Thematic Development in the Comedies of William Congreve: The Individual in Society*

SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI

William Congreve's plays have long been subject to the vicissitudes of critical taste. Beginning with Jeremy Collier, who criticized Congreve for gross immorality, obscenity, and lewdness,[1] criticism for generations was largely adverse. The exceptions are significant, for to absolve Congreve of immorality, critics placed him in the realm of the amoral. Hazlitt called Congreve's style "the highest model of comic dialogue,"[2] while Lamb defended Restoration comedy and Congreve against the charge of immorality by removing the comedies from a concern with contemporary society.[3] Early twentieth-century criticism is equally unsatisfactory. Malcolm Elwin sees in Congreve's plays a "realistic reproduction of artifical manners,"[4] and even Bonamy Dobrée, in a generally balanced approach, regards them as an outgrowth of a disillusioned idealism that expressed itself in style and diction.[5]

Fortunately, discussion of the philosophical and ethical foundation on which Congreve based his plays is found in certain recent work. Thomas Fujimura applied his analysis of Restoration comedy in terms of the philosophical naturalism of Hobbes and of wit as an ideal of judgment to Congreve, thus defending him against the earlier views that he was only a cynic or stylist.[6] Norman Holland, analyzing Congreve's comedies in terms of a concern of all drama—appearance versus reality—showed this concern was especially apt for Restoration comedy; for the man of this period, in experiencing the

*I am most grateful to Professors Kenneth Moler and Frederick Link for their reviews of this paper.

[1] *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, 4th ed. (London, 1699).

[2] *Lectures on the English Comic Writers. The Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1931), VI, 71.

[3] "The Artificial Comedy of the Last Century," *The Works of Charles Lamb*, ed. A. Singer (London, 1899), pp. 277-289.

[4] *Handbook to Restoration Drama* (New York, 1928), p. 164.

[5] *Restoration Comedy 1660-1720* (Oxford, 1924).

[6] *The Restoration Comedy of Wit* (Princeton, 1952). See Chapter VII.

separation of faith from reason, was characterized by a "sense of schism."[7] Similarly, William Van Voris maintained that Congreve was a "gentleman on a cliff" holding up "a cultivated stance" as protection against disintegration of traditional values.[8] Furthermore, a much-needed discussion of the historical and literary context for Congreve's plays has been supplied recently by Maximillian Novak.[9]

The philosophical basis of contemporary critics has led to a far better appreciation of Congreve than had been evident up to this time. However, it is possible that the enthusiasm of each critic for his own approach—Fujimura for naturalism and wit, Holland for appearance and nature, and Van Voris for the pose which the eighteenth-century man must cultivate—has resulted in a failure to recognize a central theme developed by Congreve in the four comedies—the relation of the individual to society, a concern given new importance by intellectual movements of Congreve's time. The widely recognized influence of science on man's thought need only be mentioned here: in general, the world was secularized and removed from a direct kinship with God; as a result, the former compatibility of reason and emotion became what Eliot later called "dissociated." The most important development for this study resulted from the devaluation of society: no longer divinely ordered, society, like the physical universe, could be explained in secular terms. With the loss of a divinely sanctioned social standard of right and wrong, the traditional conflict of the individual versus society was to take a new direction, one that is basic to Congreve's comedies. In these comedies there occurs increasing thematic complexity, with an accompanying increase in control over dramatic convention to support theme. The initial concentration upon society and heavy dependence upon Restoration dramatic convention shifts to a focus upon the necessity of the individual to wrest a meaningful ideal from a social system seemingly organized for the suppression of that very quality. With his last play, Congreve successfully integrates the individual and society with thoroughly controlled manipulation of dramatic convention.

I.

The Old Batchelour generally is examined in terms of Congreve's brilliant use of dialogue to enliven a rather trite theme and plot.

[7] *The First Modern Comedies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959). See Chapters 11-15.
[8] *The Cultivated Stance* (Dublin, 1965). See Chapters 1-4 and Chapter 6.
[9] *William Congreve* (New York, 1971).

Indeed, the amount of conventional material in the play is readily apparent: the characters (truewits, witwouds, and witlesses) are those common to Restoration comedy, as are the situations (a series of deceptions based on sex and money and resolved in ritual marriages). These characters and situations are developed within the overall convention of a "*précieuse* scheme of life."[10] But such analysis of plot and theme does Congreve a grave injustice by not recognizing his adroit use of Restoration dramatic convention for two ends: (1) within this play, to point out the dehumanizing effect of such convention, and (2) in terms of his overall career, to lay the foundation for the theme central to all four comedies. This foundation results from Congreve's portrayal of a world in which the value of opposition between the individual and society is *not* recognized.

In *The Old Batchelour* Congreve examines the possibilities, or lack of possibilities, for man in a world in which convention is so firmly the norm that the characters demand it of each other and are able to relate to one another only so long as each conforms to it. Thus Araminta reveals a truth not only about her relationship with Vainlove but about all the relationships in the play when she says that for men, women are "Rather poor silly Idols of your own making, which, upon the least displeasure you forsake, and set up new" (II.ii.146-147).[11] Pretense is demanded in a world in which each character insists that reality conform to his distorted picture of it. The result can only be purely social relationships, for, as indicated by the song at the end of Act II, in a world based on illusion rather than upon reality, any private contact will destroy the illusion:

I.

Thus, to a ripe, consenting Maid,
Poor, old, repenting *Delia* said,
Would you long preserve your Lover?
Would you still his Goddess reign?
Never let him all discover,
Never let him much obtain.

II.

Men will admire, adore and die,
While wishing at your Feet they lie:

[10]Kathleen Lynch. *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy* (New York, 1926). p. 194.

[11]William Congreve. *The Complete Plays of William Congreve*, ed. Herbert Davis (Chicago, 1967). References to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text.

But admitting their Embraces,
Wakes 'em from the golden Dream;
Nothing's new besides our Faces,
Every Woman is the same.

(II.ii.190-202)

In *The Old Batchelour,* then, Congreve presents relationships characterized by an indiscriminate suppression of the individual or private by the social or public. The three major couples develop three aspects of this problem, a problem portrayed by various uses of Restoration dramatic convention. The four clever young lovers are developed within a *précieuse* scheme of life, and Heartwell's pursuit of Silvia is portrayed in terms of Elizabethan humours. In each case, the man determines the direction the relationship will take within the convention: Bellmour loves indiscriminately; Vainlove, valuing the pursuit but not the woman, is just as indiscriminate in his devotion to the "golden dream" rather than to reality; and Heartwell hates indiscriminately.

Bellmour's wooing of Belinda illustrates the central concern of the play—relationships based on convention rather than upon individuality. Here it is a *précieuse* scheme of things to which characters must adapt. As a result, Bellmour's main obstacle in his pursuit of Belinda consists of defining the role he is to play, of discovering her "golden dream" so that he may comply with it: "But tell me how you would be Ador'd—I am very tractable" (II.ii.173-174). Plying Belinda with conventional *précieuse* dialogue, Bellmour evokes only exasperation, for Belinda recognizes the game she plays herself: "If you must talk impertinently, for Heav'ns sake let it be with variety; don't come always, like the Devil, wrapt in Flames" (II.ii.168-172).

Belinda's treatment of Bellmour is justified and the point of her attack illustrated when Bellmour, using the lover's cant to woo a woman he met only moments earlier, seduces Laetitia. In this seduction both Bellmour and Laetitia act and react according to expectations of conventional types: here lovemaking has become purely conventional and, in a very basic sense, social. When Bellmour declares, "Give me leave to swear—by those Eyes, those killing Eyes; by those healing Lips.—Oh! press the soft Charm close to mine,—and seal 'em up for ever" (IV.ii.72-74), Laetitia responds favorably in an aside, "I never saw any thing so agreeably Impudent" (IV.ii.79-80). Laetitia's reaction, in contrast to Belinda's, illustrates the superficial level of such a social relationship, a superficiality that, momentarily at least, Belinda seems to fight against. But Belinda has no "golden dream" beyond that provided by the convention to which she adapts:

she lacks the strength of a Millamant, which is necessary to raise the relationship from a social to an individual level. As a result the success of Bellmour's wooing of Belinda is a marriage which holds little real hope for the individual in it. There is no opposition to Belinda's view of the relation of "Courtship to Marriage, as a very witty Prologue to a very dull Play" (V.i.387-388).

With Heartwell, the old bachelor, Congreve presents a thematic contrast to the characterization of Bellmour. Heartwell's indiscriminate hatred of women, portrayed as an Elizabethan humour, blinds him to private reality in a manner reminiscent of Manly in *The Plain Dealer*. Congreve's titular character insists upon the conformity of individuals to his expectation, railing against the refusal of individuals to fit themselves to his notion of type: "I am for having every body be what they pretend to be; a Whoremaster be a Whoremaster . . ." (I.i.253-254). As is expected, the self-complacency of Heartwell limits his perception. He is unable to penetrate the social masks assumed by other characters and thus unable to relate to the private individual or to the reality beneath the mask. Silvia recognizes this devotion of Heartwell to his own dream and, in her efforts to assume the public role of wife, conforms to his ideal, agreeing to "dress up [her] Face in Innocence and Smiles; and dissemble the very want of Dissimulation" (III.i.48-50). Significantly, the private tie of friendship saves Heartwell from marriage to a whore. Although Bellmour had encouraged the attachment in the first place by purposely cooling toward his former mistress, Silvia, he prevents the marriage.

If Congreve uses the *précieuse* tradition in the Bellmour-Belinda wooing to illustrate the subordination of the individual to the social, he uses the same tradition in portraying the Vainlove-Araminta relationship to depict the total suppression of the individual by convention. Vainlove, as his name implies, is unable to love at all: he has "a sickly peevish Appetite; only chew[s] Love and cannot digest it" (IV.i.172-173). His pursuit of Araminta reaches its climax when he receives a letter supposedly from Araminta expressing her affection for him; here we have the greatest insight into Vainlove's character as well as into his relationship with Araminta. First, Vainlove's indiscriminate pursuit of the illusion is illustrated in his inability to recognize that the letter is forged. His conception of the type perverts his relation to the individual, for had he any appreciation at all of Araminta as an individual, he would have recognized that such a letter was completely incongruous with her character. Second, the incident provides insight into the relationship of Vainlove and Araminta. Ironically, the forged letter expresses the ideally true

feelings of the lovers and, for a moment at least, the relationship seems to have the potential of emerging from the world of the *précieuse* game to the realm of private feelings. However, when Vainlove reads the letter, he says coldly, "'Tis an untimely Fruit, and she has miscarried of her Love" (IV.i.169-170), resolving to see Araminta again only so "she shall see her error" in responding to his courtship. Thus the scene supports the demand of the characters seen throughout the play that the world conform to their personal illusion, for in *The Old Batchelour* the implied justification is that this is the only means by which society can exist at all.

Yet Congreve undermines this justification as a thematic solution by creating tension between the individual character and the dramatic convention dominant in his characterization. Heartwell seemingly strains against the humours convention, for Congreve has granted him sufficient wit to recognize the folly of his own actions. This tension is dramatized as Heartwell approaches Silvia's house: "Is not this *Silvia's* House, the Cave of that Enchantress and which consequently I ought to shun as I would infection? To enter here, is to put on the envenom'd Shirt, to run into the Embraces of a Fever. . . . Ha! well recollected, I will recover my reason and be gone. . . . Well, Why do you not move? Feet do your Office—Not one Inch; no, Foregod I'me caught" (III.i.64-74).

A similar kind of tension is created between the clever young lovers and the convention of *préciosité*. As has been noted, all the young lovers accept the "rules" of *préciosité*, rules which appeal to feminine taste. Yet both Belinda and Araminta, the major female characters in the play, recognize the essential falsity of the game they are playing. Even Belinda, described as "an Affected Lady" in the Dramatis Personae, recognizes "the buffoonry" of a lover's address as part of "the Miscarriages" of "the game." Araminta furthers this tension between her cousin's role and her individuality by noting that Belinda's pretense of loathing men "is gross Affectation." Araminta herself is the most obvious example of this tension. She is the most sensible of the characters; the affectation of a *précieuse* role is established early as incongruous with her true nature, for in private she candidly admits her love (II.ii.8-10). Yet in a play about the force of convention in determining the standards to which individuals must adapt themselves, it is significant that the character for whom the game is most incongruous is left, at the play's end, with the least hope of marriage. When Vainlove, seemingly in compliance with dramatic convention of marriages at the end of the fifth act, proposes to Araminta, she is forced to deny him her hand: "she dares not consent, for fear he shou'd recant" (V.ii.175-176).

The subplot supports the thematic development of the three main actions, for the Fondlewife-Laetitia relationship shows the result in marriage of the imposition of one's own ideal upon another. Laetitia knows the role she must play to please her husband; she plays it so well, in fact, that he suspects her of duplicity: "She's fonder of me, than she has reason to be; and in the way of Trade, we still suspect the smoothest Dealers of the deepest designs" (IV.i.59-60). Laetitia, by appearing to conform to what Fondlewife wishes her to be, is able to convince him that she had never before seen the man lying on her bed, for Fondlewife resolves to ignore reality in favor of his "golden dream."

With the end of the play none of the relationships rises above the social level. The only marriage among the major couples results when Belinda rather fortuitously changes her mind, a decision conforming to the expectations of the audience rather than arising out of any internal or contextual motivation. The use of the convention of masked marriages provides further comment on a society in which individuals join only by concealing private reality behind a public mask which has been adjusted to meet the demands of the other person (V.ii.95 ff.). Thus in *The Old Batchelour* Congreve presents a society in which the individual has been sacrificed to the social and the private to the public. It is a society in which admitted embraces bring the realization of the incongruity between the private reality and the public mask and, finally, the termination of the relationship.

II.

In *The Double Dealer,* thematic treatment gains depth: here Congreve establishes the antagonism that he will develop in his remaining comedies—the individual *versus* society. The basic concern is a definition of what is desirable—the private person who presents himself to the world versus the social one who dons a mask of convention to conceal his true or private self. *The Double Dealer* treats two problems central to this concern: first, that of a definition of "true wisdom," treated in the comic action, and second, that of the value of honesty versus hypocrisy, treated in the serious action of Maskwell and Lady Touchwood.

At the end of the third act, Cynthia asks a question basic to the problem of a definition of "true wisdom":

> 'Tis not so hard to counterfeit Joy in the depth of Affliction, as to dissemble Mirth in Company of Fools—Why should I

> call 'em Fools? The World thinks better of 'em; for these have Quality and Education, Wit and fine Conversation are receiv'd and admir'd by the World—If not, they like and admire themselves—And why is not that true Wisdom, for 'tis Happiness: And for ought I know, we have misapply'd the Name all this while, and mistaken the thing: Since
>
> If Happiness in Self-content is plac'd
> The Wise are Wretched, and Fools only Bless'd.

The self-content of these characters is so great that it is not adulterous love for a rival that should concern the marriage partner, but egoistic love for self. Lady Froth unwittingly expresses this truth when, after giving a mirror to her husband with instructions to pretend it her picture in order to demonstrate for Cynthia his devotion, Lord Froth responds so lovingly to his own reflection that Lady Froth declares "nay, my Lord, you sha'n't kiss it so much; I shall grow jealous, I vow now" (II.i.77-78).

If the marriage of the Froths illustrates the shallowness or affectation of social love, the marriage of Sir Paul and Lady Plyant presents the affectation of virtue. Completely oblivious to true virtue, Lady Plyant assumes a mask of social virtue to protect herself from involvement with her husband and to enable involvement with other men. She declares that she has "preserved my Honour as it were in a Snow-House for this three year past" and that she has "been white and unsulli'd even by Sir *Paul* himself" (II.i.254-256). Yet the incongruity between this mask and Lady Plyant's true self is obvious in the next scene, in which she displays her willingness to engage in an affair with Mellefont. In portraying a society in which the characters are capable only of self-love, Congreve adds the beautiful touch of having Lady Plyant seduce herself with the romantic cant of a libertine rake (II.i.344-372).

The antagonism that Maskwell sets up is, then, that of "Wisdom and Honesty" versus "Cunning and Hypocrisie," and with this antagonism there is a significant shift in what Holland calls the "comic axis," which "is no longer wisdom and folly, but good and evil. Congreve has added to the tendency to present an ideal in a realistic context still another symptom of eighteenth-century sentimentality: a faith in the 'natural goodness' of people which social forms only interfere with, as here the social context serves to obscure Mellefont's noble impulses."[12] This criterion for the morality of characters supports the basic contrast that Congreve develops in

[12] *The First Modern Comedies*, p. 160.

the play—private versus public. As Maskwell states, his hypocrisy is pitted against Mellefont's honesty, and within the play hypocrisy involves the assumption of public masks which are not compatible with the private self. Maskwell, who sees beneath the masks of the other characters and adjusts his own actions in compliance with the private realities that he perceives, is opposed to Mellefont, who has no public mask. Thus Congreve focuses thematically upon forces of antagonism by portraying the hero, Mellefont, as a private person unable to cope with a public society. Mellefont's basic impotence in influencing the action continues through the last scenes of the play. The resolution within the play comes about not through recognition of the natural goodness of Mellefont—Lord Touchwood pronounces Mellefont good *after* the essential steps have been taken in the resolution—but with the reintegration of a society which has been fragmented by Maskwell.

In the first scene, Mellefont separates himself from the rest of society, an action defined by Brisk as "thy Amputation from the body of our Society" (I.i.36-37), and he remains isolated during the rest of the play. Throughout the play, there runs an undercurrent of imagery of pursuit—the society in pursuit of the disaffiliated characters, Mellefont and Cynthia. Just as Lady Touchwood encroached upon Mellefont's privacy when she climbed into bed with him, honoring neither his own feeling nor the nearness of the blood relationship, so society encroaches upon the privacy of the lovers. This basic image is picked up by Cynthia when she says "it will never be a Match" between herself and Mellefont "because we are both so willing . . . for when People walk hand in hand, there's neither overtaking nor meeting: We Hunt in Couples where we both pursue the same Game, but forget one another; and 'tis because we are so near that we don't think of coming together" (IV.i.7-18).

Unlike Mellefont, Maskwell is, indeed, a "manifold villain" (V.i.575). He understands the masks that people wear to protect their private selves, as Lady Touchwood indicates when she cries, "O' *Maskwell,* in Vain I do disguise me from thee, thou know'st me, know'st the very inmost Windings and Recesses of my Soul" (I.i.396-398), a cry that reveals more, perhaps, about Maskwell than about Lady Touchwood. Thus the villain in the play is acutely perceptive to the discrepancy between the public and the private, and he uses the power resulting from that perception to manipulate. As *The Old Batchelour* shows the potential folly of a world in which the public suppresses the private, *The Double Dealer* illustrates the potential for evil and villainy that results from the discrepancy between the private and the public, between the actual and the ideal.

Maskwell's success is dependent, however, upon the maintenance of the discrepancy—he has power only so long as he can keep separate the fragments he has perceived and created. The villainy that may flourish in private can never survive public exposure, for as the fragments come into contact, Maskwell's influence is lost and more real human relationships are established. This is, in fact, the final moral of the play, for after Lord Touchwood orders, "Secure that manifold Villain," he declares:

> Let secret Villany from hence be warn'd;
> Howe're in private, Mischiefs are conceiv'd,
> Torture and shame attend their open Birth:
> Like Vipers in the Womb, base treach'ry lies,
>
> Still gnawing that, whence first it did arise;
> No sooner born, but the Vile Parent dies.

A basic weakness of the play is evident in its thematic "solution." Here the forces of evil are pitted against the public, or society, and overthrow of evil comes with reassertion of social order. However, such a solution is viable only so long as social codes are a reflection of true Order. In *The Double Dealer,* representatives of social order are weak and easily manipulated by Maskwell. Lord Touchwood, by his rank in society and his control over the young lovers' fortune, is the play's representative of the aristocratic values basic to Congreve's comedies.[13] Yet he readily promises both his estate and Cynthia to Maskwell. The reduction of Lord Touchwood to an impotent bystander is illustrated at the end of the play, when he is left only with delivering the final moral to the audience.

Characters representing a new order in *The Double Dealer* seem unable to assert themselves against forces of evil, a problem related to Congreve's use of dramatic convention. In his thematic portrayal of opposition to the individual in society, Congreve turned to tragic or, even more significantly, to heroic conventions. Maskwell and Lady Touchwood are motivated by uncontrolled passion and a quest for unbounded power; these qualities are expressed in the rhetorical excesses of both characters. But more important, they bring to *The Double Dealer* a world view from the heroic play—one of chance. As Martin Price describes, "In such a world the common specter is meaninglessness. The gods are ineffectual; they do nothing to

[13]For a discussion of the interaction of comedy and society in the plays of Congreve and others, see John Loftis, *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding* (Stanford, 1959).

confirm the values of men. To the lazy sensualist they seem gods at their ease, untroubled by the 'little emmets' below; to the fiery egoist they seem criminal gods who have won their own power by ruthlessness and condone cruelty in men. It remains, then, for man to create his own meaning and his own values by self-assertion. The traditional codes by which he lives have often become a travesty of true Order. . . ."[14]

The importance of this play, then, in the thematic development of Congreve's comedies lies most basically in his definition of conflict. But the play also points to thematic development of later comedies and to the necessity for increased manipulation of dramatic convention. In *The Double Dealer,* Congreve has not yet developed a thematic "solution," nor has he found the dramatic convention needed in support. These are problems with which the last two comedies concern themselves.

III.

The thematic development of *Love for Love* furthers the previous development of *The Old Batchelour,* which portrayed a society in which individuality was lost, and of *The Double Dealer,* in which the antagonism of society to the individual was stressed. In *Love for Love,* the focus is upon the individual himself and, more specifically, upon his responsibility to create meaning from an essentially meaningless society. This responsibility is implied in the title, for love is received only for love that is given. The basis for an ability to love is a detachment from one's own ego: just as Valentine at one time is confined by the poses that he assumes, so are the other characters confined within their masks and, thus, unable to escape the imprisonment in self that Valentine eventually rises above.

The obvious contrast of the constancy of Valentine to Angelica versus the transitory relationships of the other characters is based upon a more basic contrast of the final ability of Valentine to rise above his ego versus the limitation of other characters by egoism—egoism so confining that even the most superficial of contacts is possible only through a mask of hypocrisy. These are the characters who "would all have the Reward of Love," but who haven't "the Constancy to stay until it becomes [their] due" (V.i.629-631). Their deficiency in the ability to love involves a refusal to "sacrifice their

[14]*To the Palace of Wisdom* (Garden City, 1964), p. 33.

Interest to their Constancy"; this refusal of self-sacrifice is the primary characteristic of the other characters in contrast to that of Valetine and Angelica.

The basic struggle of the individual against imprisonment by ego is portrayed by the fullest integration of theme and dramatic convention thus far in Congreve's career. The confinement of "social" characters is portrayed by their seeming inability to escape a determining dramatic convention, while the individuality of Valentine and Angelica is defined at least partially by an ironic reversal of these same traditions.

Thus Sir Sampson is confined within a humour in which Elizabethan divine right is translated into Hobbesian economics and a child incurs an "original debt" to his parents at conception. This reversal of aristocratic values of inheritance is seen in Sir Sampson's search throughout the play to be freed from his familial responsibilities; he first tries to disinherit Valentine and then Ben. Sir Sampson's evasion of responsibility involves a debasement from the human to the animal level which is illustrated in his wish, "Body, o' me, why was not I a Bear? that my Cubs might have liv'd upon sucking their Paws; Nature has been provident only to Bears and Spiders; the one has its Nutriment in his own hands; and t' other spins his Habitation out of his Entrails" (II.i.389-394). Even more serious than his efforts to deny Valentine the physical support of his inheritance is Sir Sampson's attempt to marry Angelica, who within the context of the play is the means to his son's spiritual salvation. Nowhere is Sir Sampson's egoism more clearly illustrated than in this action, for with it he shows his complete blindness to his own nature, to the needs of Angelica, and to the welfare of his own son. This blindness is recognized by Ben when he advises his father not to marry Angelica: "It's just the same thing, as if so be you should sail so far as the *Streights* without Provision" (V.i.414-416). Just as Sir Sampson lacks the physical provision for a sexual relationship with a young woman, he lacks the emotional provison for a relationship of love with any human being, a deficiency attacked by Angelica when she tells him to "Learn to be a good Father, or you'll never get a second Wife" (V.i.571-572).

Against a background of the transitory and superficial relationships of society, represented by supporting characters, Valentine moves toward and finally achieves a real relationship with Angelica. This movement, involving redefinition of values, takes the lovers away from the social toward a private world. In the eyes of the world, one who adheres to values basic to this private world is "mad," and an understanding of Angelica's role must be founded upon recognition

that her use of the word "mad" is consistently in this sense. Thus Valentine moves toward the "mad" individuality of the private world, and, when in Act IV Angelica tells Tattle "when you are as mad as *Valentine*, I'll believe you love me, and the maddest shall take me" (IV.i.586-588), she does so with reasonable assurance that the audience by this time is attuned to the private-public distinction on which she is basing her alignment to the madman's values.

This individuality of Angelica is supported by ironic reversal of Restoration dramatic tradition. Angelica's speech on the joys of uncertainty and expectation is clearly in the *précieuse* scheme of things: "Wou'd any thing, but a Madman complain of Uncertainty? Uncertainty and Expectation are the Joys of Life. Security is an insipid thing, and the overtaking and possessing of a Wish, discovers the Folly of the Chase. Never let us know one another better; for the Pleasure of a Masquerade is done, when we come to shew Faces . . ." (IV.i.785-790). The comparison of Angelica's *préciosité* here and the *préciosité* in *The Old Batchelour* is striking; the difference is that Angelica is being highly ironical, while similar sentiments within the context of *The Old Batchelour* provide the basis for human relationships.[15]

The movement, then, is toward a core of private meaning in the midst of a public society. But Valentine does not achieve this condition immediately. Holland analyzes Valentine's progress in terms of three confinements,[16] an analysis which leads to profitable illustration of the central theme of the play. In the first act, Valentine is confined in his house in an effort to elude his creditors, a confinement, although originally resulting from his pretension at wealth, immediately imposed by society. In the fourth act, Valentine, feigning madness, is confined to his house again, this time by restrictions imposed by himself. And in the fifth act, a metaphorical confinement occurs when Valentine says to Angelica, "I yield my Body as your Prisoner" (V.i.615). Here the significant development occurs: for the first time, Valentine gives himself to another human being and, paradoxically, through the "confinement" involved in loving achieves true freedom. The progress of the confinements—from those imposed by society to those self-imposed and finally to detachment from self in loving another person—illustrates not only the movement of Valentine within *Love for Love* but the movement of Congreve's emphases in his first three plays.

[15]A similar ironic reversal in the opening scene of the play establishes Valentine's individuality by contrasting him to the conventional libertine rake hero. See M. Novak, *William Congreve* (New York, 1971), p. 107.

[16]*The First Modern Comedies*, pp. 161-162.

Accompanying the increased responsibility of the individual to wrest a meaningful relationship from society is an undercurrent of almost desperate longing for such a relationship. Critical treatment of Prue has been largely restricted to noting her Lockean instruction in the manners of society. But Prue is more than a foolish natural; maskless, she portrays the desperate need for human contact that motivates the other characters but that they conceal behind a masquerade of manners and poses. Prue openly resolves to have a man "some way or other. Oh! methinks I'm sick when I think of a Man; and if I can't have one, I wou'd go to sleep all my Life" (V.i.308-310). Prue's expression of physical need underscores the needs of the other characters, and it also contrasts to the spiritual need that is developed between Valentine and Angelica. The fact that the higher spiritual need is *developed* is important, for through Angelica's guidance the relationship between Angelica and Valentine advances from the animal-like hunt of the other characters for security and sex to the uniquely human quest for spiritual fulfillment.

Unable to achieve this spiritual level, the other characters carry out their search on an indiscriminate animal level. The lack of discrimination that results is seen in Prue's resolve that "I'll marry our *Robbin* the Butler" (V.i.316-317) when Mr. Tattle tells her that he loved her yesterday but not today. Again the convention of masked marriages is used to portray the ultimate in an indiscriminate selection of a mate: neither Mr. Tattle nor Mrs. Frail knew the identity of his mate until after the ceremony. It is Mrs. Frail's reaction that is especially significant here, for although she declares to the entire company that "I always despised Mr. *Tattle* of all things," she agrees with her sister's remark that "He's better than no Husband at all" (V.i.469-470). This thankfulness for simply being married without any regard for the individual or private meaning of the relationship provides striking contrast to that achieved by Valentine and Angelica.

However, the resolution of Valentine and Angelica is extra-social, for the lovers rise out of the conventional society around them to a detached, almost religious, spiritual level. This detachment implicitly presents the problem that Congreve is to treat in his last comedy: is it possible for the individual and the social—the public and the private—to be integrated? Can the value defined in *Love for Love* be achieved within society?

IV.

An examination of the meaning of the title of Congreve's fourth comedy, *The Way of the World,* provides a starting point for an

understanding of this final and most complex statement of the relationship of the individual to society. The phrase, "the way of the world," is used three times within the play: in the first Fainall expresses his realization of the true relations of Foible, himself, and his wife to the masks that each wears and that have hitherto concealed these relations—relations that Mirabell had arranged: "Why then *Foible's* a Bawd, an Errant, Rank, Matchmaking Bawd, And I it seems am a Husband, a Rank-Husband; and my Wife a very Errant, Rank-Wife,—all in the Way of the *World*" (III.i.628-632). In the second instance Fainall, upon learning that the discrepancy between the facade of virtue and the reality of his adulterous relationship with Mrs. Marwood is going to be exposed, says, "If it must all come out, why let 'em know it, 'tis but *the way of the World*" (V.i.475-476). And in the third Mirabell, after revealing the previously private deed by which the widow Arabella Languish had made him the trustee of her fortune, responds to Fainall's cry "Confusion" by saying, "Even so Sir, 'tis *the way of the World,* Sir: of the Widdows of the World" (V.i.553-554). In each case, "the way of the world" refers to the perception of two levels of reality—the private and the public—and the ability to act on that perception, an interpretation that is borne out in the rest of the play.

It should be noted that two of the three uses of the phrase refer not to Fainall's actions but to Mirabell's, and, more important, that the resolution of the play is accomplished, as Mirabell tells Fainall, through "the way of the world." Mirabell achieves this resolution by manipulating the other characters: by his actions Sir Wilful and Millamant dissemble an engagement; Foible and Mincing come forward to expose Fainall and Mrs. Marwood; and Arabella Languish's deed is brought forward. Furthermore, such manipulation is forecast for the future, for Mirabell in his final words and actions instructs Mrs. Fainall in the way of the world. Just as he had used the public security of marriage to protect his former mistress's honor before the action of the play, now he uses legal means to protect her fortune and, with it, her happiness. By the end of the play, Mrs. Fainall has approached the stature of Mirabell and Millamant with her increased power to protect the private through the public. She is told by Mirabell, "let me before these Witnesses, restore to you this deed of trust. It may be a means well manag'd to make you live Easily together [with Fainall]" (V.i.617-619). Thus Fainall does not, contrary to Fujimura's assertion,[17] exemplify the title of the play; if

[17] *The Restoration Comedy of Wit,* p. 192.

one wished to select such an exemplification, one would be forced to look to Mirabell, who is manipulating in the way of the world throughout the course of the play and who is ultimately more successful in the way of the world than is Fainall. But I do not believe that any such selection is justified, for Congreve indicates with his title not a single character but a general relation of the individual to society. The way of the world is a fact; in any society there will exist both private and public realities, and in any society there will exist individuals capable of perceiving and using the discrepancy between those realities. It is what the individual does with these two levels that is important. Implicitly, it is by a moral criterion of motivation that the individual is to be judged.

The Way of the World moves on four levels, each developing the central theme of the relation of the individual to society. The central conflict is between two ways of the world: the first, represented by Mirabell and Millamant, uses the public to protect the private, while the second, represented by Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, uses the public to conceal and to exploit the private. Thus the hero and the villain are similar in their skill in social intrigue: both are keenly perceptive of the discrepancy between the public role and the private self, and both use the power resulting from that perception to manipulate others. This similarity need not lead to a value judgment against Mirabell, however. Jean Gagen uses a view of Mirabell as "an embodiment of the ideal of the Gentleman which pervaded in Congreve's lifetime" to defend Mirabell against the view of him offered by Palmer, Fujimura, and Holland as, initially at least, a rake and a cad: "Mirabell is not a rake; his conduct is not reprehensible; and he undergoes no reformation because it never occurs to him or to anyone else in the play that reformation is necessary or desirable." Gagen's distinction, "the gentleman was ideally a man of virtue rather than a polished rake with elegant manners and no moral principles whatsoever,"[18] supports the criterion drawn in this study for distinguishing the rake from the gentleman on the moral basis of motivation.

Mirabell's primary motive throughout the play is to protect his relationship with Millamant. Their relationship begins at the point of individuality that Valentine achieved at the end of *Love for Love:* in the first scene of *The Way of the World,* Mirabell, in speaking of Millamant, insists "She is . . . Mistress of herself." This recognition answers the question implicit in *The Old Batchelour*'s portrayal of a society in which the private always had to be subordinated to the

[18] "Congreve's Mirabell and the Ideal of the Gentleman," *PMLA,* 79 (1964), 422-423.

public, in which a woman could keep her lover only by remembering, "Never let him all discover,/ Never let him much obtain." In *The Way of the World* Mirabell shows that a lover can be interested in a woman not only in spite of the discovery of private reality but because of it. In describing Millamant's attraction for him, he says "I took her to pieces; sifted her and separated her Failings; I study'd 'em, and got 'em by rote" (I.i.164-166). As a result, he is able to say "I like her with all her Faults; nay, like her for her Faults." Not only does Mirabell answer the question raised in *The Old Batchelour* about the possibility of a lasting emotional closeness, but he answers the more literal question raised about the permanency of sexual closeness. In the famous proviso scene, the depth of Mirabell's sexual attraction is revealed when he directs a provision at "when you shall be Breeding . . . Which may be presum'd, with a blessing on our endeavours" (IV.i.254-258).

But Mirabell, in what Clifford Leech called his "plan for rational living . . . must see to it that Millamant remains herself, no mere devoted complement to her husband."[19] Again referring to the proviso scene, we find that this individuality is protected on both the private and the public levels. Mirabell agrees to the personal boundaries established by Millamant to protect the "dear Liberty" of her "morning thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers," her "liberty to pay and receive visits . . . to write and receive Letters. . . . To have my Closet Inviolate; to be sole Empress of my Tea-table" (IV.i.185-227); he then establishes boundaries to protect their relationship against society—against people, the female intimates who would "tempt you to make a tryal of a Mutual Secresie," and against customs such as painting, masking, strait-lacing while pregnant, and drinking "strong Water" (IV.i.234-277).

This scene illustrates Congreve's achievement in his final comedy—his use of dramatic convention to support theme. The proviso scene had become a familiar part of Restoration comedy.[20] As a result, Congreve could rely upon the audience to recognize it immediately and to perceive his development of it on two levels. First, Millamant and Mirabell communicate their own awareness of the game they are playing, exhibiting their facility at this game; and second, they communicate a more serious recognition, albeit through sometimes absurd provisos, of the importance of protecting the individual against society.

[19]"Congreve and the Century's End," *PQ*, 41 (1962), 291.
[20]Lynch, *Social Mode of Restoration Comedy*, pp. 201-203 et passism.

But Millamant herself illustrates most thoroughly the play's integration of theme and convention. As noted, the *précieuse* convention was employed in the earlier comedies to portray characters manipulated by society. With Millamant there is a reversal of this relation of character to convention, for Congreve creates the illusion that she controls the very dramatic devices by which she is portrayed. A sense of humanity, of the individual, emerges from Millamant's manipulation of her *précieuse* role. Much of her attraction lies in her undisguised delight at her ability to participate in society and to protect herself by doing so.

Opposed to Millamant and Mirabell's use of the public to protect the private is the use of the public by Fainall and Mrs. Marwood to conceal and exploit the private. Early in the play it is revealed that Fainall's relationship with Mrs. Marwood has been disastrous to her reputation. Nowhere is the contrast between Fainall's and Mirabell's ways of the world more clearly illustrated than in the resolution scene. Fainall, once he learns of his wife's past affair with Mirabell, threatens to publish this news unless Lady Wishfort signs over to him full control over the remaining half of his wife's fortune, Millamant's estate, and her own estate after she dies. Mirabell is similar to Fainall in his use of knowledge of private reality to manipulate, but there the similarity ends. Mirabell produces Mrs. Fainall's deed, made while she was a widow, in which she conveyed her estate to him as a trustee; with this deed he frees Mrs. Fainall and Lady Wishfort from unjust control by Fainall, and Millamant from unjust control by her aunt. And here the essential difference lies: while Fainall seeks to destroy individuality, making other people dependent upon him, Mirabell seeks to protect individuality, making others independent. Just as in the proviso scene he set up private boundaries to protect his relationship with Millamant from society, so he now sets up public, legal boundaries to protect the other characters from one another.

In comic contrast to the efforts of the major characters to manipulate the public to serve the private are the characters who are themselves manipulated, serving "that Idol Reputation" at the expense of their own integrity. Lady Wishfort represents the purely social—the mask which is donned not to protect inner reality but to conceal the lack of it. She compares herself to "an old peel'd Wall," implicitly agreeing with Foible's "There are some Cracks discernable in the white Vernish" (III.i.145-148), and by doing so describes not only her own façade but that of the entire society she represents. Because this façade is so precarious that even the slightest emergence of the individual will shatter it, Lady Wishfort must keep her emotion strictly under control: as Sir Willfull says, "she dare not frown

desperately, because her face is none of her own; 'Sheart an she shou'd her forehead wou'd wrinkle like the Coat of a Cream-cheese" (V.i.361-364). This perversion is illustrated in Lady Wishfort's concern for the man she plans to marry, Waitwell disguised as Sir Rowland. When he proposes to fight a duel over her, she pleads with him, saying, "No, dear Sir *Rowland,* don't fight, if you shou'd be kill'd I must never shew my face; or hang'd,—O Consider my Reputation Sir *Rowland*" (IV.i.626-628).

Like Lady Wishfort, Petulant and Witwoud are manipulated by the "idol reputation": Petulant's desire for a reputation leads him to hire women to call on him in the guise of great ladies; as Witwoud remarks, "these are Trulls that he allows Coachhire, and something more by the Week, to call on him once a Day at publick Places" and, pushing the absurdity ever further, notes "I have known him call for himself" (I.i.359-367). Similarly, Witwoud's own assumption of a public role leads to a perversion of his ties with his family. When his brother, Sir Wilfull, calls, Witwould does not acknowledge the relationship, saying "But I tell you, 'tis not modish to know Relations in Town," to which Sir Wilfull acutely responds, "The Fashion's a Fool; and you're a Fop, dear Brother" (III.i.532-540).

In contrast to Lady Wishfort, Petulant, and Witwoud, who represent the purely social, is Sir Wilfull, who represents the purely private. By the time that Sir Wilfull enters the London society of Lady Wishfort's family, having come from "down in *Shropshire,*" half the play has been presented and, understandably enough, he is confused by the complex familial and emotional relationships into which he is submerged. Simply unable to communicate with the other characters—with Witwoud or with the truewit Millamant—Sir Wilfull finally escapes from the way of the world, first by becoming thoroughly drunk, and then by physically departing.

Sir Wilfull is the only character, however, who withdraws completely from society—even the return of Fainall is predicted by the fact that his wife now has control of her own fortune. The basis for this expected reintegration is significant: as noted, Mrs. Fainall was instructed in the way of the world by Mirabell, and the prediction of a reconciliation with her husband is based upon the expectation that she will make good use of her power. In a like manner, Mirabell and Millamant have used the way of the world as the basis for their resolution. In contrast to the resolution in *Love for Love,* which was the result of the movement of Valentine to the private "madness" defined by Angelica and which was in a very basic sense detached from the social context, the action throughout *Way of the World* takes place in terms of society, reflecting the contemporary view that the natural condition of man was social.

It is against this definition of natural that we are expected to measure the unnatural desires of the other characters for escape. Lady Wishfort, comically disaffiliated when she realizes the reality of the private relationships around her—"the false vows of *Mirabell,*" "The Detection of the Imposter, Sir *Rowland,*" and the previous relationship of her daughter and Mirabell—shows her inability to participate successfully in the way of the world when she can only envision a romanticized pastoral escape: "I wou'd retire to Desarts and Solitudes; and feed harmless Sheep by *Groves* and *Purling Streams.* Dear *Marwood,* let us leave the World, and retire by our selves and be *Shepherdesses*" (V.i.132-135). Fainall also proposes an impossible extra-social retirement when faced with the discrepancy between his public relationship to his wife and his private relationship with Mrs. Marwood: "I'll hate my Wife even more, Dam her, I'll part with her, rob her of all she's worth, and we'll retire somewhere, any where to another World" (II.i.243-246).

This definition of society as the natural condition of man explains in part the refusal of Millamant and Mirabell to consider an extra-social elopement even though the couple is not constrained by economic factors; Mirabell mentions no concern over any financial need, and Millamant is assured of half her fortune even if she does forfeit the half her aunt controls. Control over Millamant's inheritance represents the ability to participate successfully in a highly complex society—to meet society on its own terms and to wrest a core of meaning from it. Thus with the resolution of the play, Millamant and Mirabell are fully prepared to protect their relationship in a world that will remain essentially unaltered despite the union of two truewits. Private integrity was provided for in the proviso scene, and public integrity is assured with the recognition of the marriage and the legal control over Millamant's fortune achieved in the play's last scene.

With the resolution of *The Way of the World* Congreve presents a fitting culmination to the central theme in his comedies—the relation of the individual to society. Having progressed from an examination of society itself in the first play, the effect of society on the individual in the second, and individual responsibility in the third, Congreve shows with his fourth and last comedy the ideal reconciliation of these elements—individuality defined in a social context and expressed through manipulation of Restoration dramatic convention.

University of Nebraska