Analysing the themes used by William Congreve in “The Double Dealer”, “Love for Love” and “The Way of the World”

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Abstract: William Congreve was an English dramatist who shaped the English comedy of manners through his brilliant comic dialogue, his satirical portrayal of the war of the sexes, and his ironic scrutiny of the affectations of his age. Taking as its main theme the manners and behaviour of the class to which it was addressed, that is, the anti-puritanical theatre audience drawn largely from the court, his plays dealt with imitators of French customs, conceited wits, and fantastic people of all kinds; but its main theme was the sexual life led by a large number of courtiers, with their philosophy of freedom and experimentation. Congreve placed great importance on character sketches and the themes of role playing, conditional love, mingled with the love for money and the need for intrigues in almost every facet of life, as can be seen through the plays “The Double Dealer”, “Love for Love” and “The Way of the World”.

Key words: restoration comedy, dramatic representations, gallery of portraits, intrigues, role playing, comedy of manners, satirical, objective rationalism, unity of time, space and action.

Introduction

William Congreve, born January 24, 1670, in Bardsey, near Leeds, Yorkshire, England was an English dramatist who shaped the English comedy of manners through his brilliant comic dialogue, his satirical portrayal of the war of the sexes, and his ironic scrutiny of the affectations of his age. His major plays were The Old Bachelour (1693), The Double-Dealer (1693), Love for Love (1695), and The Way of the World (1700).

Congreve, in 1681, was sent to school at Kilkenny, the Eton of Ireland. In April 1686 he entered Trinity College, Dublin (where he received his M.A. in 1696). In 1691 he was entered as a law student at the Middle Temple. Never a serious reader in law, he published in 1692 under the pseudonym Cleophil a light but delightful skilful near-parody of fashionable romance, possibly drafted when he was 17, Incognita: Love and Duty reconcil’d. He quickly became known among men of letters, had some verses printed in a miscellany of the same year, and became a protégé of John Dryden.

Congreve’s character was praised in Giles Jacob’s Poetical Register (1719), where he is described as being “so far from being puff’d up with Vanity…that he abounds with Humility and good Nature. He does not shew so much the Poet as the Gentleman.” Congreve is the outstanding writer of the English comedy of manners, markedly different in many respects from others of this period of the drama.

Taking as its main theme the manners and behaviour of the class to which it was addressed, that is, the anti-puritanical theatre audience drawn largely from the court, it dealt with imitators of French customs, conceited wits, and fantastic people of all kinds; but its main theme was the sexual life led by a large number of courtiers, with their philosophy of freedom and experimentation.

Restoration comedy was always satirical and sometimes cynical. Congreve rises above other dramatists of his time in both the delicacy of his feeling and the perfection of his phrasing. Congreve was not born until ten years after the Restoration; The Way of the World was first presented when he was thirty. By that time, some of the most obvious and most notorious features of the period no longer existed or existed only in much weaker forms.

Because of its striking characterization and brilliant dialogue, The Way of the World is generally considered to be the finest example of Restoration comedy, as well as one of the last. Nevertheless, it was not successful when it was first presented in 1700. Although the English audiences, unlike the French, were accustomed to plots and subplots and to a great deal of action in their plays, they were confused by the amount of activity crammed into a single day.

Influences of Restoration Comedy

The Comedy of Manners emerged during the age of Dryden, the age of Restoration.
Therefore it is also called Restoration Comedy. The Restoration comedy of manners reached its fullest expression in The Way of the World (1700) by William Congreve, which is dominated by a brilliantly witty couple. This sort of comedy is called comedy of manners for the writers in the restoration theatre have shown the ‘manners’ and ‘morals’ of the ways of life of the higher class aristocratic fashionable society, however, not of the lower class or middle class society.

The themes of the Restoration comedy of manners are love, marriage, adulterous relationships amours and legacy conflicts; and the characters generally include would be wits, jealous husbands, conniving rivals and foppish dandies. It “relies for comic effect in large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue- often in the form of repartee, a witty conversational give-and-take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing match.”

There existed an English tradition of social comedy that treated the love game with lightness, humour, and some ribaldry. The plays included satire of social types: the tops, the pedants, and the vain women, as can be observed in almost all of Congreve’s works. He represents the attitude of the period at its best. The rakehell was no longer a hero; Mirabell is a descendent of the rakehell, but compared with earlier specimens he displays urbanity, grace, and decorum. Congreve’s love passages can be graceful and dignified; he treats love with an objective rationalism that is quite apart from the concept of lechery.

His comedies are concerned, as comedies have been through the ages, with love and money, frequently complicated by parental opposition. His approach, however, is balanced: Love without money would be a problem, but money without love, the cynic’s aim, is not the goal. Likewise, Congreve abhors the sentimental attitude that love will result in the individuals’ somehow being submerged in each other; he insists that lovers preserve their integrity as individuals. Love is not metaphysical, not sentimental, not a form of sacrifice. On the other hand, within this context, it is not merely carnal nor a thinly disguised lust; it includes trust, dignity, and mutual respect.

This paper will be dealing with the themes in three of his plays, beginning with the first play, which is The Double Dealer. Summarising the famous play’s plot, which maintained the three unities, Congreve, in his Epistle dedicatory, gives an account of the plot – pattern of his second play: “I design the moral first and to that moral I invented the fable, and do not know that I have borrowed one hint of it anywhere. I made the plot as strong as I could, because it was single because I would avoid confusion and was resolved to preserve the three unities of the drama.”

The plot was thus: Mellefont, the nephew and prospective heir of Lord Touchwood, who is about to marry Cynthia, daughter of Sir Paul Plyant, was the main character. Lady Touchwood, a violent and dissolute woman, is in love with Mellefont, but as he rejects her advances, she determines to prevent the match and ruin him in Lord Touchwood’s esteem. In this design, she finds a helper in Maskwell, who is the Double Dealer and has been her lover. He pretends to be Mellefont’s friend, and aspires to cheat him of Cynthia and get her for himself.

To this end, he leads Sir Plyant to suspect an intrigue between Mellefont and Lady Plyant, and Lord Touchwood, an intrigue between Mellefont and Lady Touchwood; and contrives that Touchwood shall find Mellefont in the latter’s chamber. This leads to Mellefont being disinherited and Cynthia is to be married off to Maskwell. The latter’s plot, however, here goes wrong. Lord Touchwood informs Lady Touchwood of Maskwell’s intention to marry Cynthia. This awakens her jealousy. She finds Maskwell and rebukes him, and is overheard by Lord Touchwood, who now perceives Maskwell’s treachery, and defeats his final attempt to carry off Cynthia.

In the next play, the important characters are Valentine, his love, Angelica, Ben, Miss Prue and others. This play is also based on relations and the consequence of thoughtless actions. Valentine has fallen under the displeasure of his father by his extravagance, and is besieged by creditors. His father, Sir Sampson Legend, offers him £4000 which is only enough to pay his debts if he will sign a bond engaging to make over his right to his inheritance to his younger brother Ben. Valentine, to escape from his embarrassment, signs the bond.

He is in love with Angelica, who possesses a fortune of her own, but so far she has not yielded to his suit. Sir Sampson has arranged a match between Ben, who is at sea, and Miss Prue, an awkward country girl, the daughter of Foresight, a superstitious old fool who claims to be an astrologer. Valentine, realizing the ruin entailed by the signature of the bond, tries to move his father by submission, and fails; then pretends to be mad and unable to sign the final deed of conveyance to his brother. Finally Angelica intervenes. She induces Sir Sampson to propose marriage to her, pretends to accept, and gets possession of Valentine’s bond. When Valentine, in despair at finding that Angelica is about to marry his father, declares himself ready to sign the conveyance, she reveals the plot, tears up the bond, and declares her love for Valentine.

Summarising the third play, The Way of the World, it is about the fact that money can really solve almost all problems, though the characters do make space for love. Mirabell is in love with Millamant, a niece of Lady Wishfort, and has
The paper now looks at the themes that occur recurrently in these three plays. It is valid to say that the main themes of all the three plays are evident through the title given by Congreve. Be it in The Double Dealer, which refers to the double standards of Maskwell or The Way of the World as depicted by Mirabell and Millamant, the title bears relevance.

Dramatic Representation of Love and its Varieties

In all the plays, we notice the dramatic representation of the varieties of love and the sex. Throughout these, Congreve plays with the limited roles assigned to the genders in upper-class society. Men can be cuckolds, cruel masters, rakes, or provincials, while women can be scheming meddlers, whores, or very rarely, good wives. The crucial characteristic for women is how permissive they are in terms of bestowing their sexual favours; men, however, are judged less by their sexual behaviour and more by their “mastery” of the world: their children, finances, servants, and love affairs.

Valentine, in Love for Love, for instance, is visited by the nurse of one of his illegitimate children and curses the mother for not killing the child and sparing him the expense of supporting it; Tattle and Scandal both boast of their success with women. The women of the play, however, know to keep their experiences quiet. Ironically, in the comedies of this period, women’s promiscuity is less serious and damaging than it would be in later decades. After the two decades of strict Puritan rule, which strictly enforced conservative sexual behaviour, the Restoration witnessed a return to relaxed attitudes about sexual behaviour.

In The Double Dealer, the love, rather attraction that Lady Touchwood has for Mellefont is not stable, neither is her love for Maskwell. She is a woman who is dissatisfied by the men in her life and is looking for something new. This is another depiction that Congreve provides. In The Way of the World, central is the delicate handling of the love game as played by Mirabell and Millamant. They represent the ideal of the Restoration attitude, intense yet balanced, their love based on mutual esteem with no surrender of individuality. Contrasted with it are Mirabell’s earlier and quite ambiguous love affair with Mrs. Fainall; the illicit love of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, presumably passionate, but wholly without mutual trust; the spurious court young Witwoud pays to Millamant; the direct and somewhat coarse approach of Sir Wilfull; and, at the opposite extreme completely, the aging and undignified longings of Lady Wishfort, vain, unrealistic, over-eager, desperate, and a little pathetic.

Love and Money

Love and money are values to be taken into account at all times. The sincerity of Mirabell’s love does not make him lose sight of the importance of Millamant’s fortune. Fainall marries for money to support an illicit love; apparently the thought of marrying Mrs. Marwood without adequate money is unthinkable. The same scenario is seen in Valentine’s love for Angelica. The man has had several other affairs but he is said to love Angelica and the fact that she is the heiress to a handsome fortune finds mention. In Mellefont’s case, though there is no overt mention of money, it is apparent that he is marrying a person who is of the same social status, and thereby, fortunate. Love without money is an impossible sentimental dream, although money often corrupts what love there is.

A Gallery of Portraits

Congreve was a master character artist and he has depicted almost all types of characters in these plays. Every character reveals himself in action, as can be seen through the way Lady Touchwood reveals her attempts at ensnaring Mellefont, or Lord Sampson Legend’s untrue love
for his sons. Mirabell is the beau ideal: polished, poised, rational and balanced, witty and perspicacious without being what we might today call over-intellectual. Millamant is the belle: feminine, beautiful, witty, not prudish, but with a sense of her own worth. She has avoided the messiness and humiliation of sexual intrigue. Opposed to Mirabell are would-be wits, worthy but graceless boors, and deep intriguers. Opposed to Millamant are women who engaged in adultery and an old dowager without decorum. Together, these varied characters produce a gallery of self-portraits.

Intrigues

This refers to the secret methods used to do something illegal or incorrect. This can be noticed in all three plays, starting with The Double Dealer. Here, Lady Touchwood hatches a plan with her previous lover, Maskwell, to cause disgrace to Mellefont. And, Maskwell plays an intrigue with Lady Touchwood as he does not disclose his intention of marrying Cynthia. In The Way of the World, everyone is engaged in intrigue: Mirabell intrigues to gain consent to his marriage from Lady Wishfort, and this involves intrigue within intrigue, for he does not trust Waitwell. Fainall intrigues in turn. Everyone is involved in one or the other of these schemes — Mrs. Fainall, Mrs. Marwood, and the servants. Even Lady Wishfort in her willingness to marry Sir Rowland has a devious purpose — revenge on Mirabell. When Mrs. Fainall married her husband; that was part of an intrigue, as was his marriage to her. And as we see in the play, victory goes to Mirabell, not because of his virtue, but simply because he is the most successful intriguer.

In Love for Love, the biggest intrigue is employed by Valentine, who pretends to be mad. Then, Angelica resorts to intrigue to trick him into saying the truth by pretending to accept Lord Sampson’s proposal for marriage. All the characters in almost all Congreve’s plays engage in some or the other form of intrigue.

Role Playing

This theme is very similar to the theme of intrigues, for it is through role playing that the characters engage in intrigues. Mirabell pretends to like Lady Wishfort and plays a role. Again, Fainall and his wife are just pretending to be a happily married couple. Valentine and the other family members are also engaged in role playing while it is his brother, Ben, who is not even aware of such occurrences. In The Double Dealer, Maskwell is the one with the maximum number of roles.

Other than these five major themes, we also have some minor themes like the relation between the father and sons in Love for Love and the urban sophistication we find in some parts of the plays.

But they are not as relevant to Congreve’s style as those mentioned above.

Conclusion

By 1692, Congreve was already a recognized member of the literary world. In 1693, Congreve's real career began, and early enough by the latest computation, with the brilliant appearance and instant success of his first comedy, The Old Bachelor, under the generous auspices of Dryden, then as ever a living and immortal witness to the falsehood of the vulgar charges which taxes the greater among poets with jealousy or envy, the natural badge and brand of the smallest that would claim a place among their kind. The dis-crowned laureate had never, he said, seen such a first play; and indeed the graceless grace of the dialogue was as yet only to be matched by the last and best work of Etheredge, standing as till then it had done alone among the barefaced brutalities of Wycherley and Shadwell.

The fame of the greatest English comic dramatist is founded wholly or mainly on but three of his five plays. His first comedy was little more than a brilliant study after such models as were eclipsed by this earliest effort of their imitator; and tragedy under his hands appears rouged and wrinkled, in the patches and powder of Lady Wishfort. But his three great comedies are more than enough to sustain a reputation as durable as our language.

The types of Congreve's first work were the common conventional properties of stage tradition; but the fine and clear-cut style in which these types were reproduced was his own. The gift of one place and the reversion of another were the solid fruits of his splendid success. His first play, The Old Bachelor, was first acted in January 1693, before he was twenty-three years old, and was triumphantly successful. His other plays, The Double-Dealer, Love for Love, The Mourning Bride, and The Way of the World, all followed at short intervals. The last of them was presented in March 1700.

For the rest of his life, Congreve wrote no plays. The Way of the World was not successful on the stage, and this disappointment may have had something to do with his decision. He engaged in controversy with Jeremy Collier on the morality of the stage, a frustrating experience. He suffered from gout and bad sight. He became an elder statesman of letters at the age of thirty, honoured by the nobility, highly respected by younger writers.

While going through Congreve’s The Way of the World, several themes that seemed to echo the nature and ways of the society at that time are noticeable. It was around the end of the Restoration Period that Congreve constructed his master plots.
Congreve placed great importance on character sketches and the themes of role playing, conditional love, mingled with the love for money and the need for intrigues in almost every facet of life. These are the themes that were central to his plays.

References:


