

Semester –II

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William Congreve

The Way of the World

Wit in Congreve's *Way of the World*

Wit expresses itself in the use of irony, innuendo, epigram, word-play, etc. These rhetorical devices almost invariably present statements that have dual significance, and the juxtaposition of the apparent and hidden meanings supplies the incongruity which is the source of comic laughter. Wit sometimes draws together two images on a flimsy point of likeness that serves only to heighten the incongruity of the association. Wit provides pleasure on several levels, but it is essentially an exercise of the intellect and its appeal is always to the intellect. It is the most effective weapon with which a sophisticated society can be made aware of its shortcomings. Wit is considered to be the ultimate apotheosis of Restoration Culture. The characters in Restoration age are sophisticated wits or would-be wits and sport an attitude of trendy skepticism. Courtship is curiously devoid of tenderness and romance, but it's rather a matter of smart verbal sparring. John Palmer is justified in declaring that "sex in Congreve is a battle of the wits" rather than a battlefield of the emotions.

Congreve, in his letter to John Dennis makes an interesting distinction between Wit and Humour. Developing Jonson's theory, Congreve believes that Humour implies certain eccentricities of behaviour arising from differences of 'Constitutions, Complexions and Dispositions of Men.' Wit is considered the art of speaking pleasantly and amusingly. On the basis of this definition, we can proceed to analyze the wit and humour in *The Way of the World*. There are three characters in the play – Lady Wishfort, Sir Willfull and Petulant, who reflect Johnsonian humour. The eccentricities in their character make us laugh but they themselves are not consciously witty. Through the exposition of their humour, the dramatist's art

and style is revealed as he makes each of them into a highly individualized character in which the type is hardly recognizable.

Congreve clearly distinguishes between true wit and false wit. In providing an explanation of the term the era of Congreve's society has to be considered as well because the meaning of the word shifted throughout the history. Hinnant, a critic adds that "wit" refers to more than just a verbal play (puns, similitudes, antithesis etc.) It also points to a traditional ideal of decorum ("a propriety of words and thoughts" whose theoretical basis provides a standard by which false wit can be judged. To elaborate more on the concept of true wit and false wit, characters in *The Way of the World* that express this notion can be divided into two groups: wits and would-be wits. In his interpretation, the separation, between the two groups is not always clear, neither it is rigid, which makes it more difficult to distinguish the true wits of the play. Congreve continues with the interest in the notion of wit, but offers a fresh outlook on it. His characters are not black and white. He allows his would-be wits to have some bright moments as well.

The character of Anthony Witwoud can serve as an example, as he represents a rather problematic would-be-wit. Witwoud was actually taken for a true wit by his contemporaries as his affectation is focused towards similitude and his character "balances brilliance with dullness...a Witwoud who sparkles and a Witwoud who is tiresome. " This allows Congreve to express his skeptical attitude towards the usage of similitudes and its perception as an example of true wit. He is someone who confesses: "I talk like an old maid at a marriage, I don't know what I say" (Act I, 230-231), but at the same time he tirelessly attempts to express what Kaufman names "linguistic ease of the wits". As a consequence, the audience can "witness a self-conscious obsession with wit transform a human being into a wit-producing automaton". Witwoud is self-aware of his over indulgence in similitudes, but simply cannot stop himself even though his speeches are found tiresome by others. The scene that he shares with Millamant in Act II is a perfect example of that:

"Millamant : Dear Mr. Witwoud, Truce with your Similitudes : For I am sick of 'em-

Witwould : As a physician of a good Air – I cannot help it Madam, tho' 'tis against my self.

Millamant : Yet again! Mincing, stand between me and his Wit.

Witwould : Do, Mrs. Mincing, like a Skreen before a great Fire. I confess I do blaze today, I am too bright.”

Witwould is conscious of his unstoppable flow of attempted wit, but still he tries to paint himself as a true wit. He is a character that focuses predominantly on his rhetorical expressions, but lacks any sense of subtlety or fittingness of his utterances that are essential components of a true wit.

Even the female characters in the play attempt to present themselves as a true wit. They also try to project themselves as ingenious players in the game of the society. To elaborate the discussion let us consider the character Mrs. Marwood, Mrs. Fainall's mistress who shares with Witwould the endeavour to present herself as a witty character. But just as he, she is not able to recognize the propriety of some of her expressions. When she is discussing the issue of female friendship with Fainall, she calls it “more sincere, and more enduring, than all the vain and empty vows of men”. Fainall immediately reminds her that she is his wife's friend and at the same time his lover, thus immediately undermining her argument. Her words could express true wit, but they would have to belong to a different character. After such disclosure of her impropriety, she resorts to a less witty and more malicious language that instead of the subtlety of true wit possesses unnecessarily dramatic exclamation such as “I loathe you”.

Wit is indeed closely connected to language, but is not expressed solely in words, speeches or similitudes. It is also reflected through action. The central characters of the play Mirabell and Fainall are both very good rhetoricians; therefore it is deeds rather than discourse that distinguish the true wit that is Mirabell from Fainall, who only feigns it, however masterfully at times, using the language of a gentleman to mask his real spiteful and vicious nature.

Indeed, it is mainly the action that uncovers his false wit. The way they both plot against Lady Wishfort brilliantly highlights the differences that demark the two characters. Fainall is unscrupulously pursuing his ambition to obtain his mother –

in-law's fortune and he is willing to destroy his wife's reputation, to let her turn "adrift like a leaky hulk to sink or swim" (Act V, 403-405), thus fully uncovering his absolute lack of morality. Kaufman, a critic, views Fainall as the "the libertine hero of the early Restoration-a predator whose vision of society is one of man's animal instincts hidden under the veneer of "honour" or "reputation". However, those qualities as a result spoil his success and leave him to exit the stage defeated. His instincts are not accurate enough and he gets lost in his schemes. In his final scene, when he is faced with the evidence of the parchment that allocates his wife's estate "in trust to Edward Mirabell" , he cannot control his rage or find words to fight or defend himself, but flees after a failed attempt to assault his wife, which proves his ultimate defeat on the rhetorical battlefield as well.

Although the play is full of false wits but we do observe true wit among some characters. The amorous gestures and contemplation of love between Mirabell and Millamant show superiority of wit among others. They learnt to conduct themselves in the society with sense of propriety and sufficient level of self-discipline. Mirabell does not pursue his scheme unscrupulously as Fainall does, but ensures that it does not pose real danger to Lady Wishfort, when he links her with a suitor that is already married.

Wit is also derived from the other characters and we are dazzled by what Bonamy Dobree calls it the 'verbal pyrotechnics' which sparkle on every page. A brilliant display of such wit is observed in the statement of Foible when she tells Lady Wishfort, with delightful irony: 'A little Art once made your Picture like you; and now a little of the same Art must make you like your picture' (Act III.i.153-55). Thus wit is revealed in the perfect control of vocabulary, in the polished, epigrammatic elegance of style and the delicate antithetical balance of the sentences. The brilliance of the intellectual word-play has led some critics to complain that it is the blinding effect but Congreve takes care that the distinction between the characters does not get blurred. Millamant's wit is the most spontaneous; though her speeches have the period and balance of perfectly constructed sentences, there is less of conscious artistry in them. Fainall and Mirabell, as men of the world, speak in a more studied and sophisticated manner and at first they seem alike, but the cynical twist to Fainall's remarks indicates the difference between the two. Witwoud's wit, on the other hand, is forced and artificial, and his laborious piling of similes drives Millamant to distraction. He

pleads that it was an innocent device even though “it had a face of guiltiness” and that he has never intended to cause lasting distress to Lady Wishfort. Indeed, through his action he distances himself from Fainall and professes his moral superiority. While Mirabell thus distances himself from Fainall, who portrays the villain of the play, Millamant is also in control of her own situation. She does not appear in person until the middle of the second act and immediately establishes herself as the character that possesses true wit in contrast to Witwoud, with whom she shares the scene. When he asks her about letters, she responds “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”. She admits that she receives letters from possible admirers and that she finds it rather tiresome, but at the same time she is careful to use “one” instead of “I” that would make her statement more offensive than amusing. Millamant seems to insist that they play the game (of courtship) by its rules.

Amongst the wits it was considered fashionable and smart to cover emotions with the veneer of sophisticated repartee. The depth of Millamant’s feelings is only revealed in instances such as her private admission to Mrs. Fainall that she loves Mirabell "violently" and would "be a lost thing" if their marriage were to go wrong. Of course, Millamant's behaviour in public is the result of deliberate and artful dissembling. What sets her apart from the rest of the social players is that certain indefinable grace that divides the Millamants from the Marwoods. Youth and beauty make her desirable and give her the confidence to carry off her act with panache. Millamant definitely enjoys her role of celebrated coquette, especially when it allows her to frustrate Mirabell's attempts to come closer to her in a serious relationship. She refuses to give him her word until she is sure of her feelings for him. Millamant seems to insist that they play the game (of courtship) by its rules.

Thus Congreve’s play *The Way of the World* offers a complex representation of wit in both its true and false forms. He uses typical wit-wouds from the Restoration comedies, but he operates with them in such a way that they do not remain only rigid, laughable characters. The barrier between them and true wit is sometimes so thin that they are almost indistinguishable from each other. However, in comparison to Mirabell or Millamant their affected wit (as Congreve called it in his dedication) proves to be false. The discourse of such characters does not possess sufficient subtlety or propriety and their actions lack sense of morality. As a result

their schemes eventually succumb to those flaws, leaving them defeated in the game of society.

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