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Restoration, Congreve and Questions of Legitimate Authority

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Abstract:

The Restoration period of British literary history provides a crucial link between the Renaissance and modernity. Whereas the Renaissance thought and literature preoccupied themselves with the crisis of feudalism, subsequent centuries saw the culmination of this crisis with the consolidation of capitalist economy. Enmeshed between this transition, the Restoration period showcases literature and especially drama where the tension and opposition between the feudal and mercantile world views manifested in many interesting ways. This paper examines continuing literary-theatrical engagements with the questions around legitimate authority and ways in which such questions were framed and articulated in the context of the opposing world views during the Restoration through a close reading of William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. This play, written in the later phase of the Restoration period, typifies certain representational shifts that inevitably took place after the Glorious Revolution of 1689. The paper demonstrates that, even though Congreve was using certain typical Restoration conventions, the target of his satire appears to be the nobility rather than the emerging middle-classes, and this attack on the nobility, unlike the earlier ridiculing of the bourgeoisie for their Puritan inclinations, does not translate much into the larger critique of outmoded and stifling moral values. A detailed textual analysis is offered to draw the reader's attention to the strikingly similar motives that drive the key conflicts in the play.

Key Words:

Restoration, Feudalism, Puritan, bourgeoisie, libertinism, legitimate authority.

British literary preoccupation with issues and questions pertaining to rightful or legitimate authority can be traced to the early modern times, when scepticism relating to the institution of monarchy and absolute state began to emerge. This scepticism was propelled by the constant weakening of feudalism and the gradual rise of the mercantile class, cultural-political movements such as the Renaissance and Reformation, and internal contradictions of monarchy and its occasional inability to cope with questions of succession. Literary-cultural articulations, and especially theatre, could no longer remain untouched by this scepticism and entered the socio-political debates, often by unsettling the dominant perceptions about the idea of a correct authority in the avatar of a State whose sovereignty is vested in an individual figurehead. Shakespeare's Histories and Tragedies, for instance, offer a strong case for reading early modern theatre as cultural productions engaging with these issues. Comedies, on the other hand, brought these questions and concerns to the level of domestic conflicts and issues concerning gender and sexuality. Patriarchal and patrilineal characteristics of family and marriage as well as social hierarchies based on birth and rank that often drew their sustenance from the institution of monarchy were ridiculed through comic characters and their actions of defiance, significant of whom were women and figures from the margins of society.

Decades later, when a significant and potential Republican experiment headed, contradictorily, by a relatively conservative and religious-minded faction (often known as the Puritans) failed and Monarchy was restored, intellectuals and writers were confronted with similar questions with their diverse manifestations. Emboldened by the restoration of their lost hegemony and aided by opportunistic factions of the emerging middling classes, the king and his courtiers promoted a lifestyle characterised by a disregard of established social mores and conventions relating to gender relations, marriage and family. However, far from being a genuine outcry against stifling and

exploitative morality, such assertions were but the means to appropriate popular aspirations for equality and inclusion to consolidate feudal gains, by silencing all ideas and values, negative as well as positive, that found their way during and after the Civil War. The project, in other words, was to legitimise the Restoration and to present it as the only antidote against the possible resurgence of Catholicism on one hand, and to thwart the possibility of socio-political upheaval similar to the Puritan revolution on the other.

To what extent, then, the Restoration theatre aided or disrupted this project? Any critical enquiry of Restoration drama, and particularly its engagement with questions of legitimate authority, begs this obvious question. As David Roberts writes, “The plays of Restoration London might be described as attempts at defusing, resolving, aggravating and skating over these tensions, sometimes all in the space of three hours.” Restoration politics up to 1688 was, he adds, “a heated argument over who the country's more natural ally was, and Restoration plays and players maintained the temperature with stereotypes that progressively helped define what it meant to be English” (8). In fact, one of the principal subjects of early Restoration drama, as Derek Hughes points out, was Restoration itself. He further writes, “Dramatic representations of monarchy restored were common until the early 1670s” and demonstrates how revivals and adaptations of earlier plays as well as comedies dealt with this theme in many ways. As the initial jubilation and the sense of settlement established by the Restoration waned, however, dramatic forms and concerns also had to undergo changes and modifications. (127-28).

The emergence and flourishing of what is known as the comedy of manners need to be viewed, therefore, against the backdrop of these tensions. One can easily identify certain common patterns in these comedies produced between, though not limited to, 1670 to 1700. The protagonist of many of these plays is what is often called a libertine or a Restoration Rake, who shows complete disregard for established social norms and moral principles, the institution of marriage and the idea of commitment with regard to relationships. However, one has to perceive the thin line between the libertine philosophy at large and the specific assertions of libertinism on the Restoration stage. The former was largely a radical break from orthodox ideas, whereas the later was, for most of its part, a stage rendering of the apparently unrestrained assertions of aristocratic superiority and dominance. According to Deborah Payne Fisk, “The close connection between the court and libertinism rendered the latter a peculiarly urban phenomenon, one moreover confined to the up-market neighbourhoods, such as Westminster, preferred by the cognoscenti. Several pamphlets published during the 1670s not only specified fashionable London but, more particularly, the London playhouse as the site of libertine values such as wit, promiscuity, and irreverence” (XVIII). One also find such assertions largely masculinist, more often than not privileging male desire and sexuality. Further, and quite ironically, frank sexual expressions are none the less tied to certain formalities and manners, and characters who deviate from or fail to adopt those manners are represented as antagonists or as laughable stocks. This opposition between the Restoration libertine—pleasure seeking, elite, urban, male—and the figures that are laughed at and defeated—Puritan or business minded, rural, female or feminized and sometimes foreigner—appears to be dramatic representation of the actual battle of contending social groups and interests in England during the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Who among these oppositional representations triumphs over the stage, then, needs to be seen in relation to the culmination of the struggle that was taking place in British politics and society at that time. Despite his promises to stick to Anglicanism, the gradual move towards Catholicism of Charles II could no longer remain a secret. The crisis was further propelled by the resurgence of the succession crisis, followed by sections of the Parliament rejecting James II as the successor. When James II none the less succeeded Charles II, the crisis only got aggravated and ultimately culminated in what is called the glorious revolution of 1688. What followed was a greater assertion of the rights

of the Parliament over subsequent monarchs and the beginning of party politics. This meant, for better or for worse, the triumph of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of capitalism.

In the same vein, the institutions, ideas and values that are presented as the 'other' on the Restoration stage none the less present themselves as strong contenders. In other words, Restoration libertinism, although is given an edge over Puritan or bourgeois values, none the less finds itself submitting to some kind of authority. Questions of legitimate authority in Restoration theatre, and especially the comedy of manners, thus relate to the ways in which institutions such as family and marriage are redefined and then presented as means of controlling or regulating the libertine hero. The regulating authorities are legitimized, not on the basis of the monarchy-patriarchy nexus, but on the basis of the principles of covenant and contract—a process in which contending parties agree to submit to one another only after certain individual rights and freedom are guaranteed. The writings of Thomas Hobbes, especially his ideas about the 'natural man', appears to be the basis of the Restoration comic pattern. While the 'man' is naturally inclined towards satisfying his desires, he must none the less agree to submit to an authority in the form of a totalitarian State. This 'common wealth' comes to fruition, in Hobbesian model, not through any imposition by any individual or group, but through people agreeing to submit to it. Once the agreement is made, the State remains totalitarian without giving its subjects any way to deviate from the agreement.

The Restoration libertine typifies the Hobbesian 'man', constantly preferring his natural appetite over social or moral dictates, who is gradually but steadily moved towards a submission to an authority. The authority in this case is derived from a redefinition of the institutions of family and marriage so as to accommodate the interests of both men and women. Whether the redefinition actually succeeds or fails remains a matter of debate, the movement from the representation of the natural human instincts towards a critique of the inherent duplicity of established moral principles, culminating with an agreement through which natural human appetite are brought within the folds of family and marriage is clearly discernable, sometimes in a single play, but often from one play to another. George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* reaches its climax with Dorimant, a typical Restoration libertine, to ultimately marry Harriet, to avert a crisis. *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley, which is clearly based on the opposition between the realm of pleasure and that of business, ends with safeguarding the domestic realm, ironically by those who could have brought it to completely break apart. The focus in this play seems more on exposing the pretentiousness and hypocrisy surrounding family and marriage than to record the exploits of an individual. Although following the same comic pattern, Aphra Behn in her play *The Rover* reverses established gender roles by giving more space and voice to her heroines, and powerfully puts the problems of parental authority and forced marriages over individual adventurism. Thus, there is a clearly discernable movement from celebrating unbridled elitism, urbanity and predatory male adventurism towards a critique of social conventions and institutions, resulting in a more agreeable, if not egalitarian, conceptualization of domesticity.

By contrast, William Congreve's *The Way of the World* typifies this progression by restrengthening the concept of the contract, but at the same time by substantially reducing the critical pungency of the earlier Restoration comedies. Whereas questions of legitimate authority finds greater space in a play like *The Way of the World*, the radical and subversive character of those questions starts losing their impetus. The year 1700, when the play was first performed, marks not just the beginning of the new century, but a new age characterized by, in the words of David Roberts, "the most powerful regime change of all: for the death rattle of the Stuart dynasty, the lusty birth cries of the British Empire" (13). However, the time also marks a changed mood towards theater, with relatively larger middle-class audience gradually taking over the fashionable nobility. No wonder, then, that a deeply conservative anti-stage manifesto by Jeremy Collier not only acquired a fair amount of popularity, but actually became a point of reference or departure for the plays to

come (493-505). The larger space that the earlier Restoration plays could explore, despite their urban and fashionable character, to engage in thorough social criticism appears to have been reduced by this time.

Given this changing scenario, it is pertinent to note the ways in which Congreve retains as well as departs from the Restoration comic conventions and motifs in The Way of the World. The play indeed retains a libertine hero in the form of Mirabell. But Congreve strikes, deliberately it seems, a low key in opening up Mirabell's libertine characters. In fact, the Prologue of the play is spoken by the actor playing Fainall instead of Mirabell, thereby deferring the introduction of the play's libertine hero. The Prologue also serves as a means in which Congreve initially distances himself from the satirical aims of the play and puts forward the idea of a 'passive poet'. Speaking about the goal of the poet, the Prologue says:

Satire, he thinks, you ought not to expect;
 For so reformed a town who dares correct?
 To please, this time, has been his sole pretense,
 He'll not instruct, lest it should give offence (253).

Such delaying and distancing sharply contrasts with the Prologue of *The Man of Mode*, for instance, where Etherege introduces the subjects of his satire in no-nonsense terms:

But I'm afraid that while to France we go,
 To bring you home fine dresses, dance, and show,
 The stage, like you, will but more foppish grow.
 Of foreign wares why should we fetch the scum,
 When we can be so richly served at home? (88)

The gradual unfolding of Mirabell's libertinism may indeed be attributed to Congreve's artistic genius. It can of course be argued that the playwright here is deploying irony to initially deceive the audience about the play's protagonist and his abilities. What is important to note, however, is that much of what is ridiculed and rejected as bourgeois, unfashionable or Puritan in earlier Restoration finds a center stage in this play. Such supposedly outmoded ethos and values are not just limited to the comic or antagonistic figures of the play. In fact, Mirabell mirrors several of the comic and antagonistic traits of his opponents and rivals. For instance, Witwoud's inability to find proper words to complete his attempts at delivering witty remarks reflects in Mirabell's own inability to articulate his love to Millamant. It is Mirabell's constant focus on his contrivance to win Millamant from the parental authority in the form of Lady Wishfort is precisely what Millamant finds problematic. While she herself displays no less interest and vigilance to the whole plot, what she expects from Mirabell is rather a combination of a contriving genius and a lover, something that Mirabell often seems lacking. When Mirabell tries to inform Millamant about his plans about putting Waitwell in disguise of Sir Roland, (something which Millamant has already found out), she rather urges him to see beyond his cold calculations to win the plot, saying, "if ever you will win me, woo me now.—Nay, if you are so tedious, fare you well: ... (275) Later, his formal marriage proposal to Millamant comes rather in a form of provisos, in which most of his demands relate to secure his private rights as an individual rather than mutuality and love:

... I covenant that your acquaintance be general; that you admit no sworn confidant or intimate of your own sex; no she friend to screen her affairs under your countenance, and tempt you to make trial of a mutual secrecy. No decoy-duck to wheedle you a fop-scrambling to the play in a mask, then bring you home in a pretended fright, when you think you shall be found out, and rail at me for missing the play, and disappointing the frolic which you had to pick me up and prove my constancy. (297)

Clearly, much of Mirabell's provisos quoted above echoes the anti-theater discourse that is ridiculed and exposed in earlier Restoration plays such as *The Country Wife*. In sharp contrast to his preoccupations bordering on Puritan opposition to pleasure and the bourgeois insistence on private rights, Millamant's demands relate to securing her freedom as a woman within the patriarchal folds of marriage and her opposition to pretenses and duplicity. She demands not to be called "as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar ...". She further demands to be free in choosing her own ways of life as opposed to patriarchal dictates and established social and moral conventions:

...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. Come to dinner 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. (296)

Apart from the obvious Puritan and Bourgeois contours of Mirabell's articulations and manners, what brings him in proximity to Fainall, his primary opponent and the counter-plotter in the play, is a combination of his pursuit of natural appetite with monetary motives and concerns for reputation. This is another departure from the earlier Restoration comedies, where the adventures and exploits of libertine men and women is driven primarily by their desire to pursue pleasure. In fact, money-minded and reputation-conscious characters like Pinchwife of *The Country Wife* and Don Antonio of *The Rover* are ridiculed and defeated.

By contrast, it is money or certain shares of property that functions as the main bone of contention between the protagonist as well as the antagonist of *The Way of the World*. Fainall's marriage to Mrs. Fainall without any feeling of love or intimacy is motivated by his desire to possess the property which she inherits from her mother, Lady Wishfort. He also wants to possess a share of property that belongs to Millamant, being Lady Wishfort's niece. That 'moiety of Millamant's fortune' actually could instead come to Mrs. Fainall if Millamant marries Mirabell against the wishes of her aunt (Mirabell especially happens to be the man Lady Wishfort formerly loved but now hates the most). Mrs. Marwood, who interestingly is Fainall's actual love-interest, spoils the whole plan by revealing everything to Lady Wishfort, which she possibly does owing to her own desires for Mirabell, something she never admits though. Fainall's accusation to Mrs. Marwood sums up his whole design:

'Tis true—had you permitted Mirabell with Millamant to have stolen their marriage, my lady had been incensed beyond all means of reconciliation: Millamant had forfeited the moiety of her fortune, which then would have descended to my wife. And wherefore did I marry but to make lawful prize of a rich widow's wealth, and squander it on love and you? (270)

The further discovery about the past affair between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall and also of the fact that Mrs. Fainall is actually an ally in Mirabell's plot to marry Millamant and thereby to claim her share of property brings both Fainall and Mrs. Marwood together to lay a counter-plot. Mirabell having been discovered now as a rival for both love and property and as a threat to Fainall's reputation, Fainall can neither afford to lose the share claimed by his wife nor the one claimed by Millamant to Mirabell. Mrs. Fainall, for him, "had added lustre to my horns by that increase of fortune: I could have worn 'em tipt with gold, though my forehead had been furnished like a deputy-lieutenant's hall" (290).

Money and reputation as Fainall's primary concerns over love is too clear to be missed. What is more crucial to note, however, is that Mirabell himself is no less motivated by money and reputation. Not just is his plot to marry Millamant combined with monetary goals, his decision to give up his earlier relationship with Mrs. Fainall and then arranging her marriage with Fainall is solely aimed at safeguarding reputation. This is what he has to say to justify his decision:

Why do we daily commit disagreeable and dangerous actions? To save that idol, reputation. If the familiarities of our loves had produced that consequence of which you were apprehensive, where could you have fixed a father's name with credit but on a husband? I knew Fainall to be a man lavish of his morals, an interested and professing friend, a false and a designing lover, yet one whose wit and outward fair behaviour have gained a reputation with the town, enough to make that woman stand excused who has suffered herself to be won by his addresses (271).

The final defeat of Fainall and victory of Mirabell itself is made possible by Mrs. Fainall's decision, made actually before she married Fainall, to convey her whole estate in trust of Mirabell. The play's comic denouement comes with Mirabell's announcement and the revelation of the 'deed' to this effect in front of all. The decision, as he announces, was informed partially by Mrs. Fainall's own suspicion about the character of her would-be husband, but mainly by "the wholesome advice of friends and of sages learned in the laws of this land". "'tis the way of the world, sir; of the widows of the world", declares Mirabell confidently (317), apparently striking a contrast with Fainall's 'way of the world' that justifies pretention and deception to any extent to serve one's purpose. The fact remains, however, that both Fainall and Mirabell display similar concerns for money and reputation.

To certain extent, women in the play offer a counter-balance to the emerging bourgeois concerns in the play. With a possible exception of Lady Wishfort who remains obsessed with her reputation, it is women who, to certain extent, assert their natural desires over mercenary goals. The ways in which Milamant not only outwits Mirabell in his contrivances, but urges him to express his feelings for her, as discussed above, is a case in point. Similarly, Mrs. Fainall remains constantly sceptic about her marriage with Fainall and actually risks her reputation to help Mirabell to succeed in his plot. Mrs. Marwood also deviates from Fainall's plans by revealing Mirabell and Millamant's relationship to Lady Wishfort. Foible often excels Mirabell and actually saves the plot at times when it is almost about to fail, and Mincing gives a fitting reply to the allegation of being mercenary, saying, "Mercenary? No, if we would have been mercenary, we should have held our tongues; you would have bribed us sufficiently" (316).

Yet, the play ensures that women's natural assertions of love and desire remain secondary to male bourgeois concerns. Their articulations are ultimately determined by the requirements of parental authority or their male counterparts. For instance, it is Mirabell's decision that prevails over Mrs. Fainall in discontinuing her relationship with him. Her hatred of Mr. Fainall and of the overall institution of marriage in general is articulated in a series of anti-male discourse, which ironically is inculcated in her by Lady Wishfort's conservative and authoritative upbringing and education. As Lady Wishfort tells Mrs. Marwood, "...I chiefly made it my own care to initiate her very infancy in

the rudiments of virtue, and to impress upon her tender years a young odium and aversion to the very sight of men..." (310). Female libertinism, then, is associated in the play with the authority to be delegitimised and ultimately must move towards a submission to newly endorsed male authority. This is best exemplified in the manner in which Millamant finds herself agreeing to Mirabell's 'horrid provisos' to 'dwindle into a wife' and to 'take my death'. Of course, marriage has remained a patriarchal institution aimed at reducing and compromising female freedom. None the less, female protagonists in the Renaissance as well as earlier Restoration plays expressed these concerns by simultaneously putting forth the idea of love and desire—something which is toned down, if not silenced, by masculine insistence for money, reputation and private rights in the play.

It is within this class and gender dynamics that one needs to look at the question of legitimate authority in *The Way of the World*. Unlike the earlier Restoration plays that developed patterns and conventions in relation to the process of consolidating feudal gains, the question, in this case, is intrinsically bound to the project of middle-class consolidation. While the former none the less retained a thoroughly critical attitude towards outmoded and stifling social conventions and institutions, the latter seems preoccupied more with endorsing bourgeois values than extending the critique of nobility to progressively reflect upon gender and social hierarchies. Attack on the nobility, in short, does not lead to any powerful and realistic critique of the emerging sociopolitical structure. Patterns and conventions of the earlier Restoration plays are indeed used to delegitimize authorities deriving their legitimacy from certain conservative or Puritan values, but much from them are also relegitimised to suit middle-class interests and aspirations.

Lady Wishfort, in the play, primarily typifies the outmoded patrician authority. A character preoccupied with her title and reputation, she simultaneously exhibits Puritan values that are often attacked by Restoration comic conventions. Essential among them is her pretended aversion to matters pertaining to love and desire and, by corollary, theater and playhouses. Beneath this pretention, however, lies what has been established in the play as her 'depraved appetite'. Congreve, in other words, delineates Puritan values as set of pretensions or affectations and then associates them with the nobility, thus departing from the earlier Restoration tradition of associating them with the upcoming middle-class.

Lady Wishfort is first introduced to the audience through a series of observations by other characters, namely, Mirabell, Fainall and Mrs. Fainall. At the outset, her role as a parental authority who wants to dictate and decide relationship and marriage of her niece is established. Mirabell sarcastically describes her as "my evil genius—or to sum up all in her own name, my old Lady Wishfort" who does not tolerate even the presence of Mirabell in the company of women in general and Millamant in particular. Apparently, Millamant also is forced to join her Aunt's complaints, since, as Fainall reveals, "half her fortune depends upon her marrying with my lady's approbation". However, her hatred for Mirabell, which has extended into her general 'detestation of mankind', has much more to do than to her being an authoritative guardian. She herself had fallen in love with Mirabell, who flattered her to conceal his love for Millamant. As Mirabell was gradually trying to amend things, Mrs. Marwood made the 'discovery' of the whole 'amour', resulting in Lady Wishfort's utmost hatred for Mirabell. She is now ready to go to any length to get Mirabell disinherited (256). Another comic addition to Lady Wishfort's character comes later from Mrs. Fainall's remark that "my lady will do anything to get an husband;" which she analysed rather sympathetically, describing it as "female frailty! We must all come to it, if we live to be old, and feel the craving of a false appetite when the true is decayed" (272). It is precisely what is thus established as Lady Wishfort's 'depraved appetite' that Mirabell exploits and works out a plot with primary involvement of Foible and Waitwell, themselves married in accordance with Mirabell's plot. Waitwell prepares to present himself to Lady Wishfort disguised as Sir Rowland, Mirabell's 'pretended uncle' and Foible, on her part, entices Lady Wishfort for the prospective match between

her and Sir Rowland. The plan is to trap Lady Wishfort in an illegitimate marriage and then compel her to consent to Mirabell's marriage to Millamant.

As she appears on the stage, Lady Wishfort confirms most of what has been observed and presented about her character. On one hand, she keeps on emphasizing her title with her repeated phrase 'as I'm a person' and often appears preoccupied with mannerisms. Equally important in this regard is her preoccupation with her acquired reputation. On the other hand, she is shown as eagerly looking forward to see Sir Rowland. Her preoccupation with mannerisms and reputation and her eagerness to marry Sir Rowland results in a comic confusion. "if he should not be importunate I shall never break decorums. I shall die with confusion if I am forced to advance—oh no, I can never advance; I shall swoon if he should expect advances", she tells Foible (280).

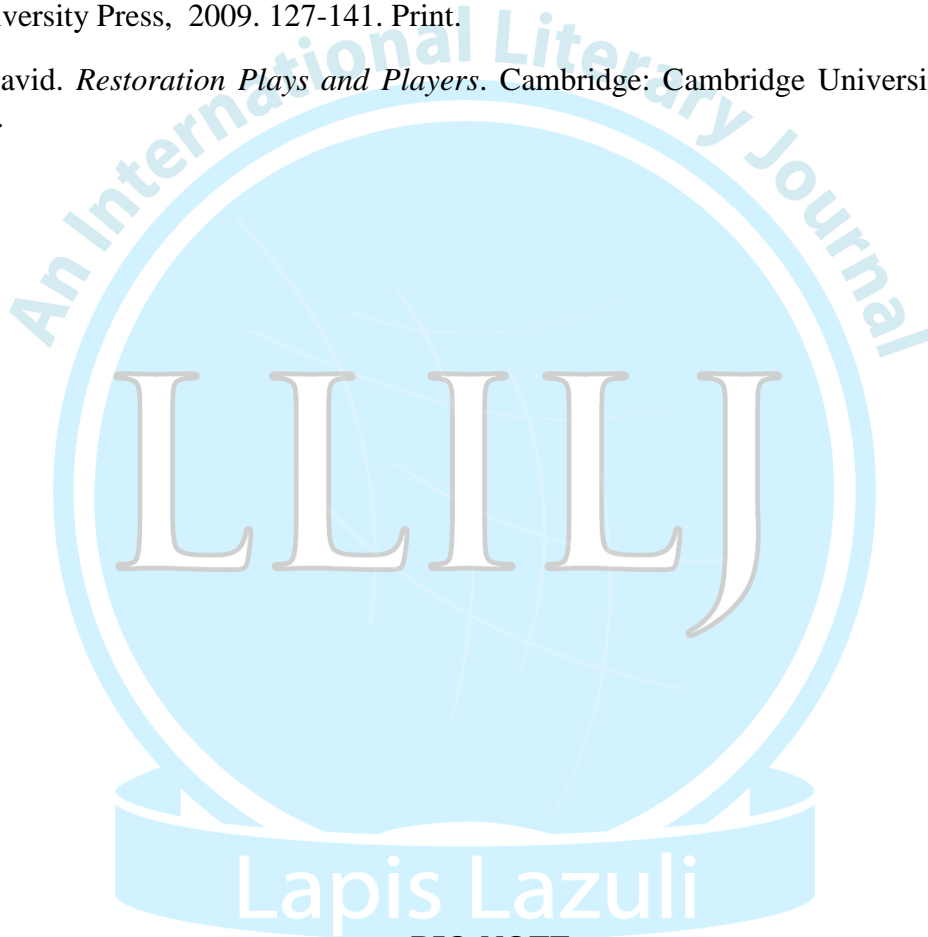
Added to this confusion is her typical Puritan aversion to theater and her constant association of female defiance and subversion with theater. Her reading interests appear to comprise of a series of Puritan and anti-theater writings from Francis Quarles and William Prynne to Jeremy Collier and John Bunyan (278). Her loathing of supposedly unsophisticated country manners are reflected in her dislike of her nephew, Sir Wilfull Witwoud, which ultimately transforms into rage when she confronts him during his drinking excesses. Interestingly, she also associates much of what she considers ill-mannered with Paganism and Islam. "Get thee gone", she commands Sir Wilfull, "get thee but far enough, to the Saracens, or the Tartars, or the Turks—for thou art not fit to live in a Christian commonwealth, thou beastly pagan" (301). Having finally discovered about Mirabell's plot, she describes Foible's 'frontless impudence' as excelling 'a bigbellied actress' (306).

Thus, the play apparently delineates Puritan emphasis on virtue, morality and discipline as hypocritical and pretentious. At the same time, preoccupations with appearance, reputation and mannerisms are presented as artificial and affectitious. The former is more or less a continuation of Restoration concerns. The latter, in its attempts at viewing affectation as isolated individual trait instead of its societal or systemic relations, emerges more as an eighteenth century preoccupation. For instance, the subject of Wycherley's satire in *The Country Wife* comprises not just of the ladies who won't mind committing adultery as long as their reputation is intact, but social obligations in general, dictated by men, that make them reputation-conscious in the first place. After all, it is the husbands themselves who would encourage their wives to socialize with Horner, as they are tricked into believing that their reputation is safe with him. Eighteenth century satire, by contrast, is more punitive on individuals' follies exemplified by the likes of Belinda in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.

The displacement of outmoded authority typified by Lady Wishfort in *The Way of The World*, then, prefigures a more depoliticised approach in literature and especially theater. As argued above, much that has been ridiculed in the play is also reinforced by modifying them to suit emerging utilitarian interests. Laura Brown reads this play as a 'transitional dramatic form' in which Congreve attempts to "rejuvenate an essentially aristocratic form through the integration of selected aspects of bourgeois ideology" (620). The rejuvenation, it clearly appears, aims more at endorsing emerging middle-class aspirations, resulting in a disassociation from actual social contradictions of its time—a disassociation which but unfolded itself more clearly in the sentimental comedies of the coming years. It is only when revolutions shook France and the entire continent in the next century, perhaps, that new forms and modes of expressions aiming at a realistic engagement with social contradictions appear to have evolved. Even then, the task is more effectively carried forward through the Novel and Tragedy than the inherent subversive elements of Comedy.

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