

Significance of the Title of Congreve's *Way of the World*:

It was perhaps sheer pedantic myopia that, when Jeremy Collier published his essay *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* in 1698, he made Congreve a particular target of his criticism. That Collier had a case is undeniable, but he forgot that a true artist does have as sincere obligation to society as a churchman. Had he waited before publishing his essay till the production of *The Way of the World* (1770), he could have perhaps understood that truth; for, in the play *The Way of the World* Congreve seems to understand the “immorality and profaneness” of a society, upon the matrices of which Restoration plays were made. He was seriously thinking of an alternative pattern of behaviour and an alternative set of codes of conduct. The very title of the play, *The Way of the World* points to the ‘way’ the hero and heroine (and by implication the spectators) should adopt in order to come out of the grip of the fashionable society. The whole story is an illustration of the process, by following which Mirabell and Millamant seek a resolution, that is, to gain their own world by using and manipulating the existing social norms, through the winding lanes of that society. Congreve constructed the plot of the play accordingly with this aim in mind. One can discern a definite pattern in the movement of the play. At the beginning of the play, Mirabell is trying to shape up a situation so that he can win both hands of Millamant and her estate from Lady Wishfort. He has married his servant, Waitwell off to Lady Wishfort’s maid, Foible and plans to have Waitwell disguise himself as a noble man, court, and marry Lady Wishfort. Then Mirabell would blackmail her by threatening to disclose that she has married a servant and would offer her to release her if she will let him marry Millamant plus the estate. But Mrs. Marwood discovers the plan and tells Lady Wishfort. Mrs. Marwood also tells Fainwall of his wife, Mrs. Fainwall’s former relationship with Mirabell. From all these Fainwall plans to blackmail Lady Wishfort by threatening to reveal all unless she signs over to him not only his wife’s but also Millamant’s estate and even the conversation of Lady Wishfort’s own estate after her death. As the action of the play gets momentum and the plot becomes more and more complicated, Congreve loads the stage by introducing confusing figures like Mr. Wilful Witwood. While it adds to the comedy of the play, it complicates the plot further. However, certain hidden facts of the past are revealed through the conversations of the characters: for instance, Mrs. Marwood’s desire for Mirabell, Mrs. Marwood’s relationship with Fainall, Mirabell’s past affair with Mrs. Fainall etc. Congreve measures these secrets slowly person by person, until the final revelation in Act V, where all pretences are destroyed Mr. Fainall’s and Mirabell’s revelations, and the bringing out from a black box of the deed renders Mr. Fainall powerless. The complexities and complications are, however, deliberate on Congreve’s part; for he wanted to present his Restoration audience a play that can coincide artistically with the artificialities and complexities in the human affairs of the period. The chief aim of the dramatist is to demonstrate “the way of the world”. Following this way Mirabell and Millamant, through their own peculiar balance of wit and generosity of spirit, reduce the bumbling Witwood and Mr. Fainall to the same level of false wit. Thus the pair dramatise the true wit that is carefully and symmetrically defined through their opposition. They are aware of the fact that they are making compromises in their marriage. Mirabell says, “...I like her with all her faults: nay, I like her for her faults...They are now grown familiar to me as my own frailties...” And Millamant charmingly declares, “Well, if Mirabell should not make a good husband, I am lost thing—find I love him violently.” These confidences do not prevent their own chances for honesty in marriage. In the Proviso Scene they arrange an agreement for their marriage. The reason is obvious: that is, marriage is a social contract that would enable them to rise above the cant and hypocrisy

that surround them. The triumph of the play is in the emergence of lovers who through a balance of intense affection and cool self-knowledge achieve an equilibrium that frees them from the world's power. As the title of the play *The Way of the World* suggests, they have assimilated the rational lucidity of sceptical rake so that they can use the world and reject its demands.