WILLIAM CONGREVE

The Way of the World

DENT'S
TEMPLE
DRAMATISTS

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

A Play written by

WILLIAM CONGREVE

Edited, with an Introduction and Explanatory Notes, by

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THE TEMPLE DRAMATISTS

Congreve's THE WAY OF THE WORLD

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WILLIAM CONGREVE IN 1709
(from a portrait by Kneller)

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM CONGREVE (1670–1729) was born at Bardsey, Yorkshire, but since his father was commandant of a garrison near Cork, young Congreve's early years were spent in Ireland, where he was educated at Kilkenny and Trinity College, Dublin. He came to London and was admitted to the Middle Temple in 1691, and in the same year published his only novel, *Incognita*. His first play, *The Old Bachelor*, was produced in January 1693, when he was nearly twenty-three, though the dedication claims that it had lain by for almost four years; it was instantly successful, and was followed by *The Double Dealer* in October, which Dryden later ushered into print with some congratulatory lines:

> 'In him all beauties of this age we see;
> . . . . .
> Heaven, that but once was prodigal before,
> To Shakespeare gave as much: she could not give
> him more.'

Love for Love was next, in 1695, a piece of which Thomas Davies could still say in 1784 that 'by consent of all the

critics, *Love for Love* is esteemed not only the most excellent of Congreve's plays, but one of the best in our language'. If the first part of the statement is not now acceptable, we must allow that for sheer fun on the one hand, and for control of rich rhetorical rhythms on the other, it is extremely difficult to match. The elaborate phrasing reaches its climax when Valentine, putting on an antic disposition, addresses his beloved Angelica in this way:

'You 're a woman. One to whom Heaven gave beauty when it grafted roses on a briar. You are the reflection of Heaven in a pond, and he that leaps at you is sunk. You are all white, a sheet of lovely spotless paper, when you first are born, but you are to be scrawled and blotted by every goose's quill. I know you, for I loved a woman, and loved her so long that I found out a strange thing. I found out what a woman was good for.'

In 1697 Congreve's only tragedy, *The Mourning Bride*, was acted. It ran for thirteen nights, and was much admired: whilst in the next century Dr. Johnson, whose poetic taste was not so sound as his common sense, was known to declare that it contained the most poetical passage in English literature. To most modern judgments its verse is more frigid than Congreve's prose.

His next and last play, *The Way of the World*, was acted in 1700. In the prologue he seemed confident enough of success to be able to proclaim indifference to his critics. But perhaps that was only a conventional gesture: because when the piece was ill received Congreve abandoned the stage, and henceforth returned to it only for such compositions as *The Judgment of Paris* and *Semele*. It may be well at this point to inquire what it was that led to the failure of so accomplished a production. The cynic may say that it was too good for immediate acceptance: that its vein of poetry was not wanted by a worldly theatrical audience. This is only a half-truth. For *The Way of the World* was rejected not so much by reason of the quality as of the particular kind of its excellence. The same audiences had received favourably other plays by Congreve, and by his contemporaries, which were not deficient in art. Congreve's fault in this comedy was to be good in a different way, to be fundamentally serious; and since no man can bear to have his first serious work despised, I do not think we need look to the finally attained financial security (which almost coincided with the production of this play, when Congreve was rewarded with a lucrative sinecure) to explain that sudden cessation from theatrical labours which so bewildered Voltaire. The application of the term 'serious' may need some explanation, in view of the notorious licentiousness of

the personages with which in general Restoration drama deals, and the issue has been further complicated by the ingenious defence by Charles Lamb in his essay on 'The Artificial Comedy of the Last Century'. So anxious was he to justify these writings that he wished entirely to avoid debate upon the moral question, and cunningly distracted attention from it by proclaiming that the comedy of this period dealt with an altogether speculative scene of things, having no reference to the world that is. But such a defence is almost apologetic: it is a running away from the point. It would not be difficult to show that Congreve's characters have no less reference to the everyday world than those of his model, Jonson.

The Way of the World, then, is serious. By this it is not meant, as one eighteenth-century critic has suggested, that it has the moral intention of safeguarding mankind against matrimonial falsehood. Its morality is not of that specific formulable sort that will adorn a tale, even if the final quatrain may lend colour to that notion. Its seriousness is of the kind proper to comedy, which is not necessarily an affair of laughter only. It may work, in the same manner as tragedy, by giving a heightened perception of things as they are, or by making the reader or spectator apprehend more finely the nice balance of virtue and stupidity which regulates our activities. In *The Way of the World* the central

theme is undoubtedly the relations of men and women in marriage, and Congreve's own contribution to the problems of matrimony may well be found in the great bargaining scene in Act IV, where Mirabell and Millamant covenant for their will and pleasure. Yet the institution of marriage is seen from many other angles in the play: it may be as a stalking-horse for the avaricious or the lustful; it becomes purely animal in satisfaction for Waitwell and Foible, and for Lady Wishfort a belated and ridiculous invitation to debauch. Who shall say that in presenting this many-sided picture Congreve was untrue to life or unjust to marriage? He is impartially directing his criticism at both men and human institutions. The surprising thing is that so critical and discerning an intelligence as Congreve's should grant to either the measure of grace which he actually does. For his final effect is tolerant: a sense of grace is conveyed, not so much in the behaviour of the persons of the drama as in their speech; so that in the last scene, when Millamant asks, 'Why does not the man take me? Would you have me give myself to you over again?' and Mirabell replies, 'Aye, and over and over again', it is hard not to feel that Congreve was exaggerating when he wrote, 'I could never look long upon a monkey, without very mortifying reflections'.

The characters all speak with a recognizably Congrevian idiom, yet their utterances, within that simi-

larity, are perfectly differentiated. In his letter *Concerning Humour in Comedy*, where he defines humour as 'a singular and unavoidable manner of doing, or saying anything, peculiar and natural to one man only; by which his speech and actions are distinguished from those of other men', Congreve suggests that it would be 'the work of a long life to make one comedy true in all its parts, and to give every character in it a true and distinct humour'. Four years after writing that Congreve as nearly as possible approached this perfection in his last play. Let the reader examine the phrasing of Millamant's speeches from her very first appearance and he will find that in all her sentences (with the possible exception of the scenes in the fifth act, where she is more an agent in the unravelling of the plot than her true self, 'a sacrifice to your repose, madam', as she says to her aunt) there is present a suggestion of the same consciously superior and exquisitely fashionable arrogance. The rhythms are breathless and hurried, as if she were always in full sail, with her fan spread and streamers out.

'Oh aye, letters—I had letters—I am persecuted with letters—I hate letters—nobody knows how to write letters; and yet one has 'em, one does not know why—they serve one to pin up one's hair.'

Another trait of hers is a fondness for playing with a

particular word and an ability to render it more telling with each repetition. The supreme instance of this is from the same scene as the passage just quoted:

'Beauty, the lover's gift—Lord, what is a lover, that it can give? Why, one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases: and then if one pleases one makes more.'

It is evident from the delicate elaboration of such dialogue that Congreve was no believer in the photograhic notation of ordinary conversation. 'I believe,' he wrote, 'if a poet should steal a dialogue of any length from the extempore discourse of the two wittiest men upon earth, he would find the scene but coldly received by the town.' On the contrary, there is in his writing the same tireless striving after refinement of style that delights the admirer of Landor or Pater; but Congreve's result is less removed from the accent of speech, and is not so purely *literary*. His lines are intended to be spoken, and the search for beauty is not permitted to interfere with this aim: what does sometimes seem to occur is that in particular scenes the too lovely phrasing may divert attention from the plot, and appear so self-conscious that it attracts a disproportionate degree of wonder. In the limits of this introduction we can do no more than indicate that analysis

of other parts besides Millamant's will show that the ability to discriminate between the various manners of speaking, in vocabulary, rhythm, ideas, and images, adopted by his different characters must ungrudgingly be allowed to Congreve. A good beginning might be made with Lady Wishfort's invective or Witwoud's very dissimilar volubility.

The plot of *The Way of the World* is intricate, yet perhaps a little lacking in coherence and strength. It is Congreve's invention, for the slight parallels between *The Alchemist* and *Les Précieuses Ridicules* need scarcely be pressed: yet there is one obligation of Congreve's which should not be overlooked. In Dryden's *Marriage-à-la-Mode* occurs the original of the incomparable Millamant, whose manner is to some extent anticipated by Melantha. Two quarto editions of *The Way of the World* were published in Congreve's lifetime: in 1700 and 1706; the second was corrected by the author and is the text followed by the *Works* (1710). In the present edition, which is based on the text of the *Works*, the spelling and stage directions have been modernized, and in the division of the scenes the practice of the quartos has been restored.

I wish to acknowledge my obligations to the work of previous editors of Congreve, in particular to that of Mr. Montague Summers, Mr. Bonamy Dobrée, and Mr. F. W. Bateson.

W. P. BARRETT.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

A COMEDY

Audire est Operæ pretium, procedere recte
Qui mæchis non vultis.—Hor. Sat. 2, l. 1

——*Metuat doti deprensa.*—Ibid.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

RALPH, EARL OF MOUNTAGUE, &c.

My Lord,

Whether the world will arraign me of vanity, or not, that I have presumed to dedicate this comedy to your lordship, I am yet in doubt: though it may be it is some degree of vanity even to doubt of it. One who has at any time had the honour of your lordship's conversation, cannot be supposed to think very meanly of that which he would prefer to your perusal: yet it were to incur the imputation of too much sufficiency, to pretend to such a merit as might abide the test of your lordship's censure.

Whatever value may be wanting to this play while yet it is mine, will be sufficiently made up to it, when it is once become your lordship's; and it is my security, that I cannot have over-rated it more by my dedication, than your lordship will dignify it by your patronage.

That it succeeded on the stage, was almost beyond my expectation; for but little of it was prepared for that general taste which seems now to be predominant in the palates of our audience.

Those characters which are meant to be ridiculed in most of our comedies, are of fools so gross, that in my humble opinion, they should rather disturb than divert the well-natured and reflecting part of an audience; they are rather objects of charity than contempt; and instead of moving our mirth, they ought very often to excite our compassion.

This reflection moved me to design some characters, which should appear ridiculous not so much through a natural folly (which is incorrigible, and therefore not proper for the stage) as through an affected wit; a wit, which at the same time that it is affected, is also false. As there is some difficulty in the formation of a character of this nature, so there is some hazard which attends the progress of its success, upon the stage: for many come to a play, so over-charged with criticism, that they very often let fly their censure, when through their rashness they have mistaken their aim. This I had occasion lately to observe: for this play had been acted two or three days, before some of these hasty judges could find the leisure to distinguish betwixt the character of a Witwoud and a Truewit.

I must beg your lordship's pardon for this digression from the true course of this epistle; but that it may not seem altogether impertinent, I beg, that I may plead the occasion of it, in part of that excuse of which I stand in need, for recommending this comedy to your protection.