It is natural that such a noncommittal, amoral attitude should pique the ire of a man like Collier, but it is more perplexing to consider that literary men like Swift, Johnson, Addison, and Steele should follow the same narrow lines of reasoning and "knock. . . [their] victim on the head with the identical bludgeon."[43] Shortly after Collier's attack, Addison and Steele, in the Spectator and Tatler,"were testing the contemporary theatre by standards. . . impertinent to their function as critics. . . Collier had completely changed the point of view. . . . The new critics were vigilant moralists."[44] For Steele the primary purpose of a play

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[42] Krutch, pp. 44-45.

[43] Palmer, Restoration Comedy, p. 11.

[44] Ibid., p. 7.

was clearly didactic, as may be readily observed in some of his more syrupy passages in the Tatler. A good play, he asserted, "gives [a playgoer] a livelier sense of virtue and merit. . . , interspersed in such a manner, as that to be charming and agreeable shall appear the natural consequence of being virtuous."[45] Just such observationsbrought on the quick decline of the pure comedy of manners and hastened the bathos of the tear-stained sentimentality which followed.

Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson, in turn, condemned the Restoration for egregious and sinister qualities. Swift called it a "criminal amour . . . [in which] the Alderman is made a cuckold, the deluded virgin is debauched, and adultery and fornication are supposed to be committed behind the scenes."[46] After having pointed out the stylistic excellence of Congreve, Johnson dismissed him, perhaps the most innocuous playwright of the period, as a debauchee:

> The general tenour and tendency of his plays must always be condemned. It is acknowledged with universal conviction that the perusal of his works will make no man better; and that their ultimate effect is to represent pleasure in alliance with vice, and to relax those obligations by which life ought to be regulated. 47

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[45] Richard Steele, The Tatler (London, 1743), II, 257; III, 286.

[46] Jonathan Swift, "A Project for the Advancement of Religion," Works, edited by Sir Walter Scott (Boston, 1883), VIII, 96.

[47] Samuel Johnson, "Congreve," Lives of the English Poets, edited by G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1895), II, 222.

Surprisingly, it never occurred to either Swift or Johnson that an evaluation of the plays in relation to their historical setting would have been more objectively valid or that "the moral test . . . may conceivably be, in the literal sense of the word, absurd, applied to the creatures of the poet."[48]

It was not until the nineteenth century that certain critics, namely Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and Charles Lamb, called the improvised moral test of Collier into question and thereby reinstated the Restoration comedies of manners as works of art. In 1848 Hunt published his edition of the Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar, to which he added essays of Hazlitt and Lamb for their critical excellence. For the first time there is no attitude of condescension nor moral nicety involved. Hunt, in every way dubious of the Collier thesis, pointed out that the Restoration playwrights had no monopoly in vice and that the pious pose of Collier and other moralists was by no means above reproach. Further, he followed a dispassionate, historical approach and exposed the ephemeral nature of moral propriety in evaluating works of art. Future generations, he contended, would not think Restoration comedy so diabolical, a prophecy which has almost been fulfilled.

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[48] Swift, VIII, 96.

Hazlitt, likewise, made a direct attack on the empirical, unhistorical methods of the morals school. He was not hoodwinked by Collier's zealous railings, and his essay is, consequently, as perspicacious as it is true. Collier, he satirically asserted ,

> does not think it enough that the stage "shows vice in its own image, scorn its own feature," unless they are damned at the same time and carried off. . . by real devils to the infernal regions. . . . It seems that [Collier] would have been contented to be present at a comedy. . . if there was to be an auto da fe at the end, to burn both the actors and the poet. This sour, nonjuring critic has a great horror and repugnance at poor human nature. . . , of the existence of which he appears only to be aware through the stage. . . . [49]

Continuing in the same vein, Hazlitt contended that Collier conspicuously overlooked the fact that the manners exhibited in the plays had their counterpart in real life and that the outrageous vice which Collier insisted the drama was fostering did not shock the audiences for which they were publicly presented. He concluded his argument by laying the blame for the "do-me-good, lack-a-daisical, whining make-believe comedies,"[50] which followed in the maudlin, sentimental tradition, at the feet of the moralists.

Lamb, in his essay On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century, inimitable in style yet somewhat overblown,

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[49] William Hazlitt, "On Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar," Collected Works, edited by A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London, 1903), p. 90.

[50] Ibid.

invalidated his viewpoint by insisting that the world presented by the Restoration comedy was not an authentic world at all and that a moral test would not do because the Restoration playwrights were "a world of themselves almost as much as a fairy land. . . . They have got out of Christendom into the land of cuckoldry--the Utopia of gallantry, where pleasure is duty, and the manners perfect freedom."[51] Lamb posed a very interesting, but irrelevant, question: "Why worry about the morality of the original when we may enjoy the image?"[52] From this gallant's beau monde Lamb would rightly have excluded the inhibitions of moral judgment, but he was loath to admit that this world of manners and gallant wit was the very world in which men like Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve had actually lived. These men were "themselves men of fashion and wit; and hence members of the same class as their characters, whom they. . . saw from within. . . , and whose ideas they expounded, . . . and whose limitations they shared."[53]

But this reputable critical evaluation which Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb put forth was annihilated in a sedulous,

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[51] Lamb, p. 213.

[52] Palmer, Comedy of Manners, p. 16.

[53] Krutch, p. 45.

a priori indictment[54] by Thomas Babington Macaulay, who, under the guise of palatable liberality, concurred in Hunt's favorable evaluation; then he deliberately reversed his viewpoint and castigated the Restoration comedy in a tirade of bigotry. "It is not easy to be too severe," he stated, "for in truth this part of our literature is a disgrace to our language and our national character."[56] In his opening paragraphs Macaulay posed somewhat as a Victorian Milton writing another Areopagetica to save worthy literature from the rash hands of the censor. He pointed out the depraved aspects of antiquity, the great classical, but immoral, masterpieces which are read by men of virtue with perfect immunity to their contaminating influence. With a great care to appear consistent, he stated that "the worst

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[54]This essay, brilliantly written, appeared in January, 1841, as a review of Hunt's edition of the Restoration dramatists. However, in some instances it is not biographically correct. Macaulay stated, for instance, that Congreve "was not a man of warm affection" (Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Leigh Hunt, The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Farquhar," Complete Works [London, 1875], VI, 529).

Although it is true that Congreve had the reputation of being a snob, "he was still an amiable snob, one of the best liked of literary men during a period of nearly forty years . . . in which very few wits were generally beloved" (George Sherburn, "The Restoration and Eighteenth Century," A Literary History of England, edited by Albert C. Baugh [New York, 1948], p. 722). For a further discussion of Congreve's amiability, see Fujimura, pp. 158-162.

[55]Palmer, Restoration Comedy, p. 21.

[56]Macaulay, VI, 493.

English writings of the seventeenth century are decent, compared with much that has been bequeathed to us by Greece and Rome."[57] He added, further, that Sir George Etherege certainly "would have shuddered" at many of Plato's works, but, in Macaulay's view, it did not follow that Sir George Etherege had as much right to an audience and a critical evaluation by posterity because, after all, Etherege was very wicked and "Plato, we have little doubt, was a much better man . . ."[58] The indictment, in terms of nineteenth-century propriety, of the personal iniquity and the "disgraceful" comedies of the Restoration dramatists reflects the worst excesses of Collier and has the quality of overripe piety gone to seed, a characteristic which does not become so illustrious a critic as Macaulay. He could much more wisely have directed his argument in these terms: "Let us agree that these men are, according to the standard of our time, wicked. But what is their position in English dramatic literature?"[59]

It is ironic that so obviously biased an opinion as this of Macaulay, brilliantly stated though it is, should have been so widely accepted as an adequate appraisal of the age which, more than any other, established dramatic comedy

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[57] Ibid., p. 492.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Palmer, Comedy of Manners, pp. vi-vii.

as its literary medium and refined the comedy of manners into the brilliant, ebullient wit expressed by Congreve in The Way of the World to stand as the primary example of this genre. Nevertheless, the Collier-Macaulay interpretation stays firmly rooted in critical tradition even to the present day. George Meredith, in his Essay on Comedy (1877), excepted only Congreve's Way of the World from moral censure, although "some of . . . [Meredith's] comments on the nature of the comic spirit apply admirably to Restoration drama, despite the fact that he did not choose so to apply them."[60]

Until as late as 1913, no real attempt was made to answer the attack consistently made by the moralistic critics. Collier and Macaulay remained firmly entrenched as the oracles of literary judgment. Since 1913, however, contemporary critics--notably excepting L. C. Knights, who is bored rather than pious--have bestirred themselves in the defense of the Restoration comedy of manners.[61] They have, indeed, almost raised it up from the very depths of infamy to the threshold of respectability. But this is not yet a complete victory;

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[60] Lynch, p. 5.

[61] The outstanding critics who have defended Restoration comedy against the moralists include John Palmer, The Comedy of Manners (1913); Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Comedy, 1660-1720 (1924); Henry T. E. Perry, Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama (1925); Kathleen M. Lynch, Social Mode of Restoration Comedy (1926); and, finally, the most provocative, Thomas H. Fujimura, The Restoration Comedy of Wit (1952).

they have not, despite their intentions, established the Restoration comedy of manners an unmitigated, authentic representation of its age with a naturalistic attitude towards morality and a very special concept of wit. Fujimura has attempted this and has succeeded to a great degree. Nevertheless, the criticism still remains a hodgepodge of varying opinions. Most of the outstanding modern critics in the "manners" tradition--notably Palmer, Dobrée, Perry, and Lynch--have rationalized the moral question out of existence by establishing that the comedies are artificial, trivial, and intrinsically removed from reality. Although this

> removes the burden of the moralistic censure, it does so only by making the comedies superficial and effete as literary works. These critics argue that Restoration comedy cannot be immoral because it is artificial and has nothing to do with morality or with serious human problems; it is concerned only with manners, or style, both social and literary. 62

Thus, this concept, as Fujimura contends, does not really analyze the comedy but rather evades the primary factors relevant to judging them as works of literary art. This interpretation, first of all, ignores the impetus of the naturalistic philosophy during the seventeenth century, expounded most notably by Thomas Hobbes, who questioned the basic concepts of morality and applied to human behavior the principle of relativity rather than absolute concepts of good and evil. He reasoned that

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62 Fujimura, p. 10.

> every man, for his own part calleth that which pleaseth, and is delightful to himself, good; and that evil which displeaseth him: insomuch that while every man differeth from another in constitution, they differ also from one another concerning the common distinction of good and evil. Nor is there such thing as absolute goodness, considered without relation. 63

This, as the governing principle of the Restoration attitude toward morality, confronts the problem without evasion. The comedy of the Restoration, then, dealt with good and evil, not as outward manifestations of inward morality, but as mere hedonistic relatives. This gives a very real tinge to the spirit of the comedy, and it adds to its laughter a sardonic quality of the cruel veneration of one's superiority over another.

If, then, manners were governed by a naturalistic philosophy of relative morality, upon what were the good or evil qualities in a person, as outwardly expressed by manners, based? In a comedy of manners in what way does a character manifest the desirable good qualities and thereby possess "moral propriety"? Who are the "immoral" against whom our artistic wrath is directed? The answers lie in an analysis of the peculiar phenomenon which motivated the comedy of manners and upon which its humor turned and upon which its morality was based--the Restoration concept of wit.

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63 Thomas Hobbes, "Human Nature," The Moral and Political Works of Thomas Hobbes (London, 1750), p. 14.

The Restoration Concept of Wit

> If Faith itself has diff'rent dresses worn,
> What wonder modes in wit should take their turn?[64]

The problem of evaluating the comedy of manners is made infinitely more complex by the various interpretations of the concept of wit.[65] Probably, even during the Restoration, "nothing. . . [was] so admired, and so little understood, as Wit."[66] The term was used indiscriminately throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a number of meanings and was seldom used consistently in the same sense by a single writer. Dryden, Locke, and Hobbes put forth elaborate definitions of wit, and Addison devoted six consecutive essays in the Spectator exclusively to wit. But each of these men failed to be consistent. Fujimura has pointed out, for instance, that Hobbes, "from whom one might expect more precision in view of his philosophical calling, used this term . . . in several different senses in the same work."[67] Yet, despite the divergent interpretations of wit, it was the

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64 Pope, II, 61.

65 Fujimura gives the most extensive discussion of wit, and, indeed, he appears to be the only critic who emphasizes wit as a basis for evaluating Restoration comedy.

66 Joseph Addison, The Spectator, edited by G. Gregory Smith (London, 1907), I, 176.

67 Fujimura, p. 16.

very touchstone of the Restoration comedy of manners, and that it has received so little attention from modern critics exposes a conspicuous lack of insight.[68]

After 1660 wit was recognized as having qualities more adaptable to the purpose of the Restoration playwright than the outmoded humors techniques of Ben Jonson.[69] Wit became the basis of a new type of comedy which whipped the literary scene into a furor poeticus as advocates of the new comedy disdained the humors tradition as inferior and unsuitable. Dryden clearly recognized the difference in the two types of comedy, and in replying to an attack by Shadwell, who wished to continue the humors tradition of Jonson, he pointed out the superiority of wit over humors. "The business of the poet," he wrote in 1671, "is to make you laugh: when he writes

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68 "In fact, wit is one of the key words in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century aesthetics, and many of the important critical documents of this period deal with it: the speculations of Hobbes . . . , the prefaces and verses of Shadwell and Dryden. . ., Blackmore's 'Satyr against Wit'. . . , Collier's Short View. . . , Addison's Spectator papers (#58-62). . . . The very bulk of the criticism devoted to wit indicates its importance in the period" (Ibid., pp. 12-13).

69 In his dramatic method, Jonson "is preoccupied with the problem of portraying and curing the 'humors' resulting from variously disordered mental states. The secret of each disorder he detects as the preponderance of some one element in the victim's nature, to such an extent as to absorb all the forces of his personality. . . . Not until the individual has recovered. . . balanced faculties is the norm of conduct achieved." (Lynch, p. 15).

humor, he makes folly ridiculous; when wit, he moves you, if not always to laughter, yet to a pleasure that is more noble."[70]

Ignoring this fine distinction which the Restoration critics made, many modern critics have insisted that the wit comedy was little more than the revamped humors comedy of Jonson. Kathleen Lynch has asserted that "Jonson plainly foreshadows the Restoration comic dramatists. He also anticipates these dramatists, to some extent, in his general methods of characterization."[71] But Lynch modified this view to a degree by stating that because of the unsocial aspect of Jonson's comedy, it was "strikingly opposed to the spirit of the Restoration comedy."[72] Bonamy Dobrée has gone decidedly further in designating Jonson the precursor of the Restoration comic dramatists. "In truth," he has contended, "Restoration writers themselves saw no vast unlikeness between the Jonsonian form and their own, and in a great majority of cases never got the difference in atmosphere clear."[73] Lynch was primarily concerned with wit only as it manifested conformity to the social mode of the Restoration, and Dobrée limited his discussion of wit to only a single aspect

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[70] Dryden, III, 248.

[71] Lynch, pp. 13-14.

[72] Ibid., p. 214.

[73] Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Comedy, p. 36.

"which distinguished the comedy of manners from that of humors, namely, the verbal pyrotechnics."[74]

But Restoration wit was a much more broad and comprehensive concept than a mere social and verbal mode of expression. Its roots may conceivably be traced back to Aristotle[75] and chronologically followed thereafter through the Latin comic tradition, through the précieuse tradition, which flourished in France (and later in the court of Charles I, existing in a subdued form even during the Interregnum),[76] and through the euphuism of John Lyly in the latter part of the sixteenth century.[77] Wit then expanded in a broad and intricate pattern as it developed in the seventeenth century from the naturalistic speculations of Locke and Hobbes and was interpreted through the plays of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve and ultimately became, in a modified form, the basis of the Augustan concept of wit in the

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74 Ibid.

75 See Fujimura, p. 24. In quoting a long passage from Aristotle's Nocomachean Ethics, Fujimura draws a striking parallel between the Aristotelian concept of wit and that of the Restoration.

76 For a detailed discussion of the précieuse tradition, see Lynch.

77 Fujimura, p. 17.

eighteenth century. Pope's interpretation of true wit as "nature to advantage dressed"[78] is not far removed from that of Congreve. In his dedicatory epistle to The Way of the World Congreve spoke of his reflections on the nature of true and false wit, which prompted him "to design some Characters, which shou'd appear ridiculous not so thro' a natural Folly. . . as thro' an affected Wit; a Wit, which at the same time that it is affected, is also false."[79] In the Spectator (May 11, 1711) Addison based his concept of wit on Locke's Reflection upon the Difference of Wit and Judgment.

However, Addison's analysis reflects the inevitable compromise which came about after the comic dramatists had been attacked for their licentious and naturalistic wit; wit had become tempered with morality. Nevertheless, one arrives at an understanding of Augustan wit through the Restoration dramatists. Since the preoccupation of the eighteenth century with conduct was partly an extenuation of the Restoration concept that proper conduct was manifested through wit, the Restoration may be designated a starting point for the study of the Augustan Age. To the courtier of the Restoration, true wit and proper conduct were synonymous, but the literature of the Augustan Age was the literature of

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[78] Pope, II, 51.

[79] Congreve, p. 337.

a compromise between the world of the courtier and the world of the bourgeois. Moderation of sensuality and moralized wit superseded the libertinism and purely intellectual wit of the Restoration. "Pope's Moral Essays, Chesterfield's Letters, the torrent of periodical writing, all sought to give. . . sensible advice about how to live within the bounds of a decent compromise."[80] Thus, the Restoration concept of wit had far-reaching effects beyond its own age, but "with the passing of the seventeenth century passed also the age of pure wit."[81]

The distinction of wit drawn by the Restoration was an extremely subtle one. Congreve complained that the critics of The Way of the World were rash in their judgment of his wit. The play, he said, "had been acted two or three Days, before some of these hasty judges cou'd find the leisure to distinguish between the Character of a Witwoud and a True-wit."[82] The witless character is usually obvious, but it is often difficult to distinguish the witwould from the true-wit primarily because those who pretend to wit are often more amusing than the possessors of wit.[83]

The distinction may be understood only partly on a social basis. A critic who would interpret Restoration

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80 Wain, p. 371.

81 Krutch, p. 153.

82 Congreve, p. 337.

83 Fujimura, pp. 36-37.

comedy solely from this standpoint must either entirely ignore the important function of wit in Restoration comedy or minimize it as a social affectation of the beau monde. In transposing wit to a social basis, the motivating force behind comedy becomes

> the struggle between the socially elect and the parvenus. . . . Some are to the manner born and some are not; those who are innately civilized, those who are not are oafs or worse. The socially elect are a moral law unto themselves since their virtue is innate, hereditary, and self-defined. Of the rest, there are some who strive to enter the circle of the elect. In their inevitable failure they make themselves even more ridiculous. . . . The parvenus must pretend to virtue, the elect need not--and therein lies the moral irony.[84]

The fault in this distinction lies in its limitation. In what way are the "socially elect" distinguished from the "parvenus" and upon what does the "moral irony" turn? An analysis of the basis of true and false wit will clarify the distinction.

True wit was an intellectual fastidiousness and an aesthetic discrimination which were manifested with great natural elegance and refinement in social intercourse. The distinction was one of decorum "based on respect for sound judgment."[85] False wit, then, was an affectation of these qualities. The witwould, who pretended to wit, was the comic butt of the truewits, who disdained his company and scorned his counterfeit show of wit. Wycherley gave a

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[84] Schiller, p. 695.

[85] Fujimura, p. 27.

description of the witwould and a prime example of the discrimination against him in The Country Wife. Harcourt, Horner, and Dorilant are speaking in derision of Sparkish, a fop who aspires to wit:

> Har. . . . a rogue that is fond of me only, I think, for abusing him.
> Dor. No, he can no more think the men laugh at him than that women jilt him; his opinion of himself is so good.
> Horn. . . . and you know 'tis a very hard thing to be rid of him; for he's one of those nauseous offerers at wit, who, like the worst fiddlers, run themselves into all companies.
> Har. One that, by being in the company of men of sense, would pass for one.
> Horn. And may so to the short-sighted world; as a false jewel amongst true ones is not discerned at a distance. His company is as troublesome to us as a cuckold's when you have a mind to his wife's.
> Har. No, the rogue will not let us enjoy one another, but ravishes our conversation. . . .
> Dor. And to pass for a wit in town shows himself a fool every night to us. . . .
> Horn. Such wits as he are, to a company of reasonable men, like rooks to the gamesters. . . .
> Dor. Nay, they are used like rooks too, snubbed, checked, and abused; yet the rogues will hang on.
> Horn. A pox on 'em, and all that force nature, and would be still what she forbids 'em! Affectation is her greatest monster. [86]

In addition to the elements of decorum and judgment, wit may be said also to encompass fancy, and in a general sense it was often used in the seventeenth century to mean a combination of both judgment and fancy. Hobbes stated that "both Fancie and Judgement are commonly comprehended under the name of Wit."[87] In further analyzing this concept

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[86] Wycherley, The Country Wife, I, i.

[87] Hobbes, p. 23.

of wit, Fujimura has summarized Hobbes' psychological analysis of wit by pointing out that

> he divided the rational faculties into two--the fancy and the judgment--both of which he treated as chiefly cognitive in function. The fancy he also regarded as the creative faculty capable of synthesis in discovering similitudes in things unlike; the judgment he regarded as a more purely analytical faculty that discovered dissimilitudes in things apparently alike.[88]

Then proceeding from these observations of Hobbes, Fujimura has distinguished three basic concepts of Restoration wit: "(1) wit as comprehending both fancy and judgment; (2) wit as judgment; and (3) wit as fancy."[89]

The various aspects of wit, whether they be judgment, fancy, or a combination of both, were manifested in a highly distilled and specialized mode of expression which seems strange and unnatural to the modern ear. The dialogue of the comedy of manners sparkles with polished conceits, similitudes, double-entendres, and epigrams. The wits speak with the effervescence of brut champagne, and this quality gives the comedy an aura of triviality and artifice which has traditionally led critics to interpret it as a mere manifestation of a social mode. But a closer look at the comedy will show that its meaning went deeper and that the quality of wit projected by a character on the stage indicated an intellectual propriety, a sound judgment, and a due regard for beauty. The true wit, as contrasted to the

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[88] Fujimura, p. 18.

[89] Ibid.

witless and witwoud, observed a decorum which was "an intellectual and aesthetic ideal . . . . The men of the Restoration were thinking of an acceptable level of intellectual refinement. . . . It was a . . . standard of thought and conduct to which the intelligent and cultivated person aspired. . . ."[90] The elect were indeed a moral and a social law unto themselves, but their superiority was based on their attainment of the intellectual, naturalistic Restoration concept of wit.

By the eighteenth century, however, the intellectual wit and hedonistic amorality of the Restoration began to fall into disrepute, and as the century advanced, the evergrowing influence of the puritanical bourgeois dictated more and more the literary taste. "Books and the theater became less and less the affair only of the aristocracy; and the middle class, which was . . . less capable of regarding literature with moral detachment, made its influence felt."[91] Restoration plays were revived occasionally throughout the eighteenth century since Collier had not entirely driven "immorality and profaneness" from the stage, but "the witty comedy of manners fared badly."[92] The vogue of moralized wit and eventually unmitigated sentimentality which dominated the eighteenth

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[90] Ibid., p. 27.

[91] Krutch, p. 153.

[92] Sherburn, p. 884.

century stage profoundly changed the Restoration dramatic concepts, and when Sheridan wrote his first play, The Rivals, in 1774, the reformation of the theater was already a fait accompli.

What Sheridan proposed to do was to revive the dramatic tradition of Congreve. What he succeeded in doing was to revive the body but not the spirit of Restoration comedy and to dress it in current eighteenth-century literary fashions. It was a clever trick, and Sheridan had dramatic genius enough to make it appear bona fide, up-to-date Restoration. But it was Restoration comedy with a difference, or in the phrase of Schiller, the "Restoration unrestored."

Nevertheless, Sheridan deserves the recognition as the eighteenth-century Congreve, for the similarities between the two dramatists are legion. However, Sheridan's dramatic philosophy and objectives contrast startlingly with those of Congreve, and the most salient divergence between the two dramatists is their morality and wit. A perusal of the comedies of manners of Congreve and Sheridan will readily show how Congreve is a nearly perfect realization of the naturalistic Restoration philosophy of wit and amorality and how, on the other hand, Sheridan is merely a realization of eighteenth-century sentimentalized morality in the form of Restoration comedy.

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM CONGREVE

Congreve, certainly at the very pinnacle of the comedy of manners, the "finis coronat" of Restoration wit and elegance, was evaluated justly by his contemporaries.[1] Dryden compared him to Shakespeare:

> This is your Portion; this your Native Store:
> Heaven, that but once was prodigal before,
> To Shakespeare gave as much; she cou'd not
> give him more. [2]

Although this appraisal may be an exaggeration, undeniably Congreve has consistently held a position of greater esteem than any other Restoration dramatist.[3] Even conservative nineteenth-century critics, so prone to see the mote in their neighbor's eye, recognized Congreve's superiority. Macaulay mitigated his blistering attack on Restoration comedy somewhat by asserting that "the wit of Congreve far outshines that of every comic writer, except Sheridan, who has arisen within the last two centuries."[4]

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[1] Palmer, Comedy of Manners, p. 141.

[2] Quoted from Congreve, p. 119.

[3] Dobrée, p. 121.

[4] Macaulay, p. 532.

Nevertheless, Congreve, the most circumspect of the Restoration dramatists, has not escaped the censure of outraged moralists. Indeed, because of his brilliance he has been all the more called to task for licentiousness. Such a pity, the "enlightened" moralist contends, that so brilliant a writer as Congreve should have been ensnared by wickedness.[5] Some critics will not grant Congreve a special dispensation even on aesthetic grounds but place him with all the other reputed debauchees of the Restoration. For these critics an historical approach will not do. William Archer wrote in 1923: "We hold our noses as we read. . . . aesthetically, a stench is a stench, even if it is wafted to us from the seventeenth century."[6]

Such an extreme viewpoint is hardly a valid evaluation of the man who even Meredith said was "worthy of treading a measure with Moliere."[7] Since the modern school of psychology has ostensibly dispelled public squeamishness regarding sexual matters, there is no reason to suppose (as Archer did in 1923)

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[5]Palmer, for instance, quotes Coleridge's remark that "wickedness is no subject for comedy. This was Congreve's great error and peculiar to him. The dramatic personalities of Dryden, Wycherley, and others are often viciously indecent, but not like Congreve's, wicked" (Comedy of Manners, p. 144).

[6]Archer, p. 174.

[7]Meredith, p. 100.

that a modern audience could not enjoy a Congreve comedy, unexpurgated, without any sense of outraged propriety.[8] Congreve's misdemeanors at worst are little more than a tongue-in-cheek sort of immorality. Admittedly, sexual intrigues are presented with unabashed candor, but this is not to say that Congreve's plays are aphrodisiac. Even so vitriolic a critic as L. C. Knights concedes that Congreve only

> hovers on the outskirts of sexual relations, and sees nothing but the titillation of appetite. . . . Sex is a hook baited with tempting morsels; it is a thirst quencher; it is a cordial; it is a dish to feed on; it is a bunch of grapes; it is anything but sex. [9]

Nevertheless, Knights proceeds to condemn Congreve's plays, en bloc, mainly on the grounds of their dissolute sexual attitude (especially toward marriage) manifested on the surface and in a very limited "verbal pattern. . . quite

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[8] In our era of the extreme naturalism of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, such righteous railing seems ludicrously old-fashioned. Archer was horrified at the thought of "thrusting seventeenth century plays, entirely unexpurgated, upon mixed audiences of men and women" (Archer, p. 178). Ten years earlier, Armstrong had shown the same attitude by suggesting that The Way of the World needed "a little cleaning up" (Cecil F. Armstrong, Shakespeare to Shaw [London, 1913], p. 141).

[9] Knights, p. 142. Knights has cleverly constructed these terse aphorisms from the lines of the plays themselves. Palmer also has made the point that "there is no sex feeling. . . in the plays of Congreve. . . . On this depends the whole force of their comic appeal and moral harmlessness" (Comedy, p. 49).

unrelated to an individual mode of perceiving. . . ."[10]

In his gentlemanly, unimpassioned defense against the Collier attack, Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations (1698), Congreve himself insisted that virtue always triumphed at the end of his plays and that a moral tone was upheld in the couplets which customarily ended each act.[11] "There is a certain amount of truth in the claim, for many of these little sayings are now familiar to thousands who have never heard of the plays in which

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[10] Ibid., pp. 145-146. Knights finds this attitude he has ascribed to Congreve epitomized as the "whole idea of Restoration comedy" in the opening song to Dryden's Marriage à la Mode:

> Why should a foolish marriage vow,
> Which long ago was made,
> Oblige us to each other now,
> When passion is decayed?
> We loved, and we loved, as long as we could,
> 'Till our love was loved out in us both;
> But our marriage is dead, when the pleasure is fled:
> 'Twas pleasure first made it an oath.

"Restoration comedy no where provides us with much more of the essential stuff of human experience than we have here . . . . Congreve is no exception" (Ibid., p. 145).

[11] A typical example is Mirabell's conclusion to The Way of the World:

> From hence let those be warn'd, who mean to wed;
> Lest mutual Falsehood stain the Bridal-Bed:
> For each Deceiver to his Cost may find,
> That Marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind.

they were spoken."[12] But this was certainly a weak defense, since "the morals expressed in the closing lines were never so convincing as the contents of the plays themselves."[13]

It is unfortunate for posterity that Congreve did not retaliate against Collier's attack in a more direct and convincing manner. Had he been less a gentleman par excellence[14] and more a fighter, he might possibly have silenced Collier and thereby erased the stigma placed on his work. Rather, he acquiesced in the moralistic sentiment aroused against his plays and in 1700 quietly retired "to devote himself to the witty company which he loved, and to the gout which he could not ignore."[15] Congreve maintained the attitude of a truewit to the end, and he would not condescend to a public quarrel with Collier over aesthetically irrelevant aspects of morality in his plays. As a result, it has taken two and a half centuries to dispel the cloud

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12 Armstrong, p. 140.

13 Snider, p. 2. Macaulay also made this point in a more disdainful manner: ". . . No man acquainted with human nature could think that a sententious couplet would undo all the mischief that five profligate acts had done" (Macaulay, p. 562).

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

of infamy which has shrouded his name along with those of the other Restoration dramatists.[16]

Far from any desire to scandalize his society, Congreve intended to reproduce on the stage the attitudes of an exclusive group of wits and pretenders to wit of the beau monde, and if these attitudes did not comply with the moral propriety of the puritanical bourgeois, he nevertheless maintained that the mirror which he held up to nature gave an accurate reflection. It was simply a reflection of the way of the world--his own exclusive world adorned, as it were, with wit rather than piety. Congreve's eye was the impersonal eye of the camera, but his pictures are not pornographic.

If Congreve were aware of his society's degeneracy, it is true that he did not attempt in any way to save it from perdition, but, on the other hand, he does not appear to have been a libertine himself. His personal life, as far as is known, was far above reproach. He was personally held in high esteem by such pillars of "propriety" as Pope, Sir William Temple, Addison, Steele, and Lady Montagu, and he was one of the most beloved members of the Kit-Cat Club.

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[16] This statement is hardly an exaggeration. Even those critics who have praised his brilliance have only passively defended his reputation. "Fujimura is about the most wholehearted defender that . . . [the Restoration] playwrights have found since their own day . . ." (Wain, p. 375).

From the time he retired from the stage, "smarting under Collier's attack,"[17] he was a persona grata in literary circles throughout London until his death in 1729.[18] Also, he remained a circumspect bachelor throughout his life, although he reputedly had an affair with Anne Bracegirdle. However, there is little evidence to justify an amorous interpretation of their relationship.[19] The only "scandal" connected with his name was that he left almost his entire fortune of ten thousand pounds to Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough.

Congreve's philosophy was moderately epicurean, and although he never openly avowed a naturalistic viewpoint, "he subscribed to naturalism insofar as he used nature as the standard, in censuring Witwoulds . . . and also in depicting his Truewits as egoistic and libertine."[20] Toward the end of his life, in the manner of the truewit he was, Congreve himself told of his naturalistic, mildly skeptical attitude toward morality. He was

> Not wondering at the World's new wicked Ways,
> Compar'd with those of our Fore-fathers Days,
> For Virtue now is neither more or less,
> And Vice is only varied in the Dress;

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17 Armstrong, p. 142.

18 Ibid.

19 Fujimura, p. 163.

20 Ibid., p. 164.

Believe it, Men have ever been the same,
And all the Golden Age, is but a Dream.[21]

But this is not to say that Congreve's art was undertaken in a moral vacuum nor that his plays are void of moral values. Congreve's comedies only partly come under Palmer's dictum that "the essential quality [of Restoration comedy] . . . was that it should be empty of moral meaning and empty of emotion. It rested upon a refusal to take the world as seriously as a moralist or as a man of feeling needs must take it."[22] We may as readily assert that any artist who concerns himself exclusively with the intellectual aspects of life is not a man of feeling, which, according to Palmer, is the primary requisite for a writer of "pure" comedy in the French tradition.[23] Congreve's plays may indeed be "pure" and closely equated with the French comic tradition in the

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[21] William Congreve, "Epistle of Improving the Present Time," The Mourning Bride, Poems, and Miscellanies, edited by Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford, 1928), pp. 401-402.

[22] Comedy, p. 39.

[23] In designating the pure comedy in the French tradition, Palmer quotes the Horace Walpole epigram that "Life is a comedy to the man who thinks and a tragedy to the man who feels;" and Palmer further states that laughter is "an act of the brain. . . intellectual, critical, . . . unfeeling, . . . divorced from emotion . . . " (Ibid., pp. 9-11). All these aspects, Palmer inconsistently contends, are conspicuously missing in the English comic tradition. (See Ibid., especially pp. 1-39.)

sense of being empty of emotion and intellectual in spirit, but they are not always empty of a moral meaning. Farquhar found, for instance, that The Old Batchelor "has an excellent moral. . . that if an old man merries a young wife he must not be surprised if she is unfaithful to him."[24] This may seem an ironic interpretation of a moral, but nonetheless, it is a valid one, for morality in its pristine sense simply denotes excellence of conduct, a requirement which the truewits of Congreve's plays faithfully exemplify in a hedonistic sense. Krutch further elucidates the moral of The Old Batchelor:

> Truly this is a moral, but not one which would have pleased Steele. . . . Yet the fable does carry a lesson. It does illustrate forcibly a truth. The best Restoration comedies, such as those of Wycherley and Congreve, do this constantly. They are not moral in the sense of striving much to raise the ethical standard, but like all good art they give information concerning the life which they depict and to that extent are instructive in worldly wisdom, . . . prudence, or to put it more broadly, savoir vivre. 25

Obviously this is not the Calvinistic ideal on which moralistic critics based their dismissal of Congreve as a literary artist. But on the basis of a semantic and aesthetic interpretation of moral, one may readily assert that Congreve was, indeed, one of the most morally edifying of the

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24 Krutch, pp. 237-238.

25 Ibid.

English comic dramatists, worthy, like Vanbrugh, of having "a virtuous woman . . . [lay] his plays by the side of her Bible."[26]

Congreve inherited the literary tradition begun by Etherege and Wycherley, who were personally a part of the court of the dissolute Charles II. In Congreve's plays the spirit of the Restoration pervades, and his contemporaries, most notably Dryden, commended him on his happy union of the stylistic qualities of Etherege and the witty qualities of Wycherley, which Congreve was to "raise . . . to a higher power."[27] Dryden's rhymed epistle addressed to Southerne in 1692 was applied to Congreve's art by seventeenth century critics:

> The standard of thy style let Etherege be;
> For wit the immortal spring of Wycherley;
> Learn after both to draw some just design,
> And the next age will learn to copy thine. [28]

Therefore, if this standard be truly applied to Congreve as the heir of the "wicked" Etherege and Wycherley, it would logically follow that he was still more "wicked" than his

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[26] Palmer, Comedy of Manners, p. 12.

[27] Ibid., p. 142.

[28] Dryden, Works, XI, 50.

predecessors, since he encompasses their qualities in their "most complete expression."[29]

Nevertheless, even though Congreve inherited the Restoration literary tradition, he must be considered primarily a transitional figure, first of all, because historically he belonged to the reigns of William and Mary and Queen Anne, and, secondly, because a chronological reading of his works will show the changing concepts of morality and wit which reflected the rapidly changing social milieu stabilizing into the Augustan Age, which was at hand. "Congreve stands midway between the ages, with a temper as balanced as the couplets of Pope."[30] Congreve's work, "transitional in nature, . . . points the way to the age of enlightenment,"[31] and when the comedy of manners culminated in the sound judgment and maturity of The Way of the World, "Congreve is not far removed from Addison, who would temper wit with morality."[32]

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[29] Palmer, Comedy of Manners, p. 143. Palmer further argues this point in the form of a reversed syllogism: "Congreve's comedies. . . should rather be associated with King Charles and his spaniels than with Queen Anne and her dish of tea. . . . Congreve is King Charles and his spaniels at their highest expression . . . [and] King Charles and his spaniels at their highest expression is Queen Anne and her dish of tea" (Ibid.).

[30] Dobrée, p. 123.

[31] Fujimura, p. 158.

[32] Ibid.

But whether Congreve is viewed as the consummation of the dramatic tradition of Etherege and Wycherley or as a transition between the Restoration and Augustan Age, most critics, admiring his inimitable wit, yet ignore the deep-seated motivations and profound meanings which surge beneath the comic surface of his plays. Congreve is known chiefly as a cynical stylist, the dilettante writer of trivial, artificial comedies sprinkled with intellectual bons mots and few quotable epigrams. Perry emphasized Congreve's style to the exclusion of his worth on any other basis: "For better or worse, Congreve's distinction as an author rests on his ability to write witty dialogue in literary form."[33] This view has been consistently popularized by those who find Congreve's art brilliant but soulless and without understanding. But to pronounce Congreve a brilliant stylist without considering his verbal technique in relation to his artistic impulse is to enervate the force of his wit. Congreve does indeed merit the universal praise he has received as a superlative stylist unique in English literature. But his style was indicative of the philosophy of a truewit, and "too great an attention to style . . . is apt to obscure the broader vision."[34] However, the vision of many critics

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[33] Henry T. E. Perry, The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama (New Haven, 1925), p. 78.

[34] Dobrée, p. 122.

has been limited to an acute myopia. Speaking of Congreve's plays, Perry said acidly that "the surface is so dazzling that sometimes one forgets what is lacking beneath. . . . It is only too evident that Congreve never really understood human behavior. . . . He is, after all, only a professional funny man."[35] John Wain even questioned the validity of a favorable appraisal of Congreve as a stylist and impertinently stated that Congreve "had a good ear for idiosyncracies of speech and knew how to write sentences that are short and rhythmical and sound well . . . from the stage, but so did the author of Charley's Aunt."[36] Comments such as these seem petty and may be disregarded as strongly biased evaluations coming from men who disguise their shallow understanding of Congreve's wit with pert sarcasm. If Congreve's style is superior, it is because his wit is superior. However, even the profundity of his wit has been seriously, but somewhat unjustly, questioned.[37] Meredith, who along with William Hazlitt was partly responsible for regarding Congreve as primarily a witty stylist, declared that although Congreve had "a

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[35] Perry, p. 80.

[36] Wain, p. 372.

[37] For Hazlitt's remarks on Congreve's brilliant style, see Works, VIII, 71.

certain soundness of mind," he had little "capacity."[38] "Judging him by his wit," Meredith continued, "he performed some happy thrusts; and, taking it for genuine, it is a surface wit, neither rising from a depth nor flowing from a spring: On voit qu'il se travaille a dire de bons mots."[39]

Fujimura, however, insists that such a cursory judgment, even from so erudite a critic as Meredith, is the result of a misunderstanding of Congreve which "arises principally from a failure to penetrate beneath the brilliant surface of the plays to the heart pulsating beneath."[40] As a result, most critics give an incomplete evaluation of the man who created the incomparable Mrs. Millamant.[41]

Hence, the genteel, unaffected Congreve, beloved of the Kit-Cat Club, becomes a veritable literary monster, sardonic,

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[38] Meredith here quotes Landor's statement concerning Pascal's "genuine humor and true wit," which in Meredith's view Congreve lacked. The "sound and capacious mind. . . is always a grave one. . . . Few men have been graver than Pascal; few have been wittier." But Meredith does not seriously propose to compare Congreve's mind with "so great a brain as Pascal's" (Meredith, p. 99).

[39] Ibid.

[40] Fujimura, p. 157.

[41] In all fairness to Meredith, however, it should be pointed out that his view is moderated considerably by his excluding The Way of the World from any moralistic or aesthetic censure "by virtue of the brilliancy of the writing and the figure of Millamant " (Meredith, p. 97).

cynical, fastidiously scornful, in the hands of critics who disdain his apparently casual indifference to morality and his naturalistic use of wit as the basis of the worth of man. Palmer eloquently summed up this viewpoint:

> Congreve cares only that he shall never be suspected of caring anything at all--that he may successfully wear that attitude of elegant, faint disdain which declares that life is no more than manners and that virtue is no more than raiment. . . . Nothing in the world of Congreve is good or bad, but the delivery makes it so. The root of his comic appeal is the pretence that man has no feeling deeper than an epigram may carry. . . .[42]

This, again, is a superficial evaluation. One does not see the real Congreve, who was "a constructive thinker. . . . Behind the coldly critical surface, there is much of the poet, of the man hungry for beauty."[43]

A closer analysis of the comedies themselves will reveal that Congreve consistently maintained the aesthetic, naturalistic attitude of a truewit, that his characters convey a verisimilar reproduction of the seventeenth century social milieu, that his morality was neither deliberately nor consciously nefarious, and that his wit, though brilliant, was neither affected nor void of depth. Indeed, a careful reading of the plays will readily show how much Congreve's artistic impulse derived from an intellectual and ethical conformity to nature.[44] The truewits, who follow

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[42] Palmer, Comedy, pp. 36-37.

[43] Dobrée, p. 125.

[44] Fujimura, p. 164.

nature, are nonpareil models of elegance and propriety, and one smiles approvingly; the witwoulds, who affect nature, are butts of scorn, and one laughs derisively. In Congreve one does not see the "reformed" man clothed in piety spouting moral platitudes, but rather, the natural man with all his egoistic, sexual, skeptical, intellectual propensities naked to nature and reclothed with wit--and we laugh at our own image. Congreve approached the full expression of pure comedy in the Molière tradition, detached, critical, and intellectual.

Congreve's first play, The Old Batchelor (1693), ushered him into the literary world as a writer worthy of inheriting Dryden's poetic laurels. Dryden himself praised it as an incomparable first play, and Thomas Southerne declared Congreve Dryden's successor.[45] In the animated opening scene Congreve

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[45] In his verse encomium, "To Mr. Congreve, on The Old Batchelor," Southerne wrote:

> Dryden has long extended his command,
> By Right Divine, quite through the Muses Land,
> . . . . . .
> (That Empire settled, and grown old in Pow'r)
> Can wish for nothing, but a Successor:
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . Congreve appears,
> The Darling, and last Comfort of his Years:
> May'st thou live long in thy Great Master's Smiles,
> And growing under him, adorn these Isles:
> But when--when part of him (be that but late)
> His Body yielding must submit to Fate,
> Leaving his deathless Works, and Thee behind,
> (The natural Successor of his Mind)
> Then may'st thou finish what he has begun:
> Heir to his Merit, be in Fame his Son.
> (Congreve, p. 18)

sets the tone of the play, and, indeed, he establishes the ebullient mood of all his comedies. It is his invocation to wit,[46] his manifesto.[47] In Bellmour's sprightly greeting to Vainlove and the brisk badinage which ensues, one sees that Congreve has already found his métier in "words . . . as a projection of worldliness, an envelope of wit."[48]

> Bell. Vainlove, and abroad so early: good Morrow; I thought a Contemplative Lover could no more have parted with his Bed in a Morning, than he could have slept in 't.
> Vain. Bellmour, good Morrow--Why truth on't is, these early Sallies are not usual to me; but Business, as you see, Sir--/ Shewing Letters./ And Business must be follow'd, or be lost.
> Bell. Business:--And so must Time, my Friend, be close pursued, or lost. Business is the rub of Life, perverts our Aim, casts off the Bias, and leaves us wide and short of the intended Mark.
> Vain. Pleasure, I guess you mean.
> Bell. Ay, what else has meaning?
> Vain. Oh the Wise will tell you--
> Bell. More than they believe--Or understand.
> Vain. How, how, Ned, a wise Man say more than he understands?
> Bell. Ay, ay, Wisdom's nothing but a pretending to know and believe more than we really do. You read of but one wise Man, and all that he knew was, that he knew nothing. Come, come, leave Business to Fools; they have need of 'em: Wit, be my Faculty, and Pleasure, my Occupation; and let Father Time shake his Glass 49

Here is the essential hedonistic doctrine of the truewit in Bellmour's intellectual detachment, sententious repartee,

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[46] Nettleton, p. 123. [47] Palmer, Comedy of Manners, p.171.

[48] Louis Kronenberger, The Thread of Laughter (New York,1952), p. 121.

[49] The Old Batchelor, I, i.

and naturalistic libertinism--"Wit, be my Faculty, and Pleasure, my Occupation."

However, The Old Batchelor displays a fanciful, youthful, effusive wit not characteristic of the mature Congreve. "There is more exuberance of spirit than judicious wit or decorum; and the elegance, the restraint, and the sensible views which are the mark of the maturest wit are notably absent."[50] This extravagance of wit becomes tedious in scenes rife with overdrawn similitudes and raillery, characteristics not becoming to a truewit. Nevertheless, Congreve's later excellence is manifested throughout the play, especially in the exchange of wit between Bellmour and Belinda, precursors of Mirabell and Millamant.[51] Although in the dramatis personae Congreve designated Belinda as "an affected Lady," possibly intended to be a witwould,[52] she talks and acts in the manner of a truewit by successfully holding off Bellmour, whom we have no doubt she loves, with the foil of her wit. "Indeed, Belinda, in her desire to make Bellmour conform to her wishes, is but Millamant on a smaller scale."[53] Her profuse, fanciful wit fairly overpowers the love-inflamed Bellmour, yet "we have the necessary lightness and delicacy."[54]

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[50] Fujimura, p. 170.

[51] Dobrée, p. 126.

[52] Fujimura, pp. 167-168.

[53] Snider, p. 5.

[54] Dobrée, p. 126.

> Belin. Prithee hold thy Tongue--Lard, he has so pester'd me with Flames and Stuff--I think I shan't endure the sight of a Fire this Twelvemonth.
> Bell. Yet all can't melt that cruel frozen Heart.
> Belin. O Gad I hate your hideous Fancy--you said that once before--if you must talk impertinently, for Heavens sake let it be with Variety; don't come always, like the Devil, wrapt in Flames--I'll not hear a Sentence more, that begins with an, I burn--Or an, I beseech you, Madam.
> Bell. But tell me how you would be ador'd--I am very tractable.
> Belin. Then know, I would be ador'd in Silence.[55]

Belinda's coquettish raillery, or "sex antagonism,"[56] is part of the premarital wit combat between the sexes before she, like Millamant, will "dwindle into a wife."[57] But it need not be raillery; a smooth simile will do. "Courtship to Marriage," Bellmour assures her, "is but as the Music in the Play-House, 'till the Curtain's drawn; but that once up, then opens the Scene of pleasure." To this Belinda replies, "Oh, foh--no: Rather, Courtship to Marriage, as a very witty Prologue to a very dull play."[58] The female truewit's ruse is to disarm her lover with the sharpness of her wit and to tantalize him with her charms, finally agreeing to a marriage contract if he perseveres.

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[55] The Old Batchelor, II, viii.

[56] Dobrée, p. 126.

[57] The Way of the World, IV, v.

[58] The Old Batchelor, V, x.

She pretends a worldly libertinism toward sexual matters which she has never experienced.

> Would you long preserve your lover?
> Would you still his Goddess reign?
> Never let him all discover,
> Never let him much obtain.[59]

In this respect all the women of Congreve's plays who are truewits are extremely circumspect and moral.

Nevertheless, this appearance of sexual promiscuousness, the bane of moralists, gives many scenes a risqué tone, especially those involving the witlesses (who resemble the humors characters of the Elizabethan drama),[60] and the humor of the episodes derives from "outwitting situations" rather than pure wit.[61] Congreve even used the stock farcical device of the passionate young wife's receiving her lover in the absence of her doting old husband, who unexpectedly returns home to find he is a cuckold. Tedious though this device may be, Congreve carries if off with a detached savoir-faire, using it as a means of voicing his anticlerical wit and, inadvertently, of commenting adversely upon the ethicality of

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[59] Ibid., II, ix.

[60] For a discussion of Elizabethan humors influence in this play, see Lynch, pp. 188-189.

[61] Fujimura, p. 170.

an old man's marrying a young girl.[62] Bellmour, gone "a whoring," has arranged through the pimp Setter, himself a skeptical wit,[63] to seduce the lovely Laetitia, under the guise of the parson Tribulation Spintext, while the uxorious husband Fondlewife is away on business. The trick works beautifully; Bellmour wins Laetitia's favor and, feigning a fit, gets as far as the bedchamber when Fondlewife returns. Laetitia easily convinces her husband that there is nothing amiss--for the moment.

> Laet. . . . Oh! my Dear, I have been in such a fright, that I forgot to tell you, poor Mr. Spintext has a sad Fit of the Cholick, and is forced to lye down upon our Bed. . . . . .
> . . . . . .

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62 Snider illustrates this traditional folly by drawing an analogy to Chaucer's "Tale of January and May":

> . . . , it is an heigh corage
> Of any man that stapen is in age
> To take a yong wyf; by my fader kyn,
> Youre herte hangeth on a joly pyn!

(Snider, p. 22.)

63 Wittiness is likewise characteristic of most of the other servants in Congreve's comedies. But Setter in particular has seemed to critics too witty for a man of his low station. This criticism may seem warranted in view of his pithy anticlerical witticisms and particularly in his cynical, ironic evaluation of his profession in reply to Sharper:

> Sharp. Here again, my Mercury!
> Setter. . . . I think my Atchievements do deserve the Epithet--Mercury was a Pimp too, but, though I blush to own it, at this time, I must confess I am somewhat fall'n from the Dignity of my Function, and do condescend to be scandalously imploy'd in the Promotion of vulgar Matrimony.
> (The Old Batchelor, V, ix.)

Fond. Good lack! good lack!--I profess the poor Man is in great Torment. . . . What Book's this? ⟨Sees the Book that Bellmour forgot.⟩
Laet. Mr. Spintext's Prayer-Book, Dear--Pray Heav'n it be a Prayer-Book. ⟨Aside.⟩
Fond. Good Man! I warrant he dropped it on purpose, that you might take it up, and read some of the pious Ejaculations ⟨Taking up the Book.⟩ O bless me! O monstrous! A Prayer-Book? Ay, this is the Devil's Pater-Noster. Hold, let me see; The Innocent Adultery.
Laet. Misfortune! now all's ruin'd again. ⟨Aside⟩
Bell. ⟨Peeping.⟩ Damn'd Chance! If I had gone a whoring with the Practice of Piety in my Pocket, I had never been discover'd.
Fond. Adultery, and innocent. O Lord! Here's Doctrine! Ay, here's Discipline!
Laet. Dear Husband, I'm amaz'd:--Sure it is a good Book, and only tends to the Speculation of Sin.
Fond. Speculation! No, no! something went farther than Speculation when I was not to be let in--Where is this Apocryphal Elder? I'll ferret him.
Laet. I'm so distracted, I can't think of a Lie. ⟨Aside.⟩ [64]

The Fondlewife-Laetitia plot, though dramatically irrelevant and certainly no example of Congreve's mature wit, nevertheless shows the immorality of an unnatural marriage; it shows the male truewit accomplishing his libertine, naturalistic goal--the pursuit of pleasure; and it shows Congreve's scorn of moral hypocrisy and his anticlerical wit.[65]

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[64] The Old Batchelor, IV, xix-xxi.

[65] Another typical example of Congreve's anticlerical wit occurs a few scenes later in a short encounter between Bellmour, still disguised in a parson's habit, and Lucy, a maid:

In the character of Heartwell, the old bachelor of the title, one sees still further the naturalistic libertinism and cynical wit of a man "who would be a Truewit but for his lack of perspicacity."[66] Heartwell is an object of scorn, not because he lacks wit, but because he is a hypocrite. Here, again, Congreve is careful to point out the immorality of affectation. The humor in Heartwell lies in his appearance as a misogynistic old bachelor who indulges in the lusts of the flesh which he openly scorns and who goes whoring to

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65--Continued

Lucy. Now, Goodness have Mercy upon me! Mr. Bellmour! Is it you?
Bell. Even I. What dost think?
Lucy. Think! That I shou'd not believe my Eyes, and that you are not what you seem to be.
Bell. True. But to convince thee who I am, thou know'st my old Token. [Kisses her.]
Lucy. Nay, Mr. Bellmour: O Lard! I believe you are a Parson in good earnest, you kiss so devoutly.
(Ibid., V, iii.)

It is obvious that Collier had some provocation for his attack on anticlerical grounds, especially when Congreve is even more direct, as in Bellmour's comment: "I wonder why all our young Fellows should glory in an opinion of Atheism; when they may be so much more conveniently lewd under the Coverlet of Religion." (Ibid., IV, i).

66 Fujimura, p. 169.

purge himself of love.[67] One is aware that the convictions Heartwell professes in his railings against marriage are false. His chief talent of speaking truth is exposed as affectation, and because of this he deserves the truewit's discrimination against him. Heartwell takes pride in being "as unmannerly and as unwelcome to a Woman, as a Looking-Glass after the Small-Pox,"[68] and he boasts that he has not been guilty of "sneering fulsom Lyes and nauseous Flattery, fawning upon a little tawdry Whore, that will fawn upon . . . [him] again, and entertain any Puppy that comes, like a Tumbler, with the same Tricks over and over."[69] He speaks with disdain of men who would succumb to courtship and marriage as "Womens Asses: . . . [who] are forced to undergo Dressing, Dancing, Singing, Sighing, Whining, Rhyming,

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[67] Note, for instance, the following conversation of Bellmour and Sharper with Heartwell:

> Bell. Prithee how dost thou love?
> Sharp. He! he hates the Sex.
> Heart. So I hate Physick too--yet I may love to take it for my Health.
> Bell. Well come off, George, if at any time you should be taken straying.
> Sharp. He has need of such an Excuse, considering the present state of his Body.
> Heart. How d'ye mean?
> Sharp. Why if whoring be purging (as you call it) then I may say, Marriage, is entering into a Course of Physick.
> (The Old Batchelor, I, iv.)

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

Flattering, Lying, Grinning, Cringing, and the drudgery of Loving to boot."[70] The "incumbrances" he would forego; he would have "everybody be what they pretend to be; a Whoremaster be a Whoremaster."[71] But because he is false to his own convictions, he is seen as a ludicrous dupe when he is ensnared by the machinations of the artful Silvia, former mistress to Vainlove. He is "fawning upon a little tawdry Whore," despite himself, and his viewpoint comically changes:

> Oh Manhood, where art thou! What am I come to? A Woman's Toy; at these Years! . . . O Dotage, Dotage! That ever that noble Passion, Lust, should ebb to this degree--No reflux of vigorous Blood: But milky Love, supplies the empty Channels; and prompts me to the Softness of a Child--a meer Infant and would suck. Can you love me Silvia? Speak. 72

This is the beginning of Heartwell's degradation, and he has forfeited all sympathy. "Ha, ha, ha, an old Fox trapt,"[73] exclaims Sylvia. The wits prod him unmercifully. "Thou hast sold thyself to Laughter," says Bellmour; "the ill-natur'd Town will find the Jest just where thou hast lost it."[74] The hypocritical old bachelor is finally made even more ridiculous by being tricked into a spurious marriage with Sylvia, who is exposed to him as Vainlove's former mistress and now a proposed bawd to Sharper. And

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., III, iii.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

finally in the words of the amused Sharper, Congreve drove his moral home: "My old Batchelor marry'd! That were a jest. Ha, ha, ha . . . .

> Thus Grief still treads upon the Heels of Pleasure:
> Marry'd in Haste, we may repent at Leisure." 75

Even though Congreve's aim was obviously not a strictly moral one, The Old Batchelor may be interpreted as presenting a morally edifying truth, despite the lasciviousness of some of the scenes. With this first play, Congreve made an impressive entrée into the literary world, and although it shows an immaturity of wit and an obvious use of stock devices, in it are seen the signs of genius which point the way to the greater wit and more subtle morality of The Way of the World.

In his second play, The Double-Dealer (1694), Congreve did not uphold the standards of pure wit which he set forth in his first comedy and which he developed further in his later comedies. Although many scenes sparkle with a wit as lively as any in the best Restoration tradition, Congreve seems primarily to have had a moral purpose in mind. In his "Epistle Dedicatory," Congreve explained that he wrote the play "as a Builder may say he has built a House according to the Model laid down before him. . . . I designed the Moral first, and to that Moral I invented the Fable. . . ." 76

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75 Ibid., IV, x.

76 Congreve, p. 114.

Because of this preoccupation with a didactic purpose, this play presents a problem. It has an atmosphere of melodrama, which is "strangely opposed to the usual temper of Restoration comedy."[77] The usual emphasis on the truewit's outwitting the pretenders to wit is overshadowed by the "great deal of concern with barefaced villainy."[78] The mendacious intrigues of the villain Maskwell and the vengeful passion of his accomplice Lady Touchwood seem incongruous in the gossamer world of the wit and levity which pervades part of the play. That The Double-Dealer was not a success with Congreve's audience may perhaps stem from the fact that "the standards in the play are inconsistent."[79] Congreve perhaps realized this himself, and the standards he set forth seem a deviation from his usual amoral purpose. He seemed overly concerned that he might have caused offense in the Machiavellian portrayal of Maskwell and Lady Touchwood: "They who are Virtuous or Discreet, should not be offended, for such Characters as these distinguish them, and make their beauties more shining and observ'd."[80] It is this concern that virtue triumph over evil which gives the play its melodramatic atmosphere, and its moralistic intent detracts from the brilliance of its wit.

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[77] Lynch, p. 186.

[78] Fujimura, 171.

[79] Ibid. For a detailed account of the stage reputation of Congreve's comedies, see Emmett L. Avery, Congreve's Plays on the Eighteenth-Century Stage (New York, 1951), pp. 1-19.

[80] Congreve, p. 117.

> Congreve here has roused his moral sense at the cost of putting his esthetic sensibilities to sleep. He is in a mood to arraign and condemn, but the villainy he would arraign in Maskwell, the vengefulness he would condemn in Lady Touchwood, cannot be coupled with comedy. . . . Congreve, though wearing moral harness, is personally reacting against nothing; his indictment is all made to order. He is what might be called a hack moralist. . . . [81]

Congreve's "made-to-order" morality is conventional in the denouement of the play. The villains are exposed and driven forth from the world of the virtuous. "Though all is not well that ends well, the curtain no longer falls on the dishonoured husband amid derisive laughter."[82] This is an ironic outcome for a Congreve comedy.

But however the melodramatic Maskwell-Lady Touchwood plot may overshadow the play, it does not entirely obscure the brilliance of Congreve's wit, which shines through the gloom despite the odds. Palmer stated that "The Double-Dealer is a masterpiece--with reservations. . . . The lighter seenes are as perfect Congreve as any in The Way of the World."[83] However, the animated wit combats between the lovers during courtship are conspicuously marked by solemnity, disillusionment, and an emphasis upon judgment rather than fanciful levity. Mellefont and Cynthia lack the spirited, debonair wit of Bellmour and Belinda. "They are both

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[81] Kronenberger, pp. 123-124.

[82] Nettleton, p. 124.

[83] Palmer, Restoration Comedy, p. 180.

too level-headed and too serious about life to indulge in much fanciful wit or repartee."[84] Their first encounter in the play has a ponderous, fatalistic quality, and it stands in sharp contrast to Belinda's coquettish railings at Bellmour and Millamant's polished repartee with Mirabell in the proviso scene of The Way of the World,[85] although it is marked by a witty use of similitudes and intellectual banter.

> Mel. You're thoughtful, Cynthia?
> Cynt. I'm thinking, tho' Marriage makes Man and Wife one Flesh, it leaves 'm still two Fools; and they become more conspicuous by setting off one another.
> Mel. That only when two Fools meet, and their Follies are oppos'd.
> Cynt. Nay, I have known two Wits meet, and by the Opposition of their Wit, render themselves as ridiculous as Fools. 'Tis an odd Game we're going to Play at: What think you of drawing Stakes, and giving over in time?
> Mel. No, hang't, that's not endeavouring to win, because it's possible we may lose; since we have shuffled and cut, let's e'en turn up Trump now.
> Cynt. Then I find it's like Cards, if either of us have a good Hand it is an Accident of Fortune.
> Mel. No, Marriage is rather like a Game at Bowls, Fortune indeed makes the Match, . . . but the Game depends intirely upon Judgement.
> Cynt. Still it is a Game, and consequently one of us must be a loser

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84 Fujimura, p. 172.

85 Palmer contends, however, that "Mellefont's dialogue with Cynthia . . . is the germ of that more brilliant scene between Mirabell and Millamant . . . "(Comedy of Manners, p. 181). But for an interpretation of this scene as serious and lacking the levity of typical truewits, see Fujimura, p. 172.

Mel. Not at all; only a friendly Trial of Skill, and the Winnings to be laid out in an Entertainment. [86]

This scene, showing a grave disillusionment about marriage, is hardly typical of the attitude of truewits,[87] and because there is always a cognizance of foreboding evil throughout the play, they are "more preyed upon than praying, and the outwitting situation gets out of their hands into those of Maskwell and Lady Touchwood."[88]

But if the evil protagonists monopolize the outwitting situations, the comic element of the play is almost entirely in the hands of the coxcombs and witwoulds, who dominate whole scenes with riotous attempts to ape the manners of the fashionable world and to affect true wit.[89] Even the most

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[86] The Double-Dealer, II, iii.

[87] Even the usually scintillating song which ends the scene has a singular tone of sadness:

> Prithee Cynthia look behind you,
> Age and Wrinkles will o'take you;
> Then too late Desire will find you:
> Think o think o' th' sad Condition,
> To be past, yet wish Fruition.

(Ibid.)

[88] Fujimura, p. 176.

[89] In referring to these scenes dealing with false wit, Palmer contends that "manners alone are the theme" (Comedy of Manners, p. 185). But Fujimura refutes this by saying that "these scenes are utilized by Congreve for the familiar purpose of exposing creatures without wit" (p. 174).

unschooled audiences should have no trouble recognizing their antics. In The Double-Dealer are some of Congreve's most memorable passages of false wit exemplified in the characters of Lord Froth, "A Solemn Coxcomb"; Brisk, "A pert Coxcomb"; Lady Froth, "A great Coquet; pretender to Poetry, Wit, and Learning"; and Lady Plyant, "Insolent to her Husband, and easie to any Pretender."[90]

Lord Froth is exposed as a ridiculous pretender to wit because in his affected dignity he would feign have a blasé understanding beyond the reach of even the poets themselves and would not condescend to laughter no matter how worthy the thrust of wit. Yet, in spite of his staid pose, he is easily made a gull by even so pert a witwould as Brisk.

> Ld. Froth. . . . I assure you, . . . I laugh at no Bodies Jest but my own, or a Lady's . . . .
> Brisk. How? how, my Lord? what affront my Wit! Let me perish, do I never say any thing worthy to be laugh'd at?
> Ld. Froth. O foy, don't misapprehend me, I don't say so, for I often smile at your Conceptions. But there is nothing more unbecoming to a Man of Quality, than to laugh; 'tis such a vulgar Expression of the Passion; every Body can laugh. . . . ridiculous! To be pleased with what pleases the Croud! Now when I laugh, I always laugh alone.
> Brisk. I suppose that's because you laugh at your own Jests, I' gad, ha, ha, ha.
> Ld. Froth. He, he, I swear tho', your Raillery provokes me to a Smile.
> Brisk. Ay, my Lord, it's a sign I hit you in the Teeth, if you show 'em.
> Ld. Froth. He, he, he, I swear that's so very pretty, I can't forbear. 91

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90 Congreve, p. 122.

91 The Double-Dealer, I,iv.

Congreve further used the character of Lord Froth to expose the foppery of the witwould at the theater. Still hounded about his disinclination to laugh, Lord Froth is asked why he attends the theater, if not for laughter. Not to be daunted, he expounds:

> To distinguish my self from the Commonalty, and mortifie the Poets; the Fellows grow so conceited, when any of their foolish Wit prevails upon the Side-Boxes.--I swear--he, he, he, I have often constrain'd my Inclinations to laugh--he, he, he, to avoid giving them Encouragement. 92

Brisk, too, is a pretender to wit, but he is more adept in his thrusts and more nearly succeeds in his aim. In the eyes of the other fops he passes very well for a truewit. "Pooh," exclaims Lord Froth, ". . . all the World allows Mr. Brisk to have Wit; my Wife says he has a great deal. I hope you think her a Judge."[93] Even Mellefont, speaking to Careless, concedes (with reservations) that Brisk is "a good natur'd Coxcombe, and has very entertaining Follies."[94] Brisk is able to disguise his lack of judgment by his garrulity,[95] but when he is musing alone rehearsing his affectations to trap the frivolous Lady Froth, he exposes his shallow nature and his lack of perspicacity:

> So now . . . I have an Opportunity to practise.--Ah! My dear Lady Froth! . . . Now to make my Approaches--Hem hem! Ah Ma- (Bows.) dam!--Pox on't, why should I

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92 Ibid., I, v.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., I, iii.

95 Fujimura, p. 174.

disparage my Parts by thinking what to say? None but dull Rogues *think*. . . . 96

Lady Froth is perhaps the most broadly funny witwould in the play. A great pretender to learning, she pedantically explains word definitions in case the listener "escap'd the etymology,"[97] and she advises Cynthia to write to give vent to the "Whimsies and Vapors" of love.

Cynt. Write, what?
L. *Froth*. Songs, Elegies, Satires, Encomiums, Panegyricks, Lampoons, Plays or Heroick Poems.
Cynt. O Lord, not I, Madam; I'm content to be a courteous Reader.
L. *Froth*. O Inconsistent! In Love, and not write! If my Lord and I had been both of your Temper, we had never come together, . . . --But I'm the more amaz'd to find you a Woman of Letters and not write! Bless me! how can *Mellefont* believe you love him? 98

Soon, Lady Froth is indeed composing a heroic poem about a coachman named Jehu and a dairy maid. The poetic palaver which ensues between Lady Froth and Brisk is a rollicking *reductio ad absurdum* of the witwould in all his affected glory.

Brisk. . . . My Lord was telling me, your Ladyship has made an Essay toward an Heroick Poem.
L. *Froth*. Did my Lord tell you? Yes I vow, and the Subject is my Lord's Love to me. And what do you think I call it? I dare swear you won't guess-- *The Sillabub*, ha, ha, ha.
Brisk. Because my Lord's Title's *Froth*, I'gad, ha, ha, ha, duce take me very *à Propos* and surprizing, ha, ha, ha.

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[96] *The Double-Dealer*, IV, v.

[97] *Ibid*., II, i.

[98] *Ibid*.

L. Froth. He, ay, is not it?--And then I call my Lord Spumoso; and my self, what d'ye think I call my self?
Brisk. Lactilla may be,--'gad I cannot tell.
L. Froth. Biddy, that's all; just my own Name.
Brisk. Biddy! I'gad very pretty--Duce take me if your Ladyship has not the Art of surprizing the most naturally in the World,--I hope you'll make me happy in communicating the Poem.
L. Froth. O, you must be my confident, I must ask your advice. 99

Brisk's advice is no less ludicrous than the poem itself:

L. Froth. . . . [Reads]
For as the Sun shines ev'ry Day,
So of our Coachman I may say.
Brisk. I'm afraid that Simile won't do in wet Weather--Because you say the Sun shines ev'ry Day.
L. Froth. No, for the Sun it won't, but it will do for the Coachman, for you know there's most Occasion for a Coach in wet Weather.
Brisk. Right, right, that saves all.
L. Froth. Then I don't say the Sun shines all the Day, but that he peeps now and then, yet he does shine all the Day too, you know, tho' we don't see him.
Brisk. Right, but the Vulgar will never comprehend that.
L. Froth. Well, you shall hear--let me see. [Reads]
For as the Sun shines ev'ry Day,
So, of our Coach-man I may say
He shows his drunken fiery Face,
Just as the Sun does, more or less.
Brisk. That's right, all's well, all's well. More or less. 100

Brisk further advises Lady Froth to clarify certain built-in obscurities with "a small Asterism" in the marginal notes "to prevent Criticism."[101]

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99 Ibid., II, ii.

100 Ibid., III, ix.

101 Ibid.

Lady Plyant, step-mother to Cynthia and imperious wife to the doting Sir Paul Plyant, affects a pious wit, yet would flatter herself with numerous fabricated love intrigues. Careless complains that he cannot "get an Answer from her, that does not begin with her Honour, or her Virtue, her Religion, or some such Cant."[102] Also, she consented to marry Sir Paul only after nine years' courtship, and she gives him few liberties in bed. She "has him swaddled up in Blankets, and his Hands and Feet swath'd down, . . . and there he lies with a great Beard, like a Russian Bear upon a drift of Snow."[103] This picture of connubial bliss was hardly a Restoration ideal, and Congreve's lively wit is here barbed with satire and exposes the ridiculous false standards of propriety in the witwould who would affect a circumspect morality.

The Double-Dealer, inconsistent in its standard of wit and tinged with a moralistic melodrama not desirable in a pure wit comedy, nevertheless was a forward stride in Congreve's art. The faults of the play are conspicuous: The moral purpose does not mix well with the wit, and the villainous element very nearly turns it into a sensational melodrama worthy of Shirley or Ford.[104] The moral outcome is handled in the conventional way; the villains are punished and the

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[102] Ibid., III, v.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Snider, p. 11.

virtuous rewarded, and however this may detract from the wit in the comedy, it does not entirely obscure it. The wit derives mainly from the pretenders to wit, who, through their ridiculous antics, present some of the most entertaining scenes in Congreve. "They are the most idiotic for being worldly and even witty; all the worse popinjays for having a genuine instinct for elegance; all the sillier flirts for knowing the true nature of flattery. . . . They are . . . rather disturbingly like ourselves."[105]

Congreve's third comedy, Love for Love (1695), was his greatest theatrical success.[106] Relatively speaking, in terms of modern theatrical jargon, it was a "smash-hit," and even during the eighteenth century when Congreve's comedies were no longer fashionable, Love for Love was more highly regarded than any other of his five comedies.[107] From Congreve's remarks in the prologue to the play it is obvious that he was soliciting

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105 Kronenberger, p. 125.

106 "Love for Love is . . . Congreve's best theater piece; along with Wycherley's The Country Wife it perhaps constitutes the most actable Restoration comedy for the present-day stage" (Kronenberger, p. 128).

107 "It was beyond any doubt the most popular on the stage. It was acted approximately 435 times in the century . . . and that figure represents a third of the performances of all of Congreve's plays " (Avery, p. 155).

audience approval.[108] He utilized popular stage conventions culled from the Elizabethan and précieuse traditions[109] and instilled into them all the salient elements vital to a comedy of manners in the Restoration wit tradition. The truewits are set off to their best advantage in full control of the outwitting situations; the wit combats are brilliantly executed in an attitude of levity and libertine sexuality; the witwoulds make ample asses of themselves aping their betters; and the wit manifests a fine balance between judgment (decorum) and fancy, which is indicative of the mature Congreve. Love for Love is also marked by "more outright sexual wit . . . than any other of Congreve's comedies."[110] Nevertheless, from an unbiased

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[108] Speaking of it as a "First-fruit Offering," Congreve set the congenial tone of Love for Love:

> We hope there's something that my please each taste,
> And tho' of Homely Fare we make the feast,
> Yet you will find Variety at least.
> There's humor, which for chearful Friends we got,
> And for the thinking Party there's a Plot.
> We've something too, to gratifie ill Nature,
> (If there be any here) and that is Satire.
> Tho' Satire scarce dares grin, 'tis grown so mild
> Or only shews its Teeth, as if it smil'd.
> As Asses Thistles, Poets mumble Wit,
> And dare not bite, for fear of being bit.

(Congreve, p. 217.)

[109] For a discussion of the stock dramatic conventions used by Congreve in Love for Love, see Lynch, pp. 186-198, and Kronenberger, pp. 128-130.

[110] Fujimura, p. 183.

viewpoint it may be interpreted as having moral overtones. The hero Valentine, for instance, though professing libertinism, conducts himself with propriety. "Actually Valentine is a rather reformed libertine, and he reveals a fundamentally sound (and even moral) character."[111] However, the allusions in the first act to his former dissipation leave little doubt that he has been profligate, and his present asceticism is attributed to a lack of funds. We know, for instance, that he has fathered more than one illegitimate child, and when "bouncing Margery," a whore who works so hard in her profession that she smells "vigorously,"[112] comes to the door with one of his children seeking relief, Valentine exclaims to his servant, Jeremy:

> Pox on her, cou'd she find no other time to fling my Sins in my Face: Here, give her this ⟨ Gives Mony. ⟩ and bid her trouble me no more; a thoughtless two handed Whore, she knows my Condition well enough, and might have overlaid the Child a Fortnight ago, if she had had any forecast in her. [113]

But, on the other hand, during the play he remains faithful to Angelica, who is such a coquettish wit that he is almost

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[111] Ibid., p. 179.

[112] The plain-dealing Scandal sends word to "bid Margery put more Flocks in her Bed, shift twice a Week, and not work so hard, that she may not smell so vigorously" (Love for Love, I, iv).

[113] Ibid.

distracted with infatuation for her. Feigning madness to avoid signing a deed relinquishing his right of inheritance from his father, Sir Sampson Legend, Valentine would have Angelica confess her love, but she cleverly holds him off with the foil of her wit:[114]

> Val. . . . My seeming Madness has deceiv'd my Father, and procur'd me time to think of Means to reconcile me to him; and preserve the right of my Inheritance to his Estate. . . .
> Ang. How! I thought your Love of me had caus'd this Transport in your soul; which, it seems you only counterfeited; for mercenary Ends, and sordid Interest.
> Val. Nay, now you do me Wrong; for it any Interest was consider'd it was yours; since I thought I wanted more than Love, to make me worthy of you.
> Ang. Then you thought me mercenary--But how am I deluded by this interval of Sense, to reason with a Madman? [115]

Having fully displayed the force of her wit, Angelica prepares to leave, and Valentine, in desperation, exclaims, "You are not leaving me in this Uncertainty?" She replies, "Would any thing, but a Madman, complain of Uncertainty? Uncertainty and Expectation are the Joy of Life."[116]

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[114] However, Lynch observed that "the love interest is for once largely obscured by other issues; . . . Similitude debates do not occur between the young lovers. . . . The brief masquerading encounters of the pair are in no way memorable" (p. 198).

[115] Love for Love, IV, xviii.

[116] Ibid., IV, xx.

But if Angelica is able to dominate Valentine with an antagonistic wit, she is also able to dupe his father, Sir Sampson, a ribald old wit, by pretending a libidinous love for him and thereby tricking him into a counterfeit marriage contract. Their exchange of wit is characterized by a verbal sexuality, which in its playful moral detachment exposes Sir Sampson's lustful nature, but, at the same time, since it is only concerned with the sexuality of marriage, it does not undermine any of the venerated precepts of virtue.

> Sir Samp. Odd, you're cunning, a wary Baggage!. . . . --Body o' me, I have a Trick to turn the Settlement upon the Issue Male of our two Bodies begotten. Odsbud, let us find Children, and I'll find an Estate!
>
> Ang. Will you? Well, do you find the Estate, and leave t'other to me--. . .
>
> Sir Samp. ..Odzooks, I'm a young Man, and . . . Odd, you're devilish handsome: Faith and Troth, you're very handsome, and I'm very young and very lusty--Odsbud, Hussy, you know how to chuse . . . Give me your Hand, odd, let me kiss it . . .--give me t'other, and I'll mumble 'em, and kiss 'em, 'till they melt in my mouth.
>
> Ang. Hold, Sir Sampson--You're profuse of your Vigour before your time: You'll spend your Estate before you come to it.
>
> Sir Samp. . . . Ah! Baggage--I warrant you for little Sampson: Odd, Sampson's a very good Name for an able Fellow: Your Sampsons were strong Dogs from the Beginning.
>
> Ang. Have a care, and don't over-act your Part--If you remember, Sampson, the strongest of the Name, pull'd an old House over his Head at last. 117

In addition to the singular clarity of the wit, the finesse

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117 Ibid., V, ii.

of the plot structure[118] and the well-drawn character delineations of truewits in outwitting situations make Love for Love good theater as well as good wit comedy, but it is a memorable play also for the classic caricature of the country bumpkin, Miss Prue, being initiated into the mendacious way of the fashionable world of manners by Tattle, a pompous wit-would[119] who "will speak aloud in the Posture of a Whisper" and who specializes in calumny and gossip under the guise of secrecy. The seduction scene is one of the most humorously risqué in all of Congreve; yet it is carried out with such innocuous levity that only the most impressionable moralist need actually fear for Miss Prue's virginity. Left alone with Miss Prue to "perswade her out of her Innocency,"[120] Tattle, for all his affected wit, gives an accurate description of the duplicity of civilized society, and Miss Prue epitomizes all the country ingénues learning about the "wicked" life of the city. The scene has the mark of universality.

> Miss. . . . What shall you and I do together?
> Tatt. I must make Love to you, pretty Miss; will you let me make Love to you?
> Miss. Yes, if you please.

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[118] There are contradicting opinions on this point. In comparing Love for Love with The Double-Dealer, Palmer stated that "it is the most loosely written of his comedies" (Comedy of Manners, p. 189). Fujimura, on the other hand, maintained that the "structure is more unified" (p. 177).

[119] Love for Love, I, x.

[120] Ibid., II, x.

Tatt. Frank, I gad, at least. . . .
Miss. Well; and how will you make Love to me--Come, I long to have you begin--must I make Love too? You must tell me how.
Tatt. You must let me speak Miss, you must not speak first; I must ask you Questions, and you must answer.
Miss. What, is it like the Catechism?--Come then ask me.
Tatt. D'ye think you can love me?
Miss. Yes.
Tatt. Pooh, Pox, you must not say yes already; I shan't care a Farthing for you then in a twinkling.
Miss. What must I say then?
Tatt. Why you must say no, or you believe not, or you can't tell--
Miss. Why, must I tell a Lie then?
Tatt. Yes if you'd be well bred. All well-bred Persons Lie--Besides, you are a Woman, you must never speak what you think: Your Words must contradict your Thoughts; but your Actions may contradict your Words. So, when I ask you, if you can love me, you must say no, but you must love me too--If I tell you you are handsome, you must deny it, and say I flatter you--But you must think yourself more charming than I speak you. . . . If I ask you to kiss me, you must be angry, but you must not refuse me. If I ask you for more, you must be more angry,--but more complying; and as soon as ever I make you say you'll cry out, you must be sure to hold your Tongue.
Miss. O Lord, I swear this is pure,--I like it better than our old fashion'd Country way of speaking one's Mind;--and must not you lie too?
Tatt. Hum--Yes--But you must believe I speak Truth.
Miss. O Gemini! Well, I always had a great Mind to tell Lies--but they frighted me, and said it was a Sin.
Tatt. Well, my pretty Creature; will you make me happy by giving me a Kiss?
Miss. No, indeed; I'm angry at you.--
[Runs and kisses him.]
Tatt. Hold, hold, that's pretty well--but you should not have give it me, but have suffer'd me to have taken it.
Miss. Well, we'll do it again.
Tatt. With all my Heart--Now then my little Angel.
[Kisses her.]
Miss. Pish.
Tatt. That's right,--again my Charmer.[Kisses again.]
Miss. O fie, nay, now I can't abide you.

Tatt. Admirable! That was as well as if you had been born in Covent-Garden,--And won't you shew me, pretty Miss, where your Bed-Chamber is?
Miss. No, indeed won't I: but I'll run there, and hide myself from you behind the Curtains.
Tatt. I'll follow you.
Miss. Ah, but I'll hold the Door with both Hands, and be angry--and you shall push me down before you come in.
Tatt. No, I'll come in first, and push you down afterwards.
Miss. Will you? then I'll be more angry, and more complying.
Tatt. Then I'll make you cry out.
Miss. Oh but you shan't, for I'll hold my Tongue--
Tatt. Oh my dearapt Scholar. 121

In Love for Love Congreve recaptured much of the cynical, naturalistic wit first manifested in The Old Batchelor but expressed it with more maturity and proportion. Unlike The Double-Dealer, Love for Love has no specific moral purpose, nor can much moral edification be read into the scenes. Angelica's observation in the play's closing couplet can hardly be taken as a moral aphorism:

The Miracle to Day is, that we find
A Lover true: Not that a Woman's Kind. 122

In thus commenting on the vogue of infidelity exemplified in his plays, Congreve was playing into the hands of the moralists. 123 Love for Love certainly reflects the essence of the Restoration spirit of wit, but it is doubtful that in the

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121 Ibid., II, xi.

122 Ibid., V, xii.

123 For example, Macaulay, in supporting the Collier attack, quoted this couplet as incriminating evidence against the morality of Love for Love (Macaulay, p. 526).

play "Congreve reveals himself as a poet pleading for finer living."[124]

However, Congreve's last comedy, The Way of the World (1700), does indeed reflect the increasing moral atmosphere which emanated at the end of the century. "In The Way of the World, Congreve brought Restoration comedy up to the very frontiers of respectability; except for his much greater brilliance, he all but joins hands with . . . Sheridan."[125]

Congreve's wit in this play is tempered--to a degree--with morality. Yet it is a morality so subtle and unobtrusive that it has eluded the attention of most literary critics, who interpret the play as a final statement of Congreve's acquiescence in a world no more profound than the latest fashion and no more serious than a polished epigram can express. "'Tis but the Way of the World"[126] indeed, and it is not a very pretty way. Congreve does not paint us the devil, as in a morality play, to frighten us into the paths of righteousness, but he does expose the treachery of those who would hide malice and ribaldry behind the mask of wit. The elect are now to be judged by a standard of sense and propriety as well as wit. Mirabell, a truewit in the fullest sense, fulfills much more than the mere Restoration ideal.

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[124] Dobrée, p. 138.

[125] Wain, p. 383.

[126] Way of the World, V, xi.

He is a gentleman with a keen sense of discretion and gracious regard for taste and good breeding. He is unique among the truewits of Restoration comedy because he not only displays a lively wit balanced by fancy and judgment, but he also emanates a moral reserve.[127] He is a libertine with a conscience. He can scheme with the best of the double dealers, but his seeming indifference to the feelings of others is a conscious affectation. In the opening scene of the play Mirabell, obviously out of humor because of Millamant's coolness, is seen as a man of ethical discernment and sensibility. "I confess," he says, "I am not one of those Coxcombs who are apt to interpret a Woman's good manners to her Prejudice; and think that she who does not refuse 'em ev'ry

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[127] Observe, for instance, his sagacious censure of the witwould Petulant, who delights in embarrassing the ladies with ribald jests:

> Mira. . . . Let not us be accessary to your putting the Ladies out of Countenance, with your senseless Ribaldry; which you roar out aloud as often as they pass by you; and when you make handsome Woman blush, then you think you have been severe.
> Pet. . . . Then let 'em either shew their Innocence by not understanding what they hear, or else shew their Discretion by not hearing what they wou'd not be thought to understand.
> Mira. But hast not thou then Sense enough to know that thou ought'st to be most asham'd thy self, when thou hast put another out of Countenance. . . ?
>
> Where Modesty's ill Manners, 'tis but fit
> That Impudence and Malice pass for Wit.

(Ibid., I, ix.)

thing, can refuse 'em nothing."[128] His companion, Fainall, sums up Mirabell's circumspect character in his reply:

> You are a gallant Man, Mirabell; and tho' you may have Cruelty enough, not to satisfie a Lady's longing; you have too much Generosity, not to be tender of her Honour. Yet you speak with an Indifference which seems to be affected; and confesses you are conscious of a Negligence. [129]

Mirabell's wit also has a decided moral overtone in his perceptive observation that a man's respectability in society is based on the false standard of reputation:

> Why do we daily commit disagreeable and dangerous Actions? To save that Idol Reputation. . . . I knew Fainall to be a Man lavish of his Morals, an interested and professing Friend, a false and designing lover; yet one whose Wit and outward fair Behaviour, have gain'd a Reputation with the Town. 130

The moral stated in the couplet at the end of the play--"For each Deceiver to his Cost may find,/ That Marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind"--[131] clearly points out that Congreve's aim in the play was not only to distinguish the true-wit from the witwould (as he stated in the dedicatory epistle) but also to distinguish between the man who accepts deceit as the way of the world and the man who repudiates it. It is Fainall, the deceiver, who points out sardonically that

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[128] Ibid., I, i.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid., II, iii.

[131] Ibid., V, xiv.

corruption is "but the Way of the World,"[132] but the truewits are rewarded at the end of the play on the basis of their virtue as well as their wit.

Yet, the failure of The Way of the World on the stage in 1700 did not derive from any moral basis, nor from the public's changing taste toward morality initiated by the Collier attack.[133] The problem of wit is more pertinent than ever here since The Way of the World--despite the overtones of morality--beautifully fulfills the Restoration concepts of wit, but to such a brilliant degree that the wit proves to be the play's undoing from an audience viewpoint. The wit is far too sententious, introspective, and esoteric to be fully comprehended at a performance, and since its failure in 1700, it has been considered primarily a closet drama.[134] "Theatrically it

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[132] Ibid., V, xi. Fujimura concisely makes this point, taking issue with Palmer's assertion that "there is an equable finality about the morality of The Way of the World--a dead level of conscience against which is vividly thrown a brilliant variety of manners and habits" (Comedy of Manners, p. 192). Fujimura contends, on the other hand, that this is a gross misunderstanding of the play and that "Congreve repudiates the way of the world, for he censures Fainall, Marwood, Petulant, and Witwoud, who conform to the world as it is" (p. 195).

[133] Fujimura, p. 184.

[134] Congreve himself stated in the dedicatory epistle that he was writing for the literati: "For but little of it was prepar'd for that general Taste which seems now to be predominant in the Pallats of our Audience. . . . It is only by the Countenance of . . . the Few so qualify'd, that such who write with Care and Pains can hope to be distinguished" (pp. 336-337).

moves too slow, with talk when one would welcome action. . . . Verbally it moves too fast: the wit has us panting and puffing to keep up with it. Such writing is too concise for the stage."[135]

Critics are generally unanimous in their approbation of The Way of the World as the pinnacle of Congreve's wit and even of all English comedy.[136] However, they are not in agreement about the significance of the wit nor the consistency of its brilliance. Meredith, for instance, points out an example of Congreve's schoolish, "hack-word" wit. Witwoud and Mirabell are discussing the eminent arrival of Sir Wilfull Witwoud, a country bumpkin:

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135 Kronenberger, p. 135. For other proposed reasons for the failure of The Way of the World, cf. Armstrong, pp. 140-141; Dobrée, pp. 138-139; Fujimura, pp. 184-185; Nettleton, pp. 129-130; Nicoll, p. 243; Palmer, Comedy of Manners, pp. 190-192.

136 Kronenberger's concise evaluation of the wit in this play may be taken as an example: "The point about The Way of the World is not just that it boasts a great deal more wit or a great deal better; . . . Wit in The Way of the World is not one of the ingredients of the play, but its essential nature. . . . The wit of The Way of the World is not a matter of how many brilliant remarks Congreve may have written, but is in itself a way of writing, even a way of thinking. If you tried to paraphrase a speech in The Way of the World you would have hardly more luck than if you tried to paraphrase a stanza of the Ode to a Nightingale. The idea is completely married to the words, and if you will kill off the words, the idea--like a hindu widow--will fling itself into the same grave" (pp. 133-134).

> Wit. . . . A Messenger . . . has brought me a Letter from the Fool my Brother, as heavy as a Panegyrick in a Funeral Sermon . . . . And what's worse, 'tis as sure a Forerunner of the Author, as an Epistle Dedicatory.
> Mira. A Fool, and your Brother, Witwoud!
> Wit. Ay, ay, my half Brother. My half Brother he is, no nearer upon Honour.
> Mira. Then 'tis possible he may be but half a Fool.
> Wit. Good, good, Mirabell, le drole! 137

The scene in which Millamant encounters Sir Wilfull also has this "hack-word" quality, although the doggerel pun derives from the imbecility of Sir Wilfull, from whom such balderdash is expected. In the fashion of a truewit, Millamant is reading Suckling when Sir Wilfull comes to make his addresses to her.

> Milla. . . . Natural, easie Suckling!
> Sir Wil. Anan? Suckling? No such Suckling neither, Cousin, nor Stripling: I thank Heav'n I'm no Minor.
> Milla. Ah Rustic, ruder than Gothick. 138

However, doggerel wit is not typical of the play, and The Way of the World is rightfully regarded as an exemplar of Restoration wit. It presents prime examples of the male truewit in the character of Mirabell, of the female truewit in the character of Millamant, of the witwoud in the

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137 Way of the World, I, vi. Meredith comments that "this is a sort of wit one remembers to have heard at school. . . . It was, no doubt, a blaze of intellectual fireworks to the bumpkin squire who came to London to go to the theatre and learn manners" (p. 100).

138 Ibid., IV, iv.

characters of Witwoud[139] and Petulant,[140] of the country witless in the character of Sir Wilfull Witwoud, and of the coquettish witwoud ungracefully grown old in the character of Lady Wishfort.

The wit of Millamant easily dominates the play. One feels her presence long before she enters midway in the second act "full Sail, with her Fan spread and Streamers out, and a Shoal of Fools for Tenders."[141] Mirabell can talk of little else but her between wit combats with the fops who congregate at the local chocolate house. But no discussion about her, no matter how apt, could fully prepare the audience for Millamant's dazzling entrance amid "a Flock of gay fine Perukes

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139 Mirabell gives the quintessence of all pretenders to wit in his succinct description of Witwoud: "He is a Fool with a good Memory, and some few Scraps of other Folks Wit. He is one whose Conversation can never be approv'd, yet is now and then to be endur'd. . . . He so passionately affects the Reputation of understanding Raillery, that he will construe an Affront into a Jest; and call downright Rudeness and ill language, Satire and Fire" (Ibid., I, v).

140 Petulant affects social eminence by "calling for himself" at the chocolate house: "He wou'd slip. . . out of this Chocolate-house, just when you had been talking to him--As soon as your Back was turn'd--Whip he was gone;--Then trip to his Lodging, clap on a Hood and Scarf, and a Mask, slap into a Hackney-Coach, and drive hither to the Door again in a trice; where he wou'd send in for himself. . . . call for himself, wait for himself, nay and what's more, not finding himself, sometimes leave a Letter for himself" (Ibid., I, viii).

141 Ibid., II, iv.

hovering around . . . [her] . . . like Moths about a Candle."[142] Her wit is contagious. She compliments Mirabell's more serious wit, exposes Witwoud's false wit, and humorously brings out the wispy domestic wit of Mincing, her servant. Come to meet Mrs. Fainall in St. James's Park, she encounters Mirabell as well, and the scene which ensues fairly overflows with witty sillabub.

> Milla. Dear Mr. Witwoud, Truce with your Similitudes: for I am as Sick of 'em--
> Wit. As a Physician of a good Air--I cannot help it, Madam, tho' 'tis against myself.
> Milla. Yet again! Mincing, stand between me and his Wit.
> Wit. Do Mrs. Mincing, like a Skreen before a great Fire. I confess I do blaze to Day, I am too Bright.
> Mrs. Fain. But dear Millamant, why were you so long?
> Milla. Long! Lord, have I not made violent haste? I have ask'd every living Thing I met for you; I have enquir'd after you, as after a new Fashion.
> Wit. Madam, Truce with your Similitudes--No, you met her Husband, and did not ask him for her.
> Mira. By your leave Witwoud, that were like enquiring after an old Fashion, to ask a Husband for his Wife.
> Wit. Hum, a hit, a hit, a palpable hit, I confess it.
> Mrs. Fain. You were dress'd before I came abroad.
> Milla. Ay, that's true--O but then I had--Mincing, what had I? Why was I so long?
> Minc. O Mem, your Lashp staid to peruse a Pacquet of Letters.
> Milla. O ay, Letters--I had Letters--I am persecuted with Letters--I hate Letters--No Body knows how to write Letters; and yet one has 'em, one does not know why--They serve one to pin up one's Hair.
> Wit. Is that the way? Pray, Madam, do you pin up your Hair with all your Letters; I find I must keep copies.
> Milla. Only with those in Verse, Mr. Witwoud. I never pin up my Hair with Prose. I think I try'd once, Mincing.
> Minc. O Mem, I shall never forget it.

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142 Ibid.

Milla. Ay, poor Mincing tift and tift all the Morning.
Minc. 'Till I had the Cramp in my Fingers, I'll vow Mem. And all to no purpose. But when your Laship pins it up with Poetry, it sits so pleasant the next Day as any Thing, and is so pure and so crips.
Wit. Indeed, so crips? [143]
Minc. You're such a Critick, Mr. Witwoud.

But the wit is not all florid banter. Congreve's wit often has a sting. He does not gloss over the ugliness of the world's perfidious ways or the cruelty of coquettish love.[144] "Ones Cruelty is ones Power," exclaims Millamant.[145]

A victim of such cruelty is Lady Wishfort, Millamant's aunt, a foolish, venemous old pretender to wit whose frailty is a ridiculous affectation of passionate youth. Because of her vanity, she is easily flattered into believing that Mirabell's servant Waitwell, disguised as Sir Rowland, has come to court her. She is anxious to entrap the imagined Sir

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[143] Ibid.

[144] Note, for instance, the sadistic quality in the song Millamant is learning because, as she says, "'Tis agreeable to my Humour."

'Tis not to wound a wanton Boy
Or am'rous Youth, that gives the Joy;
But 'tis the Glory to have pierc'd a Swain,
For whom inferior Beauties sigh'd in vain.

Then I alone the Conquest prize,
When I insult a Rival's Eyes:
If there's delight in Love, 'tis when I see
That Heart which others bleed for, bleed for me.
(Ibid., III, xii.)

[145] Ibid., II, iv.

Rowland in a marriage contract, and in her haste to protest her chastity, she unwittingly anticipates Mrs. Malaprop.

> Lady. Well, Sir Rowland, . . . you are no Novice in the Labyrinth of Love. . . --But as I am a Person, Sir Rowland, you must not attribute my yielding to any sinister Appetite, or Indigestion of Widowhood; nor impute my Complacency to any Lethargy of Continence--I hope you do not think me prone to any Iteration of Nuptials.--
> Wait. Far be it from me--
> Lady. If you do, I protest I must recede--or think that I have made a Prostitution of Decorums, but in the Vehemence of Compassion, and to save the Life of a Person of so much Importance--
> Wait. I esteem it so--
> Lady. Or else you wrong my Condescension--
> Wait. I do not, I do not--
> Lady. Indeed you do.
> Wait. I do not, fair Shrine of Virtue.
> Lady. If you think the least Scruple of Carnality was an Ingredient--
> Wait. Dear Madam, no. You are all Camphire and Frankincense, all Chastity and Odour. 146

Meredith calls Lady Wishfort's raillery "the flow of boudoir billingsgate . . . unmatched for the vigor and pointedness of the tongue. . . . It . . . is, indeed, racy eloquence of the elevated fishwife."[147]

It is appropriate that The Way of the World ushered in the eighteenth century, for although it represents the ultimate in Restoration wit, it also maintains a sensible balance between wit and morality typical of the best of Pope. Congreve may sometimes be humorously risqué, but he is never crass. Many writers have been more broadly humorous, but none have written wit so concisely. But if its very

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146 Ibid., IV, xii.

147 Meredith, p. 101.

conciseness makes Congreve's wit appear artificial, it also makes it peerless. "Verbal wit was perhaps Congreve's highest value. . . . He was perhaps too subtle for his own good."[148]

There was nothing of the charlatan in Congreve, and beneath the glitter of his wit and the seeming indifference of his morality, there is a very subtle reality. "If in the scale of being there had to be a maidservant called Mincing, she would inevitably announce dinner as Congreve makes her: 'Mem, I am come to acquaint your Laship that dinner is impatient.'"[149]

Almost a century later Sheridan tried in vain to capture the essence of Congreve's art, for Sheridan was not quite the "literary patrician"[150] Congreve was. Congreve "does not just mirror Restoration manners; he embodies the civilized point of view."[151]

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148 Sherburn, p. 775.

149 Ibid.

150 Kronenberger, p. 118.

151 Ibid.

CHAPTER III

RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN

In 1776 when Sheridan became manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, he attempted to stimulate public interest in the outmoded comedy of the Restoration by reviving the comedies of Congreve, and later when he ostensibly modeled The School for Scandal on The Way of the World, he was recognized as "the modern Congreve" by his contemporaries.[1] Yet, what Sheridan achieved in his emulation of Congreve, in reaction against the sentimental comedy of the day, has variously been interpreted by critics as an authentic revival of the Restoration comic spirit on the one hand and as a complete travesty on the other. Nettleton stated, for instance that Sheridan's work "marks . . . the height of the reaction against sentimental drama. . . . He disarmed comedy of her weapon of sentiment . . . and reclaimed the Restoration comedy of manners . . . purged of offence."[2] Snider

[1] R. Crompton Rhodes, The Plays and Poems of Richard Brinsley Sheridan (New York, 1929), p. 5. Rhodes further stated that "in The School for Scandal, Sheridan vied with Congreve's masterpiece The Way of the World, yet unlike his illustrious predecessor he wrote a play that succeeded in the theatre beyond all precedent. . . . Congreve was Sheridan's model so far as any dramatist may be said to have been, always remembering . . . that the great poets go to their predecessors only to confirm what is already in themselves" (pp. 6-7).

[2] Nettleton, p. 291.

also stated that Sheridan is akin to Congreve "in both substance and spirit. . . . Sheridan managed to recapture the spirit of the previous century in his presentation of heartless women, scheming men, and . . . a cold and worldly-wise society."[3] However, most other critics are generally in agreement with Mudrick's statement that

> Sheridan, the presumptive inheritor of the tradition of Congreve, found his inheritance dissipated before he could lay his hands on it, and was . . . writing, not comedies of manners, but . . . good-natured sentimental dramas of comic intrigue and situation, which Fielding had acclaimed to fiction, in the guise of anti-sentimentalism, a generation before. 4

Indeed, during the eighteenth century, the cult of sentimentalism had so permeated the comic tradition that Sheridan, like Goldsmith before him, made concessions to audience taste[5] and evoked the sentimental

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[3]Snider, pp. 41-42. However, in the view of the opinion of most other critics, this statement is not entirely accurate, and Snider herself concedes that Sheridan, "to appease his own desire to follow the dictates of society, . . . frequently seasoned his comedy with sentimentality" (p. 42). Nicoll designates only School for Scandal as uniquely fulfilling Sheridan's aim. In it, Nicoll stated, "all is crystal clear. . . .The humor of the play is, as in the comedies of . . . Congreve, not the traits of mankind, but their social manners. With The School for Scandal we reach the culmination of the anti-sentimental movement" (British Drama, p. 295).

[4]Mudrick, p. 15. cf. Kronenberger, pp. 192-193; Krutch, pp. 252-53; Lamb, p. 215; Nicoll, British Drama, p. 294; Palmer, Comedy, p. 56; Rhodes, p. 7; Schiller, p. 694.

[5]"Sheridan was not so much interested in art for art's sake as in art for money's sake. . . . His inherited knowledge of the theatre made him realize that the simplest way to achieve the best results was that of pleasing the audience" (Snider, p. 41).

muse,[6] despite his assertion in the prologue to The Rivals that he was mocking the "woeful countenance" of sentimentality.[7]

Oliver Goldsmith had earlier attacked sentimental comedy in much the same vein. He chided the playwrights of the eighteenth century for lacking the vis comica and further asserted that sentimental comedy, contrary to the true purpose of comedy,

> aims at touching our passions, without the power of being truly pathetic. . . for while the comic poet is invading the province of the tragic muse, he leaves her lovely sister quite neglected. . . . If we are permitted to make comedy weep, we have an equal right to make tragedy laugh, and to set down in blank-verse the jests and repartee of all the attendants in a funeral procession.[8]

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[6] Allardyce Nicoll, Late Eighteenth Century Drama, 1750-1800 (Cambridge, 1952), p. 160.

[7] In referring to the image of comedy, Sheridan burlesqued the infringement of sentiment upon the domain of comedy:

> Must we displace her, and instead advance
> The goddess of the woefull countenance--
> The sentimental Muse? Her emblems view,
> The Pilgrim's Progress, and a sprig of rue!
> . . . . . .
> There, fix'd in usurpation, should she stand,
> She'll snatch the dagger from her sister's hand:
> And having made her votaries weep a flood,
> Good heaven! she'll end her comedies in blood--

(Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Complete Plays, edited by Nigel Playfair [London, 1930], p. 21. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Sheridan's plays will be to this edition.)

[8] Oliver Goldsmith, "A Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy," Works, edited by Peter Cunningham (New York, 1881), III, 379-380.

One of the distinguishing features of the sentimental comedy was an ostentation of virtue, and if it neglected wit as the basis of the comic impulse, it did not neglect morality as a basis of emotion. The audience wept because it was made to feel morally edified. Indeed, the comedy became so moral in tone that even the famous actor-manager David Garrick, who himself indulged in the "luxury of tears,"[9] made jokes about the "advisability of putting a steeple on the playhouse now that it was a temple of virtue."[10] The vigor of Restoration wit was emasculated by morality. Congreve had "left to his successors a heritage they could not intelligently administer."[11]

But if Sheridan for one tried to administer the heritage of Congreve, he did it only half-heartedly, because he was not primarily concerned in writing plays as literature but as popular stage pieces[12] and because the easiest way to popularity in the eighteenth century theater was to write exceedingly moral plays spiced with an affected wickedness and drenched in tears. The morality itself was a sham fastidiousness. "The erring . . . [were] shamed into virtue with

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[9] Sherburn, p. 1039.

[10] Ibid., p. 1042.

[11] Palmer, Comedy, p. 38.

[12] Nigel Playfair, Introduction to Complete Plays of Sheridan, p. 3.

surprising--and unconvincing--ease."[13] Sheridan may have attempted to dry the eyes of the comic muse by reviving the laughing comedy of wit, but he enervated his purpose by paying homage to morality. A character may conceivably be witty and moral at the same time (as in the case of Mirabell), but a deliberately didactic purpose annuls the force of his wit. In writing with an urbane wit clothed in morality, Sheridan composed a strange mélange of Restoration radiance and fashionable eighteenth century sensibility. "Sheridan spoiled his genius for comedy by complying with the fashion. He found comedy a tumbled ruin. . . . Instead of clearing the ground, . . . he adapted the ruin. . . . His plays are a perplexing blend of the dispassionate and the sentimental."[14]

But it was also true that by Sheridan's time the concept of wit had changed. Wit had taken on a "modern" quality. In analyzing this changing concept of wit, Wain stated that Samuel Johnson viewed wit as "that which upon its first production is immediately acknowledged to be just . . . [and also] the unexpected copulation of ideas."[15] This latter concept of wit survives today "in the impoverished modern notion of wit as intellectual agility manifested in the ability to make a special kind of joke."[16] Sheridan often

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[13] Sherburn, p. 1043.

[14] Palmer, Comedy, p. 56.

[15] Wain, p. 375.

[16] Ibid.

displayed smart repartee in his plays, but it is not quite the same thing as Congreve's sharp, skeptical, intellectual--and often profound--wit. Sheridan's wit has a glittering theatrical effectiveness which gives it artifice and humor but also giddiness and trumpery. Sheridan did not invite a perusal beneath the surface of his wit; he was concerned mainly with keeping up an appearance of propriety,[17] and his wit is generally no more profound than a moral platitude or a tear-stained posy can express. Sheridan's "world is often tidier than Congreve's . . . . But it is in every way tamer, at least where truth or revelation is concerned; for sheer superficial glitter it has almost never been equaled."[18]

However, Sheridan's first play, The Rivals (1775), does not display so much glitter as it does sheer "vanilla-flavored" farce.[19] The characters are stock farcical types in the "humors" tradition,[20] and although they talk in a lively manner, their factitious wit can hardly be considered in the best Congreve tradition. There are no truewits in Sheridan; virtue has usurped the domain of wit.

Despite its proverbial popularity, The Rivals is a poor play by the standards of Restoration comedy, for in

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[17] Kronenberger, p. 193.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 194.

[20] Ibid., pp. 193-194. See also Nettleton, pp. 297-298.

his sedulous purge of Congreve's "wickedness," Sheridan sterilized the passionless sexual wit of Restoration comedy[21] and substituted the jejune wit of his own time in a pastiche of bathos and moralized sentiment. Sheridan's emulation of Congreve can in many instances be exposed as a flaccid imitation. Whereas Congreve presents the scintillating sex antagonism of Mirabell and Millamant in the proviso scene of The Way of the World, Sheridan gives the maudlin punctilio of Faulkland and Julia in a similar scene in The Rivals.[22] Millamant is loath to "dwindle to a wife" without some provision for her feminine prerogative, but Mirabell is not to be subdued in the ensuing scene.

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[21] Kronenberger stated that "Restoration comedy is almost a tedious succession of ladies and gentlemen thrust behind screens, pushed into closets, hidden under beds. . .; nothing . . . could seem more routine" (p. 197). Palmer also pointed out that the comedy of Congreve was characterized by "sex, dryly conceived, entirely unemotional. . ., stage directions such as Offers to throw her down, meaning no more than Walks left centre . . . , a hero tumbling the wife of his friend with as little sex significance . . . as though he were tumbling upstairs or losing his watch and chain" (Comedy, pp. 52-53).

[22] The Faulkland-Julia romance has been taken as a prime example of Sheridan's satirization of sentimentality, and Armstrong even cites each of these two characters as "a really live wire . . . , a hint of . . . the deep things latent within [Sheridan] and shows us what he might have become" (p. 154). However, Faulkland is "presented at such length and with such abundant self-justification that Sheridan seems to be soliciting sympathy . . . on behalf of as windy a bore as any sentimental novel offers. . . . And Julia . . . is . . . smug and dreary" (Mudrick, p. 116). Cf. Kronenberger, pp. 194-195; Nettleton, pp. 295-297; Nicoll, Late Eighteenth Century Drama, p. 160.

> Milla. . . . And d'ye hear, I won't be call'd Names after I'm Marry'd; positively I won't be call'd Names.
> Mira. Names!
> Milla. Ay, as Wife, Spouse, my Dear, Joy, Jewel, Love, Sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous Cant, in which Men and their Wives are so fulsomly familiar. . . . Let us be very strange and well bred: Let us be as strange as if we had been marry'd a great while; and as well bred as if we were not marry'd at all. . . .
> Mira. Your Bill of Fare is something advanc'd. . . . Well, have I Liberty to offer Conditions--That when you are dwindled into a Wife, I may not be beyond measure enlarg'd into a Husband.
> Milla. You have free leave, propose your utmost, speak and spare not.
> Mira. . . . Item, when you shall be Breeding--
> Milla. Ah! Name it not.
> Mira. Which may be presum'd, with a Blessing on our Endeavours--
> Milla. Odious Endeavours!
> Mira. I denounce against all strait Lacing, squeezing for a Shape, 'till you mould my Boy's Head like a Sugar-loaf; and instead of a Man-Child, make me Father to a Crooked-billet. Lastly, to the Dominion of the Tea-Table I submit.--But with proviso, that you exceed not in your Province; but restrain your self to native and simple Tea-Table Drinks, as Tea, Chocolate, and Coffee. As likewise to Genuine and Authoriz'd Tea-Table Talk--Such as mending of Fashions, spoiling Reputations, railing at absent Friends, and so forth. . . . 23

Contrasted to the racy repartee and sexual wit of this scene, the languid verbiage and priggish nicety of Faulkland's ridiculous love tiff with Julia seems inane.

> Faulk. Ah! . . . Search your heart, Julia; perhaps what you have mistaken for love, is but the warm effusion of a too thankful heart.
> Jul. . . . I see you are determined to be unkind! The contract which my poor father bound us in gives you more than a lover's privilege.

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23 The Way of the World, IV, v.

Faulk. Again, Julia, you raise ideas that feed and justify my doubts. . . . How shall I be sure, had you remained unbound in thought and promise, that I should still have been the object of your persevering love?

Jul. Then try me now. Let us be free as strangers as to what is past; my heart will not feel more liberty!

Faul. There now! so hasty, Julia! so anxious to be free! If your love for me were fixed and ardent, you would not lose your hold, even though I wished it.

Jul. Oh! you torture me to the heart! I cannot bear it.

Faulk. I do not mean to distress you. If I loved you less I should never give you an uneasy moment. But hear me. All my fretful doubts arise from this. Women are not used to weigh and separate the motives of their affections: the cold dictates of prudence, gratitude, or filial duty, may sometimes be mistaken for the pleadings of the heart. . . .

Jul. I know not whither your insinuations would tend:--but as they seem pressing to insult me, I will spare you the regret of having done so.--I have given you no cause for this! [Exit in tears.]

Faulk. In tears! Stay, Julia: stay but for a moment.--The door is fastened!--Julia!--my soul--but for one moment!--I hear her sobbing!--'Sdeath! what a brute am I to use her thus! . . . 24

Never in all of Congreve will one find these longuers of "prudence, filial duty, and longings of the heart," although Congreve often draws an unobtrusive moral. This mollycoddled love-making may have moved Sheridan's audience to shed a tear, as some of the contemporary theatrical reviews indicate,[25]

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[24] The Rivals, III, ii.

[25] For examples of favorable critical comments on the edifying sentiment of Julia and Faulkland, see Nettleton, pp. 296-297. These comments "recognize in the underplot of The Rivals some suggestion of the sentimental comedy against which Sheridan was . . . in revolt " (Ibid.).

but it does not in any way capture the spirit of the wit combats between lovers in Congreve's comedies.

Yet if it is too disingenuous to compare The Way of the World, exemplifying Congreve as a mature writer, with The Rivals, exemplifying Sheridan as a novice to dramatic art, the comparison may be just as revealing in dealing with a scene from Congreve's first play The Old Batchelor. Even here, Congreve's lucid wit easily exposes the sentimentality of Sheridan's art and the nonintellectual nature of his wit. When Belinda is accused by Araminta of loving Bellmour, she emits a witty raillery against men reminiscent of Shakespeare's Beatrice.

> Belin. Ah! Nay, . . . no more, oh Gad, I swear you'd make one sick to hear you.
> Aram. Bless me! what have I said to move you thus?
> Belin. Oh you have raved, talked idly, and all in Commendation of that filthy, awkward, two-leg'd Creature, Man . . . . O Gad I hate your horrid Fancy--This Love is the Devil, and sure to be in Love is to be possess'd--'Tis in the Head, the Heart, the Blood, the--all over . . . .
> Aram. Fie, this is gross Affectation--A little of Bellmour's Company would change the Scene.
> Belin. Filthy Fellow! I wonder Cousin--
> Aram. I wonder, Cousin, you should imagine I don't perceive you love him.
> Belin. Oh I love your hideous Fancy! Ha, ha, ha, love a Man!
> Aram. Love a Man! yes, you would not love a Beast.
> Belin. Of all Beasts not an Ass. . . . 26

In a comparable scene in The Rivals, Sheridan gave an antithesis to this typically Restoration spirit, substituting

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26 The Old Batchelor, II, iii.

a saccharine sentiment for the raillery and a clever pun for the wit. When Julia is mildly reproached by Lydia, herself a lady of sentiment,[27] for her forbearance of the lovesick whims of Faulkland, she gushes forth a mass of lugubrious sentiment in his defense.

> Lyd. Well, Julia, you are your own mistress. . . , yet have you, for this long year, been a slave to the caprice, the whim, the jealousy of this ungrateful Faulkland, who will ever delay assuming the right of a husband, while you suffer him to be equally imperious as a lover.
>
> Jul. Nay, you are wrong entirely. We were contracted before my father's death. That, and some consequent embarrassments, have delayed what I know to be my Faulkland's most ardent wish. . . . Unused to the fopperies of love, he is negligent of the little duties expected from a lover--but being unhackneyed in the passion, his affectation is ardent and sincere; and as it engrosses his whole soul, he expects every thought and emotion of his mistress to move in unison with his. . . . This temper, I must own, has cost me many unhappy hours; but I have learned to think myself his debtor, for those imperfections which arise from the ardour of his attachment.
>
> Lyd. Well, I cannot blame you for defending him. But tell me candidly, Julia, had he never saved your life, do you think you should have been attached to him as you are? . . .
>
> Jul. Gratitude may have strengthened my attachment to Mr. Faulkland, but I loved him before he had preserved me; yet surely that alone were an obligation sufficient.

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[27] Lydia is satirized for her great propensity to read the current sentimental novels, which motivate the sentiments of her daily life. Among the books on her reading list are Peregrine Pickle, The Tears of Sensibility, Humphrey Clinker, The Man of Feeling, and The Innocent Adultry. However, Mudrick points out a discrepancy in this satire. Sheridan gives his audience "catalogues of lending-library fiction, in which Smollett is equated with Sterne and both with the true-romance writers of the time--as if Sheridan, acquiescing in the eighteenth-century snobbery toward the novel, is himself incapable of making the distinctions" (p. 117).

Lyd. Obligation! why a water spaniel would have done as much!--Well, I should never think of giving my heart to a man because he could swim.
Jul. Come, Lydia, you are too inconsiderate.
Lyd. Nay, I do but jest. . . .[28]

Indeed, Lydia is obviously jesting, and her remark has wit, although as a truewit she cannot rival any of Congreve's heroines.[29] In this scene, and generally throughout the play, Sheridan seemed to take great pains "to tell the audience everything, for fear that they . . . [would] miss something important."[30] He often treats his audience "like an idiot with an ear trumpet."[31]

But one needs no ear trumpet to comprehend Mrs. Malaprop's "select words so ingeniously misapplied, without being mispronounced."[32] Although she is theatrically very effective, her "nice derangement of epitaphs"[33] has no functional significance in the plot nor does her pretense to wit reveal her character. Hers is an "isolated humor,

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[28] The Rivals, I, ii.

[29] Mudrick remarked, for instance, that as an "up-to-date Millamant," Lydia is a failure. "The affectation of Congreve's Millamant has a purpose and is subordinated to her wit; the best Sheridan can do by way of expressing Lydia's affectation is to preface her otherwise characterless remarks with a 'Heigh-ho!'" (p. 117).

[30] Armstrong, p. 154.

[31] Mudrick, p. 117.

[32] The Rivals, I, ii.

[33] Ibid., III, iii.

usually a rambling collection of improbable errors interrupted by plain sense whenever Sheridan is anxious to advance the plot."[34] Despite the fact that she is always a delight to audiences and has traditionally been one of the primary reasons for the popularity of the play, Mrs. Malaprop is not a very subtle nor even original creation. One needs only to call to mind Shakespeare's Mistress Quickly or Dogberry as prototypes to realize that she is "simply a made-to-order character part."[35] However, as a witwould, Mrs. Malaprop compares favorably with Lady Froth in Congreve's Double-Dealer. Like Lady Froth, she has pretensions to youth and learning. Although she does not attempt to master the intricacies of heroic verse, her "manifesto" on education for a young lady has become a classic example of affected preciosity. Nevertheless, most of Mrs. Malaprop's ludicrous verbalisms have "long ago passed into the language, and it is hard to have an unhackneyed sense of them."[36] Although again the comparison may be weighted to favor Congreve, the fishwife billingsgate of Lady Wishfort in The Way of the World easily surpasses the absurdities of Mrs. Malaprop's "oracular tongue,"[37] Both characters express their affected wit in a vocabulary peculiar to themselves. Mrs. Malaprop excites laughter mainly through the ludicrous incongruity of her speech, especially in such

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[34] Mudrick, p. 119.

[35] Kronenberger, p. 193.

[36] Ibid., p. 194.

[37] The Rivals, III, iii.

phrases as, "'Tis safest in matrimony to begin with a little aversion,"[38] but she cannot rival the vigor of Lady Wishfort's scathing denunciation of her designing maid:

> Out of my House, . . . thou Viper, thou Serpent, that I have foster'd; thou bosom Traitress, that I rais'd from nothing--Begone, begone, begone, go, go--That I took from washing of old Gause. . . with a bleak blue Nose, over a Chafing-dish of starv'd Embers . . .--go, go, starve again, do, do. . . . Go, go drive a Trade, . . . you treacherous Trull . . . . What to betray me, . . . to make me a Receptacle, an Hospital for a decay'd Pimp? . . . O thou frontless Impudence, more than a big-belly'd Actress. [39]

Under somewhat similar circumstances when Mrs. Malaprop discovers that she has been duped, she can muster little more than "O mercy! I begin to suspect! . . . O lud! Sir Anthony! --a new light breaks in upon me!--hey!--how! What!. . . O mercy!--was it you that reflected on my parts of speech?"[40] Lady Wishfort's foibles are readily exposed in her indecorous raillery, whereas Mrs. Malaprop's outlandish "parts of speech" have little bearing on the situation at hand. "Lady Wishfort is . . . speaking with a freedom rather indecorous for Sheridan's stage, but . . . she speaks always as a character involved in the action, and with an energy and particularity of vision beyond Sheridan's powers entirely."[41]

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[38] Ibid., I, ii.

[39] The Way of the World, V, i.

[40] The Rivals, IV, ii.

[41] Mudrick, p. 119.

The Rivals established Sheridan's reputation as a writer of theatrically effective comedy; but mainly because of his concession to the sentimental vogue of the eighteenth century, at the expense of the lucid wit of the previous century, The Rivals can hardly be considered in the tradition of the Restoration comedy of manners. Although Sheridan's theatrical inventiveness is evident, the play fails ultimately because its wit is too winsome and its morality too prim. "The whole play, in fact, suffers from playing safe. The targets are of a kind no one could object to, the jokes of a kind no one would blush at."[42] What Sheridan achieved was an entertaining farce with very adept but unoriginal caricatures of current foibles and popular comic types. The brilliance of certain scenes only emphasizes the travesty of the whole. "Sentimental motives clash with elements taken from the Congreve school; Jonsonian exaggeration conflicts heavily with the play of wit and fancy."[43] Despite Sheridan's cleverness, "The Rivals is found to be a thing of shreds and patches."[44]

In Sheridan's rewriting of Vanbrugh's Relapse in the jejune Trip to Scarborough (1777), he only further emphasized the folly of purging the Restoration comedy of its "wickedness"

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[42]Kronenberger, p. 195.

[43]Nicoll, British Drama, p. 294.

[44]Nicoll, Late Eighteenth Century Drama, p. 160.

in order

> . . . to draw some slender cov'ring o'er
> The graceless wit which was too bare before. [45]

This sterilized version of a comedy in the Restoration tradition clearly indicates that Sheridan often sacrificed wit to didacticism and that his characters could "overstep the bounds of decorum but not of morality."[46]

In his greatest play, The School for Scandal (1777), "which remains the most famous comedy of manners in the language,"[47] Sheridan further proposed to revive the spirit of Congreve. Outwardly he very nearly succeeded, but a close inspection of the particulars which Sheridan employed to create the illusion of authentic Restoration comedy will readily show that his supposed veneration of Congreve's ideal of wit actually "presents an amusing consciousness of contemporary sentimental absurdities."[48]

The aspects of Congreve which Sheridan recaptures most successfully may be seen in the vivid picture of a scandal-loving society which he lifted directly from Congreve's Double-Dealer.[49] The scandal scenes of Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Candour, and Snake show a direct relationship to the scene from Congreve in which Lord Froth, Lady Froth, and Brisk manifest their

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[45] "Prologue," A Trip to Scarborough, p. 213.

[46] Sherburn, p. 1045.

[47] Kronenberger, p. 195.

[48] Sherburn, p. 1046.

[49] Rhodes, p. 6.

delight in slanderous gossip.

> Ld. Froth. Hee, hee, hee, . . . we were laughing at my Lady Whifler, and Mr. Sneer.
> L. Froth. . . . Oh filthy Mr. Sneer; he's a nauseous Figure, a most fulsamick Fop, foh--He spent two Days together in going about Covent-Garden to suit Lining of his Coach with his Complexion.
> Ld. Froth. O silly! yet his Aunt is as fond of him, as if she had brought the Ape into the World her self.
> Brisk. Who, my Lady Toothless; O, she's a mortifying Spectacle; she's always chewing the Cud like an old Ewe. . . .
> L. Froth. I have seen her take 'em half chew'd out of her Mouth, to laugh, and then put 'em in again--Foh.
> Ld. Froth. Foh.
> L. Froth. Then she's always ready to laugh when Sneer offers to speak--And sits in Expectation of his no Jest, with her Gums bare, and her Mouth open--[50]
> Brisk. Like an Oyster at low Ebb, I'gad--Ha, ha, ha.

Although some critics complain that the scandalmonger scenes of School for Scandal do not advance the plot,[51] Sheridan gives a clever commentary on the chronique scandaleuse made popular by such eighteenth-century periodicals as The Town and Country Magazine[52] and, in addition, successfully provided "that sense of naughtiness which is the very atmosphere of Restoration comedy."[53]

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[50] The Double-Dealer, III, x.

[51] For a discussion of this point, see Nettleton, pp. 303-304.

[52] Rhodes, p. 13.

[53] Kronenberger, p. 196.

Sheridan likewise captured the Restoration atmosphere in the brilliant dialogue which "was set down with such exquisite Congreve-like precision that it enforced excellence of delivery. . . . It sailed to success with . . . a dazzling glitter of wit."[54] The lively repartee between Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, for instance, is reminiscent of the sex antagonism of Mirabell and Millamant, although it has now degenerated into a marital squabble.

> Sir Pet. Lady Teazle, Lady Teazle, I'll not bear it!
> Lady Teaz. Sir Peter, Sir Peter, you may bear it or not, as you please; but I ought to have my own way in everything, and what's more, I will too. What though I was educated in the country, I know very well that women of fashion in London are accountable to nobody after they are married.
> Sir Pet. Very well, ma'am, very well; so a husband is to have no influence, no authority?
> Lady Teaz. Authority! No, to be sure:--if you wanted authority over me, you should have adopted me, and not married me: I am sure you were old enough.
> Sir Pet. . . . Well, well, Lady Teazle, though my life may be made unhappy by your temper, I'll not be ruined by your extravagance!
> Lady Teaz. My extravagence! I'm sure I'm not more extravagant than a woman of fashion ought to be.
> Sir Pet. . . . 'Slife! to spend as much to furnish your dressing-room with flowers in winter as would suffice to turn the Pantheon into a greenhouse, and give a fête champêtre at Christmas.
> Lady Teaz. And am I to blame, Sir Peter, because flowers are dear in cold weather? You should find fault with the climate, and not me. . . .
> Sir Pet. 'Slife, madam, I say, had you any of these little elegant expenses when you married me?
> Lady Teaz. Lud, Sir Peter! would you have me be out of fashion? [55]

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[54] Sherburn, p. 1047.

[55] School for Scandal, II, i.

Yet, despite the fact that Sheridan was a master of dramatic situation,[56] and however adept he was in creating an illusion of Congreve's wit in the scandal scenes and in the repartee of the Teazles, the authenticity of his creation is marred in several ways.

First of all, the milieu of The School for Scandal is that of a bourgeois society with typical eighteenth-century middle-class attitudes toward virtue. There is no longer a special coterie of truewits who comprise the elect in the Restoration sense. "The major transgressions are no longer against manners, but those against domestic virtue. . . . Lady Teazle's world is neither so limited in scope nor as homogeneous as Millamant's."[57] The play reflects the typical bourgeois ambivalence toward sin. It is "concerned with the imputation of sinning; of sin itself there is absolutely nothing."[58] This attitude is far removed from the hedonistic Restoration concept of relative morality based upon wit and pleasure: "Wit be my Faculty, and Pleasure my Occupation."[59]

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[56] Nettleton, p. 303.

[57] Schiller, p. 700.

[58] Kronenberger, p. 196. Kronenberger states further that "whenever we find much sin or much scandal, we should find little of the other. In communities that are habitually sinful, there cannot be anything very newsworthy about sin; . . . Scandal is a kind of amusement tax that virtue exacts of indecorum" (Ibid.).

[59] The Old Batchelor, I, i.

Even Lady Teazle, so enamored with the worldly ways of the fashionable city, has a keen cognizance of sin and "even when she would be at her most wicked. . . [shows] a superb innocence."[60] She is delighted to be in fashion by having a supposed secret affair with Joseph Surface, but at the same time, she exerts her puritanical reserve.

> Lady Teaz. . . . You know I admit you as a lover no farther than fashion requires.
> Jos. Surf. True--a mere Platonic cicisbeo, what every wife is entitled to.
> Lady Teaz. Certainly, one must not be out of the fashion. However, I have so many of my country prejudices left, that, though Sir Peter's ill humor may vex me ever so, it never shall provoke me to--
> Jos. Surf. The only revenge in your power. Well, I applaud your moderation. [61]

Sheridan's applause of the staid moral moderation of the English middle class under the guise of wit comedy has led some critics to consider The School for Scandal "a kind of bourgeois morality play in the format of a Restoration manners comedy."[62]

Another factor which falsifies The School for Scandal as an authentic comedy of manners in the Restoration tradition is that the town-country antithesis has a reversed significance. Although Sheridan was urbane enough to

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[60] Schiller, p. 701.

[61] School for Scandal, II, ii.

[62] Sherburn, p. 702.

acquiesce in the "prevailing notion that all beyond Hyde Park was outer darkness,"[63] he ironically very nearly portrays Lady Teazle, a country bumpkin, as the sentimental heroine of the play.[64] The pretenders to wit, fresh from the country, who had been objects of scorn in Congreve's day, are by Sheridan's standards the socially elect because they are virtuous.

Despite the commendable quality of the wit, especially in the scandal plot, the hackneyed theme of the triumph of virtue over evil permeates most of the play, and as a result, the wit is obscured. The good brother, prodigal but honorable, wins the hand of the angelic heroine from the machinations of the wicked elder brother, and true love and righteousness are victorious. Seduction is out of the question, and in The School for Scandal "sex has become glamorous through being illicit."[65] The famous screen scene, in which Lady Teazle is discovered by her husband in the chambers of Joseph Surface, "a kind of locus classicus for comic invention,"[66] may largely owe its success to Sheridan's dramatic inventiveness, but the comic fascination which this scene holds for audiences derives not so much from its wit as from the scandalous intrigue which it has

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[63] Schiller, p. 701.

[64] Ibid., p. 702.

[65] Kronenberger, p. 197.

[66] Nicoll, Late Eighteenth Century Drama, p. 161.

aroused in the middle-class minds of English audiences from the eighteenth century to the present day. A similar scene probably would not have had the same "zestfully scandalous" enchantment for a Restoration audience.[67] When the screen falls, exposing a virtuous woman compromised by extenuating circumstances, symbolically the whole Restoration concept of wit falls, compromised by morality.

Hence, Sheridan, a superlative craftsman of the theater, accomplished a brief resurrection of the comedy of manners in the Congreve tradition, and at the same time, he drowned it with sentimentalized virtue. He sired a bastard child of wit and strangled it with morality. "That there is no great playwright in his time may be the fault of the time, but Sheridan himself will have to bear some of the responsibility for being no better than he is."[68]

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[67] Kronenberger, p. 197.

[68] Mudrick, p. 120.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

From the time of the Restoration, when the comedy of manners flourished uniquely as the primary dramatic form of the English stage, the problems in evaluating the comedy of manners have derived mainly from diverse concepts of morality and wit. The situation is made infinitely complex by the dynamic nature of morality and wit, which fluctuates in accordance with the intellectual and social modes of the time and which helps to account for the intangible quality of the comedy of manners. The confusion in defining manners comedy arises mainly from the seventeenth-century concept of manners as opposed to the modern concept. In the seventeenth century "manners" was tantamount to "character" or the basic motivating forces underlying the psychological variations in human personality, whereas the modern interpretation of manners limits it to an artifical social code of ethics or affected conventions which are manifested in the fashionable intercourse of the beau monde. The misunderstanding which has resulted from these two contending interpretations of the comedy of manners has led to a dilemma of definition, which can be greatly alleviated by an objective, historical revaluation of the Restoration concepts of morality and wit.

The Restoration comedy of manners naturally raises the problem of morality for those critics who interpret art as an instrument of didacticism, because the playwrights of the Restoration did not consider moral propriety a worthy basis for dramatic expression. This amoral attitude expressed in the Restoration comedies of manners has traditionally led most critics either to denounce it as degenerate dramatic literature unworthy of a Christian society or to dismiss it as trivial and pretentious moral laxity not to be taken seriously. Consequently, the body of literary criticism dealing with the comedy of manners is relatively meager, and even the few studies available are conspicuous for their lack of quality. Because of the middle-class puritanical mania for classifying all aspects of life as either good or evil, most literary critics, as if oracles of literary righteousness, disavow Restoration comedy as a malignant pustule on the chaste countenance of English comedy. Following in the tradition of Jeremy Collier, who denounced Restoration comedy as an abomination, eighteenth-and nineteenth-century critics--notably excepting Leigh Hunt and Charles Lamb--conducted their criticism almost entirely in moral terms. As a result, the comedy of manners has only recently begun to emerge from the shadow of suspicion and infamy cast upon it by moralistic critics.

The current trend to see the Restoration comedy of manners from an unbiased viewpoint may be attributed mainly to the work

of liberal modern critics, such as Thomas H. Fujimura, who have objectively analyzed the Restoration attitudes toward morality and wit. Fujimura found, for instance, that the seventeenth-century playwrights, writing in the philosophical tradition of Thomas Hobbes, viewed morality as a hedonistic relative, not as an absolute standard of propriety. This spirit was vividly reflected in the Restoration comedies of manners which were, therefore, realistic portrayals of a naturalistic, homogeneous coterie exemplifying man as essentially a comic creature seeking physical pleasure and cultivating intellectual wit.

It was mainly in this cultivation of wit that the Restoration comedy of manners distinguished itself; yet, it is partly because of this very quality of wit that it has failed to have a universal appeal, for the modern concept of wit differs considerably from that of the Restoration. Also based largely upon the philosophical discourses of Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century concept of wit comprised an intellectual fastidiousness and an aesthetic discrimination manifested in a finely balanced sense of decorum and sound judgment blended with a vivid creativeness or fancy. These qualities were best exemplified in the truewits, who were the elect morally, socially, and intellectually. The witwould affected these qualities and was therefore held up to scorn. It was on this very fine distinction between the truewit and the pretender to wit that the comic effect was primarily sustained.

This Restoration comic tradition of sententious wit and hedonistic amorality reached its most brilliant expression in William Congreve, whose works are nonpareil paradigms of the comedy of manners. Although his first three plays, The Old Batchelor (1693), The Double-Dealer (1694), and Love for Love (1695), do not consistently fulfill all the precepts of the Restoration comedy of manners, his last play, The Way of the World (1700), is generally considered by most critics to be the most brilliant example of the type in English literature. Not all critics, however, will forgive Congreve's apparent indifference toward morality despite his brilliant wit. Nevertheless, in the view of objective historical criticism, Congreve's licentiousness is innocuous, and too much emphasis upon the "wickedness" of his plays betrays a naive, childish fear of a painted devil. Indeed, Congreve's profound wit is quite often morally edifying, and The Way of the World, most notably, brought the comedy of manners within the realm of respectability. Congreve's recipe for comedy is extremely palatable because he has tastefully blended a generous quantity of dry wit with but a dash of morality.

However, with the advent of the eighteenth century and the reassertion of middle-class dominance, the basic ingredient of comedy became straight sentimentalized morality, and the theater became a house of virtue. What Sheridan proposed to do was to revive the comic tradition of Congreve, but what he

did was to write The Rivals (1774), a pretentious sentimental comedy which shows very much theatrical talent for farce but very little of the brilliant wit of Congreve, and The School for Scandal (1777), a very effective theater piece which was reminiscent of the spirit of Congreve but which at the same time reversed the very qualities of wit and amorality which gave Congreve's comedy its unique force. Sheridan was a man catering to public taste, and despite his devotion to Congreve, he unconsciously prostituted his genius for true wit to the current vogue for morality. Sheridan's plays, in short, lack the sententious quality of Congreve's and therefore have a greater appeal to the middle-class public, anxious to indulge in moralized sentimentality and to affect a clever wit. One is not likely to find better theater than The School for Scandal, but one cannot find greater comic literature than The Way of the World.

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