

The Way of the World



Prologue

- The Prologue, is spoken before the play's start by the actor playing Fainall. The verse is written in iambic pentameter with a rhyme scheme of aabbcc..., also called rhymed couplets. The actor, like Congreve in his dedication, delivers a speech about try-hard poets and foolish characters, asking the audience to not take offense and to withhold quick judgement. Congreve does, however, slip in a sarcastic jab - "Should he by chance a knave or fool expose,/ That hurts none here, sure here are none of those..."
- The dedicatory letter indicates that he did arraign the taste of his audience because it did not approve his play .
- His statement about what is in his play has more value: "some plot," "some new thought," "some humor too," but "no farce," the absence of which, he adds, ironically, would presumably be a fault.
- The statements that there is no satire because the town is so reformed and that there are surely no knaves or fools in his audience are, of course, ironic.

Act I

- The curtain rises in a chocolate House where Mirabell and Fainall are playing cards. The conversation reveals that Mirabell is in love with Millamant but is intensely disliked by Millamant's guardian. Lady Wishfort's dislike seems to have some justification: Mirabell at one time pretended to court her in order to conceal his love for her niece. She is fifty-five years old, and her vanity was offended when she discovered that Mirabell did not love her.
- When Fainall leaves for a moment, a servant enters and informs Mirabell that his valet married that day. Mirabell is pleased because his marriage is a necessary prelude to some secret scheme — which is not revealed. Witwoud and Petulant then enter, and we gain the additional information that Witwoud's elder brother is coming to town to court Millamant. Witwoud and Petulant are also both courting Millamant but only because she is the currently reigning belle. There is further talk of an uncle of Mirabell's who is coming to court Lady Wishfort. The men leave for a walk in the park.

Act II

- In St. James' Park, Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood discuss their favourite subjects, men and how to manipulate them. Beneath their apparent friendliness, they are wary of each other as they talk of Mirabell. Mrs. Fainall suspects, quite correctly, that Mrs. Marwood is in love with him.
- After Fainall and Mirabell enter, Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall stroll off and leave Fainall and Mrs. Marwood alone on the stage. We now discover that Mrs. Marwood is Fainall's mistress and that he only married his wife for her fortune so as to finance his amour. However, their love includes neither faith nor trust. Fainall is sensitive to the fact that Mrs. Marwood's seeming enmity of Mirabell covers her attraction for him. The scene ends with mutual recrimination and a reconciliation as they leave the stage when Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall return.
- The conversation of Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall supplies new revelations. Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall were lovers; she married Fainall as a cover for her affair with Mirabell. Mirabell, during their stroll, has told her of his scheme to trick Lady Wishfort and marry Millamant. As he does not trust Waitwell, he arranged for a marriage between Waitwell and Foible, Lady Wishfort's maid. (The news of this marriage arrived in the first act.) After all, having wooed and won Lady Wishfort, Waitwell might plan on actually marrying her.

Act II ... contd

- Millamant now makes her first entrance, accompanied by Witwoud and her maid, Mincing. She is thoroughly aware of her own charm and her power over Mirabell, and toys with Mirabell's love at the same time that she returns it. She is apparently quite prepared to go along with Mirabell's plot, which Foible has revealed to her, a clear indication that in the end she intends to have Mirabell.
- After her exit, Waitwell and Foible appear. Waitwell will woo Lady Wishfort in the guise of Sir Rowland, Mirabell's imaginary uncle. As Sir Rowland, he would be a fine match; in addition, the marriage would serve Lady Wishfort as a way to be revenged on Mirabell for his earlier slight, for presumably Mirabell would be disinherited when Sir Rowland married. All exit, with Waitwell making wry, typically Restoration comments.

Act III

- At her home, Lady Wishfort is trying to hide the signs of age with cosmetics applied externally and brandy internally. Mrs. Marwood enters and tells her that Foible was talking to Mirabell in the park. While Mrs. Marwood hides in a closet, Lady Wishfort taxes Foible with disloyalty. However, Foible takes advantage of this opportunity to forward Mirabell's plot; she says he stopped her only to insult Lady Wishfort, who therefore determines to accept Sir Rowland, due to arrive that day.
- Unfortunately, after Lady Wishfort leaves, Mrs. Fainall enters, and she and Foible discuss Mirabell's scheme; Mrs. Marwood, still hidden, overhears their conversation. They also mention that Mrs. Fainall was Mirabell's mistress at one time, and that Mrs. Marwood is in love with Mirabell, but he finds her unattractive. Mrs. Marwood's anger is reinforced in the next scene when Millamant also accuses her of loving Mirabell and makes biting remarks about her age.

Act III ... continued

- When the guests arrive for dinner, Petulant and young Witwoud, and then Sir Wilfull Witwoud, the elder brother and Millamant's suitor, appear. In a scene that perhaps comes closer to farce than any other in this play, Sir Wilfull does not recognize his foppish brother, and young Witwoud refuses to recognize his country-bumpkin elder brother. Afterward, Mrs. Marwood, left alone with Fainall, describes Mirabell's plot. He is certain now that he has been a cuckold and wants revenge.
- Mrs. Marwood then outlines a plan for Fainall. Since Lady Wishfort has control of Millamant's fortune, and since she is very fond of her daughter, Mrs. Fainall, he can insist that Millamant's money be made over to him on threat of making public his wife's transgressions.

Act IV

- After Lady Wishfort is seen preparing for the visit of Sir Rowland, Millamant and Sir Wilfull are onstage together. Sir Wilfull, somewhat drunk but very shy, is too bashful actually to complete his proposal to Millamant. Overawed by the aloof lady, he is eager to get away and grateful when she dismisses him. It is obvious that he will not succeed, but he is likable in his embarrassment.
- Immediately after occurs the scene between Millamant and Mirabell that is often called the proviso scene. They discuss the conditions under which he is prepared to marry her and under which she is prepared to accept him. At the end of the scene, when Mrs. Fainall enters, Millamant admits that she does love him violently. As Mirabell leaves, the company — Sir Wilfull, young Witwoud, and Petulant — come in from dinner. They are all drunk — Sir Wilfull the drunkest of the three. Now the spurious Sir Rowland arrives to woo Lady Wishfort, and his wooing bids fair to be successful when a letter is brought from Mrs. Marwood in which she tells Lady Wishfort of the plot. However, Waitwell and Foible between them manage to convince Lady Wishfort that the letter is actually sent by Mirabell and is designed as a plot against Sir Rowland. Apparently Lady Wishfort is convinced, at least for the moment.

Act V

- The scene, as before, is Lady Wishfort's house. Lady Wishfort has discovered Mirabell's plot. Foible tries unsuccessfully to make excuses for herself.
- Fainall now makes his demands. As Millamant's fortune of 6,000 pounds was presumably forfeit when she refused to marry a suitor selected for her by Lady Wishfort, he wants the money as his price for not blackening his wife's reputation. He also wants the remainder of Mrs. Fainall's fortune turned over to his sole control. And he insists on Lady Wishfort's not marrying again so that he be sole heir. These terms are very harsh, and Lady Wishfort might not be prepared to go along with them except that Mrs. Marwood, standing by, goads her on by harping on the public disgrace of her daughter, Mrs. Fainall.

Act V ... Contd

- When the two maids now reveal that Fainall, in his turn, has been unfaithful to his wife, he refuses to be deterred; he is willing to be the subject of scandal himself, but he will still make public his wife's shame. When Millamant states that she is prepared to marry Sir Wilfull, thus meeting the wishes of her aunt and saving her 6,000 pounds, Fainall suspects a trick, but he can still demand control of the balance of his wife's estate, and now also the control of Lady Wishfort's. At this point, Mirabell presents the evidence which will protect Mrs. Fainall. At the time of her marriage, they had judged Fainall's character correctly, and Mrs. Fainall secretly signed over her fortune to Mirabell's control. There is, therefore, no money which Fainall can successfully obtain.
- In great anger, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood leave the stage, vowing dire vengeance. Lady Wishfort, having discovered that Fainall was a villain and that Mrs. Marwood, her friend, was not a true friend, is now prepared to forgive Mirabell; Millamant can now marry him with her aunt's consent. It is on this happy but somewhat indeterminate note that the play ends.

Epilogue

- Spoken by Mrs. Bracegirdle, who played Millamant, the epilogue only makes conventional points: the essential inadequacy of critics who decry plays without knowledge, and the statement that the characters are fictitious, and no individual is represented; the satire is universal, for
- So poets oft do in one piece expose Whole belles assemblies of coquettes and beaux.

Proviso Scene ... 1

- Millamont's Terms
- **Allowed to stay in bed late as she wishes**
- "I'll lie abed in a morning as long as I please."
- **Mirabell cannot call her by pet names**
- "I won't be called named after I'm married; positively I won't be called names."
- **No public displays of affection allowed**
- "Don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks"

Proviso Scene ...2

- **Allowed to have any visitors without question**
- "Liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whomever I please"
- **Allowed to write and receive any letters without question**
- "to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or wry faces"
- **Not required to spend time with Mirabell's friends or family**
- "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."

Proviso Scene ... 3

- **Allowed to eat dinner together or alone as she wishes**
- "Come to dinner when I please, dine in my dressing room when I'm out of humor, without giving a reason."
- **Allowed to dress how she wants**
- "To have my closet inviolate"
- **Allowed to be in charge of her tea table**
- "to be sole empress of my tea table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave."
- **Mirabell must always knock before entering a room**
- "You shall always knock at the door before you come in."

Proviso Scene ... 4

- Mirabell's Terms
- **Millamont must not have friends who are women**
- "that you admit no sworn confidante or intimate of your own sex"
- **Millamont must like her own face**
- "that you continue to like your own face as long as I shall"
- **Millamont cannot wear makeup or other cosmetics**
- "I prohibit all masks for the night, made of oiled-skins and I know not what- hog's bones, hare's gall, pig water, and the marrow of a roasted cat."

Proviso Scene ... 5

- **Millamont must not wear corsets**
- "I denounce against all straight lacing, squeezing for a shape, till you mold my boy's head like a sugar loaf"
- **Allowed to restrict Millamont's drink intake**
- "Restrain yourself to native and simple tea-table drinks, as tea, chocolate, and coffee."
"I banish all foreign forces, all auxiliaries to the tea table, as orange brandy, all aniseed, cinnamon, citron and Barbados waters..."
"But for cowslip-wine, poppy water, and all dormatives, those I allow."

Critical Analysis of the Proviso Scene

- William Congreve in *The Way of the World* has shown the fashionable beau-monde of London indulging in their favourite pastime – love, sex and intrigue. But under the façade of the supposed freedom lies the palpable tension of both sexes to assume liberty and to exert control. This is nicely brought out by Act IV, scene i, popularly known as the Proviso scene. The provisos are the set of conditions which Millament and Mirabell propose to one another before confirming their contract to marry one another. Already, from the beginning of the play we have seen Mirabell pursuing Millament but the airy wit of the heroine did not make any firm commitment about her seriousness with the affair. Even in Act IV before she admits Mirabell to hear his suit she encourages Sir Willfull to present his case for marrying her despite the fact that she is not at all keen to hear what he has to offer.

Critical analysis ...2

- Millamant admits that she is haughty and dismissive while being pursued because “There is not so impudent a thing in nature as the saucy look of an assured man confident of success”. Her independence cannot tolerate being taken for granted in love and being rejected with indifference after marriage. Hence she tots up a bill of conditions which must be respected before she would give herself to Mirabell.
- It is interesting to note that Millamant’s first condition seeks to preserve and hold on to her solitude and time for contemplation showing that she is not really a socialite seeking company and bored when she is without one. Only in an afterthought she adds morning thoughts and indolent slumbers to the list. She completes this with a more practical “I’ll lye a bed in the morning as long as I please”.

Critical Analysis ... 3

- Her second proviso forbids Mirabell to call her in any fancy name than her own. She means that she would not be anybody's doll but the mistress of her own self with a will and identity of her own. This identity would be certified by the name she bears.
- She would not also tolerate any public show of affection. There would be no emotional excess to mark the exuberance of the first days of their marriage since for her marriage calls for sobriety and a constant love for each other that would not wax and wane with the passage of time.
- She would also like to receive whomsoever she pleases and write or receive letters from anybody she wants to. She would not allow her post-marital life to be controlled and governed by her husband. She wants a pledge from Mirabell that would grant her the freedom she has always enjoyed and which, she knows, men do not sacrifice even after getting married.

Critical Analysis ... 4

- She may have allowed false wits like Witwoud and dullards like Petulant to woo her but after her marriage she certainly would not like to be pestered by wits or fools who are her husband's relatives. There would be a strict embargo in compelling her to be sweet to those relatives by marriage whom she would not prefer to meet. Once again we find Millament bombarding the male bastion of forcing one's relatives and acquaintances on the wife whether or not she likes them.
- Her next proviso shows that Millament is a mistress of her moods. She would not like to be forced to maintain the decorum of having food with others at a properly designated place and in a conventionally designated pattern. When she is not in a mood to tolerate company she must be allowed to dine in her dressing room and cannot be forced to justify her action. This proviso also shows that Millament is trying to extract from Mirabell the right to tolerate / not tolerate company and not being held accountable for violating certain established social codes of decorum.

Critical Analysis ... 5

- “To have my closet inviolate” may refer to her independence in wearing what she likes or may indicate her right to keep secrets without being probed or spied upon. In a short pithy sentence therefore she has demanded her right to secrecy establishing her as an independent woman who would not like to sell herself in a marriage.
- By remaining in charge of her tea table she indicates that she would control all social niceties and be immune to being conditioned or controlled while she is entertaining her guests. Also by requiring that Mirabell knock at the door before entering her room she retains her privacy which she cannot abandon because of her marriage.

Critical Analysis ... 6

- We notice that compared to Millament's provisos Mirabell does not require any conditional liberty. His provisos seek to temper the free spirit and independent nature of Millament – that she must not have friends who would encourage her to cheat or burden her with their guilty secrets; that she must not use make up and allow her face to receive the stamp of time as it comes by; that she must allow her child to grow in her womb without trying to hide her pregnancy through artificial means; that her tea table can house sedatives but certainly not the stimulants like brandy. She can also have her usual tete-a-tete about the scandals of the town but must not certainly try to imitate men by consuming alcohol in her tea table.

Critical Analysis ... 7

We notice that while Millament's provisos are her demands to have her liberty which she enjoyed before getting married, Mirabell's provisos are designed to temper the very same freedom she is clamouring for. He does not want any right to be free and independent because men even after getting married remain free and it is only women who have to bargain with provisos about their share of liberty.