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ENG 335: 17th Century Literature

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Reputation and Self-Identity in *The Way of the World*

William Congreve's *The Way of the World* is an incredibly progressive play for its time. Written in an era of transition, Congreve was hyper aware of the political and social messages he was layering in this particular piece. The concept of reputation being one of the most important aspects to daily life is one that has proven to last into today's culture, transcending time and space, despite Congreve's criticism of it. But in order for this obsession of how one is viewed by others to exist, one must first have an understanding of him or herself, a self-awareness that is not as prevalently present in literature and culture before this era, and a drive to preserve independence while simultaneously remaining part of the group. This is a concept that people struggle with even today. Congreve's characters seem less foreign to us than other characters from that era because these issues of reputation and desire to be accepted by others are still customary in society today. The standout characters of Millamant and Mirabell actively rebel against this notion of reputation defining self-worth and strive for a life driven by happiness and independence, without allowing society to define one's success. This leads to chaos ensuing and eventually being restored, albeit changing the way of the world forever.

In particular, Millamant's character is a revolutionary one, unlike any other that existed before her. She is extremely independent, and surprisingly successful at it, which is radically different from the other female characters of the seventeenth century. The women of seventeenth century plays typically actively seek out husbands because of the necessity of being supported but Millamant rebels at every opportunity, even denying her developing love for Mirabell. Also unique to the characters of Congreve's play, she is "fully aware of her own precarious position" and is "staunchly determined to define her role and gain control of her life in a libertine and skeptical world," (Al-Ghalith, 283). This "libertine and skeptical world" is also a world that much resembles our own. Granted, in our contemporary world women have much more control over their lives and are not by any means required to marry for the sake of monetary support, but we still fight for our place in a male-dominated society.

In the world Congreve created, people both desire and participate in a certain to-be-looked-at-ness, that is to say that they depend on their social reputations in order to determine their quality of life. These reputations are determined by the male gaze, through which both men and women have learned to see the world (Devereaux, 337). This is why women spend so much time trying to make themselves "beautiful," often utilizing or undergoing uncomfortable processes. Lady Wishfort is a prime example of this infatuation with appearance. When preparing to receive Sir Rowland, she literally paints her face in makeup. Foible tells her, "There are some cracks discernible in the

white varnish,” which sends Lady Wishfort into a tizzy, insisting that she looks like “an old peeled wall” and asking Foible to fix her face for her (Congreve, 358). She quite literally “finds her identity as the object of men’s desire” (Devereaux, 340), and is, thusly, the polar opposite of Millamant’s character, who refuses to let a man define who she is. Lady Wishfort is so desperate to find a new husband because she defines marriage as a “source of power” (Bender, 4) whereas Millamant views it as a significant loss of sovereignty. She says to Mirabell, “My dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you then adieu? ...I can’t do’t, ‘tis more than impossible,” (Congreve, 379). But I think her honesty with him on the subject of marriage is refreshing and bodes well for their relationship. She doesn’t romanticize marriage like so many people do today. This is one moment where she does not hide her anxieties and it is a moment with Mirabell, which highlights a certain trust she has in him and a certain comfort with him. Even if her tone is a bit facetious, she genuinely has these anxieties about relinquishing her life as a bachelorette for one as a wife.

Little has changed since the times of the seventeenth century in regard to appearance as a value that defines an individual. In the same way that Lady Wishfort literally paints her face, people today get plastic surgery or Botox injections to avoid the effects of aging. People also rely heavily on social media and the number of likes, retweets, or favorites they receive on their posts. It has born some very detrimental effects, even causing emotional breakdowns in some people. Similar to the phenomena of

the seventeenth century, these social media sites allow people to present themselves in a way that may or may not be consistent with reality. “Social media encourage adolescents to compete for attention in order to increase their ‘likes’ and enhance their self-worth,” assert Lisa M. Cookingham and Ginny L. Ryan, both medical doctors at the University of Iowa College of Medicine. Young impressionable people obsess over body image and what others think of them, establishing their own self-esteem based on the success or lack thereof of their social media presence.

Similarly but more simply, Mirabell spreads rumors regarding Lady Wishfort. He “...compliment[ed] her with the imputation of an affair with a young fellow, which I carried so far that I told her the malicious town took notice that she had grown fat of a sudden; and when she lay in of a dropsy, persuaded her she was reported to be in labour,” (326), which pleased Lady Wishfort to no end. Simply to be a topic of discussion amongst society was so exceedingly important to her self-identity. And when Mirabell ceased his libertine behavior once he gained the physical affections of Millamant, Lady Wishfort lost all of her confidence and self-worth and placed the blame solely on Mirabell because she was so reliant on him, and his male gaze, to substantiate her value to society.

Another similarity from the seventeenth century is the cabal nights, such as the one that Millamant hosted. Gardner argues that “the gaze...operates as a powerful disciplinary force regulating the conduct and normalizing the behavior of the person who is the object of the gaze, pinning him or her down for a scrutiny which will compare,

differentiate, hierarchize, and exclude” (61). This accurately describes the sole purpose of the cabal nights. The ladies of the town, and Petulant and Witwoud, gather to discuss the latest gossip, talking about people behind their backs, as well as the people present, to further demolish or enhance his or her reputation. This essentially takes on the same role as the social media of today. If one gets many likes, favorites, or retweets, one is socially successful; but if one gets too few, they feel ostracized, like a failure and unaccepted by society. Social media also leaves room for people to comment on the posts of others, which allows people to vocalize thoughts and opinions that may be either positive and encouraging or negative and detrimental. Overall, these social media “jeopardize the...social wellness” that their users experience (Cookingham, 3) much the same way that Lady Wishfort’s social wellness suffers due to the pressures of maintaining her reputation.

Millamant did not seem to play into this desire to be discussed. Instead, she wanted to live a happy and fulfilling life, not to be controlled by a man or the critique of other people. While she comports herself as a very confident and independent woman through her witty and aloof remarks, Millamant has some very real anxieties that women face still today, and is the reason so many marriages today end in divorce. She fears aging, just like Lady Wishfort does, getting old, and losing her beauty, and, consequently, her husband’s desire for her. She says to Mirabell in Act 4, “...I’ll fly and be followed to the last moment. Though I am upon the very verge of matrimony, I

expect you should solicit me as much as if I were wavering at the grate of a monastery, with one foot over the threshold. I'll be solicited to the very last, nay and afterward," (Congreve, 378). She always keeps him on his toes, wanting more. She never wants him to become bored or complacent with her, to turn into an old couple that resents each other, without any love. She always wants to be desired, so she takes a stand and demands the upper hand. While she outwardly presents herself as confident, she plays into the same male gaze dilemma that Lady Wishfort does, just not quite to the same extremes.

Congreve is not the first playwright to write a strong female protagonist like Millamant, but he is one of the first to write a genuinely happy ending for her, one in which she does not have to conform to the male authority. Her relationship with Mirabell is quite unique. During her conversations with him, she behaves in a very aloof manner, never admitting her feelings for him, even though the audience knows that they've had an intimate relationship beforehand. And Mirabell has a vast amount of respect for Millamant. He knows just how educated she is and thus has high hopes for and expectations of her. "You had the leisure to entertain a herd of fools...How can you find delight in such society?" (Congreve, 350) he says to her, disgusted at her hosting of a cabal night. Earlier in the play, he insists to Fainall, "She is more a mistress of herself than to be under the necessity of such a resignation," (325) which shows just how much he elevates her above everyone else.

If Millamant is to marry Mirabell, whom she actually seems to love, she makes demands. She's desperate to rebel against the expected submissive behaviors of women because she's intelligent and perceives herself as having "rights that are distinct from the artificial social conventions" that she experiences daily (Al-Ghalith, 287). This self-awareness in itself is very unique. She is able to view her own actions and behavior from a nearly third person perspective; she doesn't simply conform to society; she analyzes her actions and concludes something about them, taking agency over her life. This makes her an even stronger character to have the ability to self-reflect. Many people even today lack this quality and it shows in their everyday actions. For example, Taylor Swift consistently writes songs blaming the men for the demise of all her relationships, when in reality it is probably a combination of both party's actions. She once said, "If boys don't want me to write songs about them, maybe they shouldn't do bad things," which highlights the immature and closed minded way she views life and her significant others. Conversely, Millamant, much like Mirabell, accepts herself for who she is, never claiming to be perfect.

Millamant demands from Mirabell many concessions before she concedes to his proposal:

I'll lie a-bed in a morning as long as I please... I won't be called names after I'm married... As liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or wry faces on your part. To wear what I please, and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; ...Come to diner when I please; dine in my dressing-room when I'm out of humour, without giving a reason. To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my

tea-table which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly, wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in. (Congreve, 379-380)

Mirabell gives in to these requests, but makes his own in return, and the two essentially create one of the first prenuptial agreements (Gardner, 70). This is incredibly progressive for the time because it shows just how much respect Mirabell has for Millamant and also how far Millamant is willing to go in order to protect her independence and happiness. Even after she agrees, she does not change her behavior; she remains aloof and simply says, “Well, you ridiculous thing you, I’ll have you. I won’t be kissed, nor I won’t be thanked. - Here, kiss my hand though. - So, hold your tongue now and don’t say a word,” (Congreve, 381-382). While this may seem like an unenthusiastic reception to Mirabell’s proposal, she later admits, after he has left, of course, “Well, if Mirabell should not make a good husband, I am a lost thing - for I find I love him violently,” (382). This is one of Millamant’s most vulnerable and authentic moments throughout the entire play because, for one simple moment, she is letting her guard down and admitting her true emotions; she too is susceptible to love, despite her efforts to care less than Mirabell. It is quite a beautiful moment in the play. It also highlights a transition from marriage for just wealth and security to marriage for love as well. Millamant and Mirabell clearly love each other, enough so that Mirabell is willing to change his libertine ways, abandoning all his previous lovers (which could have been many because it seems that every woman in the play wanted him at some point). The fact that Congreve wrote

the play this way illuminates his own unique beliefs as well: he respects women just as much as Mirabell does and wants to see them lead fulfilling lives, not controlled by the confines of society's will.

The title of the play, *The Way of the World*, now seems to take on a shifting meaning. What really is the way of the world? It appears as though all of Mirabell's scheming has paid off and a shift within the patrician society, where Lady Wishfort was once the center, to lending the spotlight to Mirabell and Millamant, leading the town into a society where love is the predominant reason for marriage and where reputation holds less value among people than before. Mirabell altered his scheming from a motivation where he is the beneficiary to a motivation where saving Lady Wishfort's and Mrs. Fainall's reputations and inheritances is the priority, and Millamant agrees to help. It can be argued, then, that Millamant and Mirabell are the only two characters in the play that truly understand the way of the world and are, therefore, the only two who can change it. This is a tremendous power to hold and it seems fitting that are hero and heroine team up to, to use a cliché, be the change they wish to see in the world.

At the end of the play, nearly all the loose ends are tied up. The most obvious one that remains, however, is the relationship between Fainall and Mrs. Fainall. He is escorted off stage in a bitter disposition and Mirabell can only offer the words, "In the meantime, madam, let me before these witnesses restore to you this deed of trust. It may be a means, well managed, to make you live easily together," (Congreve, 408). While

this does not by any means solve the issue of an incredibly unhappy marriage without the option of divorce that would be present today, Mirabell does his best to offer a consolation to Mrs. Fainall. And if his character has led the audience to believe anything, it is that he will do his best to right the situation in any way that he can. It is comforting to know that, as past lovers, Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall have a fundamental trust between each other, a trust that will be necessary in this newly developing society that Mirabell and Millamant are creating. The trust between Mirabell and Millamant will be vital within their relationship as well; a trust to not seek out affairs, as happened with the Fainalls, a trust to respect each other's demands set up before the marriage, and a trust to remain in love, to always desire each other.

Congreve's *The Way of the World*, while it seems as though not a lot happens throughout the play, makes bold statements about the treatment and expectations of women in the Restoration era. He juxtaposes characters that give into the ways of the world without question, such as Lady Wishfort, with the one who refuses to do so, Millamant, so that the audience can see just how progressive his ideas are. And while he does create a new type of heroine who breaks social norms, it is evident that many Lady Wishforts still exist today, still obsess over the male gaze and value their reputations over their own perception of themselves. They employ the many forms of social media to validate their self-worth, going to similar pains as Lady Wishfort to make themselves seem appealing to the male gaze through which everyone has been trained to view others.

It needs to be noted however that many Millamants exist today as well, further rebelling against the male authority as well as the caring about how others perceive them to establish worth that is still present in society and Congreve can be partially thanked for that, for creating Millamant to speak for women, furthering their power in the world.

While the way of the world may not be all that different than it was in 1700, we have Congreve to thank for starting us in the right direction. It is the fictitious creations of authors such as Congreve that pave the way for changes in society like the ones presented in *The Way of the World* because fiction allows us to understand why certain things happen in life, and consequently, to make the conscious decision to alter our ways of thinking. And while some trends seem not to change, many very important ones do, thanks to the authors who immortalize new concepts as literature.

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