

## Style, Wit, and Irony in *The Way of the World*

In the most common use of the word, style describes the author's use of language within the shorter rhetorical units, the sentence or at most the paragraph. It includes the choice of words and the rhythmic and musical quality of the sentences. Since it also includes a discussion of the relations of language to thought, fact, and reality, at some point it becomes identical with a discussion of wit and irony.

If irony is included in the discussion, then arbitrary limits must be set because from some points of view, irony pervades *The Way of the World*. The title is ironic; the action is ironic; the relationships of the characters to each other are ironic. This section, however, is concerned only with irony as a function of the speeches of characters, not as a function of plot or theme. It is concerned with that kind of irony that is closely related to style and wit.

Congreve avoids attempting any definition of wit, although, in the dedication, he distinguishes between true wit and false wit, the latter a product of affectation. Another comment of Congreve's on wit also casts some light on his practice. In "Concerning Humour in Comedy," he writes:

Every person in a comedy may be allowed to speak them [pleasant things]. From a witty man they are expected and even a fool may be permitted to stumble on 'em by chance. . . . I do not think that humourous characters exclude wit; no, but the manner of wit should be adapted to the humour . . . ; a character of a splenetic and peevish humour should have a satirical wit. A jolly and sanguine humour should have a facetious wit.

In practice, all of Congreve's characters speak "pleasant things." There is not a speech that does not have its biting edge of wit, satire, or irony.

Discussions of style and wit in a play are in some ways simple. Certain kinds of problems do not have to be discussed since they do not exist. Unlike novels, plays have no long passages of description which may or may not be well written; there are no elaborate expositions of motives. There is no reason to consider whether the author is inside his creatures' minds or external to them. The characters speak; what they say can be examined. To talk of style or wit in a play is to talk of the different styles and different kinds of wit of the characters.

Congreve wrote so that his characters were sharply differentiated by their speech patterns and their wit. As Congreve used style and wit as one of his ways of characterization, the material in this section may be considered additional data for study of the characters, collected here so that a rather technical subject can be treated in one place.

### Mirabell

Mirabell's style is not an easy one. We do not feel that he is spontaneous, for his periods are carefully prepared. The sentences are long, flowing, and syntactically intricate. He indulges in no slang or canting expressions. While he can be acid in his judgment, there is no vituperation in his

speech. The objects of his disapproval are so deftly lanced in his gracious phrases that they can scarcely feel the knife.

Mirabell's wit and irony are also intricate. His observations about others are shrewd, including a mixture of distaste, tolerance, and amusement. Considerable irony is also directed at himself. There is a strong element of self-criticism that makes him a most unusual hero.

Any number of speeches might serve to reveal these characteristics; this famous speech from the first act about his feelings toward Millamant will do:

I'll tell thee, Fainall, she once used me with that insolence, that in revenge I took her to pieces, sifted her and separated her failings: I studied 'em, and got 'em by rote. The catalogue was so large that I was not without hopes one day or other to hate her heartily: to which end I so used myself to think of 'em, that at length, contrary to my design and expectation, they gave me every hour less and less disturbance, till in a few days it became habitual to me to remember 'em without being displeas'd. They are now grown as familiar to me as my own frailties, and, in all probability, in a little time longer I shall like 'em as well.

The characteristics can be seen: the long smooth passages (one might read aloud from "to which end" to the end of the sentence), the real wit, the clear vision of the object of the speech, and the wry ability to laugh at himself.

Millamant

The ultimate proof of the individuality of Millamant's style is in this — that to read the passage aloud is immediately to sense the manner and mannerisms of the character. She is flippant, delightfully spoiled, spirited. When, in the fourth act, she reveals a depth that we might not have expected, that, too, is in the style. Her speech in her first appearance is abrupt; she moves not so much from one subject to another as from one feeling to another with an ability to turn anything into wit.

*Mrs. Millamant:* Oh, aye, letters: I had letters. I am persecuted with letters. I hate letters. Nobody knows how to write letters; and yet one has 'em, one does not know why. They serve one to pin up one's hair.

*Witwoud:* Pray, madam, do you pin up your hair with all your letters?

*Mrs. Millamant:* Only with those in verse, Mr. Witwoud; I never pin up my hair with prose. I think I tried once, Mincing.

*Mincing:* O mem, I shall never forget it.

After a series of short, flippant statements, there comes an inspired thought: "They serve one to pin up one's hair." She then pursues the train of thought that this conceit suggests: "Only with those in verse." It is incidentally pleasant that Mincing can pick up her cue and proceed further.

The passage "One makes lovers as fast as one pleases" is similar, as is "Now I think on't, I'm angry. No, now I think on't, I'm pleased; for I believe I gave you some pain!" The style and wit *are* the character of Millamant.

In the proviso scene, more serious in content, the pace changes. There is still a teasing element, but there is less skipping from point to point. Millamant is stating her conditions for marriage:

Trifles — 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; to have no obligation upon me to converse with wits that I don't like, because they are your acquaintance; or to be intimate with fools, because they may be your relations. . . . These articles subscribed, if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a wife.

#### Fainall

Fainall's style and wit must be differentiated from Mirabell's. His sentences are not as long or as contemplative as Mirabell's, and his wit is more direct and somewhat crueler: "The coldness of a losing gamester lessens the pleasure of the winner. I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune than I'd make love to a woman that undervalued the loss of her reputation." Perhaps because of the nature of his part, he is more abrupt in accusation, and his lines may depend on a more obvious parallelism and antithesis: "Could you think, because the nodding husband would not wake, that e'er the watchful lover slept?" And he engages in a more direct attack: "Professed a friendship! Oh, the pious friendships of the female sex!"

#### Young Witwoud

Since Congreve himself commented that readers and audience could not always distinguish between Witwoud and his true wits, Witwoud's speeches demand especially careful examination.

As Witwoud has no function in the plot of the play, the purpose of his speeches is to characterize him and to provide comedy. The key to his wit is the "similitude." "Truce with your similitudes," says Millamant to him. Each comparison may be clever by itself, amusing, unusual, a little shocking, such as "Friendship without freedom is as dull as love without enjoyment." The lines with which he interrupts Millamant in the second act are each one a comparison, amusing or overburdened. The witticisms are forced; they have been collected and memorized, and at need pulled out of his conjurer's bag of tricks. Irony, if there is any here, is superficial; no one of the witticisms has any particular point. Nor does young Witwoud even realize it should.

#### Petulant

Petulant's style and wit are included in his name. He has a humour to be angry — that is, he is an example of Jonsonian humour, or, perhaps, he affects a humour.

#### Lady Wishfort

Lady Wishfort's style, like everything else about her, is of special interest. Her manner is abrupt — a mirror of the arbitrary, petty tyrant she is. Like all Congreve characters, she has, perhaps unconsciously, a fair amount of wit. More than anything else in the play, her verbal attack on others is direct vituperation—"Boudoir Billingsgate," in Meredith's phrase. No unit of thought is longer than a few words. It is clear that she shouts when annoyed or irritated, and she is always in a state of annoyance:

No, fool. Not the ratafia, fool. Grant me patience! I mean the Spanish paper, idiot; complexion, darling. Paint, paint, paint! dost thou understand that, changeling, dangling thy hands like bobbins before thee? Why does thou not stir, puppet? thou wooden thing upon wires!

The term irony has a different meaning when one is discussing Lady Wishfort. It is true that she does indulge in heavy-handed sarcasm, but the unconscious irony is more important. She responds to the accidental images of words in ironical self-revelation. Foible reports that Mirabell said he would "handle" Lady Wishfort. "Handle me, would he durst!" she cries, "such a foul-mouthed fellow." It is clear what the word "handle" means to her — and the reader may or may not catch the ambiguity of "would he durst." Her speech as she repairs her face while waiting for Sir Rowland is a group of short, flustered comments that constitute her regular manner, an unconsciously ironic description of her hypocrisy:

In what figure shall I give his heart the first impression? There is a great deal in the first impression. Shall I sit? — No, I won't sit — I'll walk — aye, I'll walk from the door upon his entrance; and then turn full upon him. — No, that will be too sudden. I'll lie — aye, I'll lie down — I'll receive him in my little dressing-room; there's a couch — yes, yes, I'll give the first impression on a couch. — won't lie neither, but loll and lean upon one elbow, with one foot a little dangling off, jogging in a thoughtful way — yes — and then as soon as he appears, start, aye, start and be surprised, and rise to meet him in a pretty disorder — yes — oh, nothing is more alluring than a levee from a couch, in some confusion. — It shows the foot to advantage, and furnishes with blushes, and recomposing airs beyond comparison.

Examples can be multiplied. One might only add Lady Wishfort's remark when she discovers that her daughter's fortune will not be lost: "'Tis plain thou has inherited thy mother's prudence," a highly ambiguous compliment in the light of Mrs. Fainall's unsatisfactory love affair with Mirabell and Lady Wishfort's misjudgment of Mrs. Marwood and Sir Rowland.