The Way of the World

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM CONGREVE

William Congreve grew up in Ireland, where he attended Kilkenny College. There he met Jonathan Swift, a fellow satirist who would become his lifelong friend. He also attended Trinity College in Dublin. Later, Congreve moved to London to study law but switched to playwriting instead. He wrote five plays (4 comedies and 1 tragedy) between 1693-1700, some of which became the most famous plays of the Restoration period. His career as a playwright was short-lived and he entered retirement early. He never married but was involved with several famous actresses, many of whom starred in his plays. He died from wounds he received from a carriage accident and was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Congreve's play was written and performed during the end of what scholars call the Restoration, the period in which Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660 (Charles II's father, Charles I, was beheaded on charges of treason on January 30, 1649 after a lengthy civil war and England briefly became a commonwealth with Oliver Cromwell as its leader.) In 1700, the nation was still struggling to define succession. King William III, a Dutch prince was brought over from Hanover in 1688, to rule the Protestant nation alongside his wife/cousin, Queen Mary, an event known as the Glorious Revolution. The pair essentially took the throne from the then-reigning Catholic King James II, Mary's father, who fled to France. They promised to rule the nation well by upholding its Protestant tradition, something many citizens felt James II wasn't doing. Congreve weaves much of this political detail into his poem through its preoccupation with marriage, capital, and laws.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Man of Mode, Or Sir Fopling Flutter by George Etherege. Etherege's play, first performed in 1676, is the story of the roguish, man-about-town Dorimant and his efforts to woo the beautiful and headstrong Harriet. The marriage is contrary to the wishes of Harriet's mother, Lady Woodvill, who has heard about Dorimant's immodest reputation and is eager to protect her daughter by marrying her off to a more suitable man. Though Congreve's play is much more forward thinking in terms of the way he portrays women and their struggle for independence, his play contains many of the same stock character types found in Etherege's play, such as the flirtatious hero, the overbearing mother, and the stubborn heroine.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Way of the World*
- **When Written:** likely late 1699- early 1700
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** March 1700
- **Literary Period:** Restoration Period
- **Genre:** Restoration comedy
- **Setting:** London, most of the play takes place in Lady Wishfort's house
- **Climax:** Act V, Scene I, Wishfort finally learns about Mirabell's plot, that Foible is helping him, and that Sir Rowland is a sham.
- **Antagonist:** Fainall

EXTRA CREDIT

Congreve's Love Life. It is reputed that Congreve was involved with Anne Bracegirdle, an actress to whom he gave many major roles in his plays. She played the role of Millamant in *The Way of the World*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Before the play begins, a number of important events have taken place in the lives of the main characters, which Congreve reveals throughout the play. Arabella's first husband, Languish, has died and left her his fortune. She begins a secret affair with Edward Mirabell. They end the affair and she gets married to a man Mirabell has selected (Fainall) because Mirabell is afraid that they will conceive a child out of wedlock (Congreve never explains why Mirabell just doesn't marry her himself). Mirabell and Mrs. Arabella Fainall remain good friends after the affair ends.

Mirabell begins courting Mrs. Fainall's cousin, Millamant, who lives with Millamant's aunt and Mrs. Fainall's mother, Lady Wishfort. To gain Wishfort's favor for his marriage to Millamant, Mirabell flatters Wishfort and lavishes much attention on her. Wishfort becomes convinced that he loves her and falls for him. However, after Wishfort's best friend, Mrs. Marwood, reveals what Mirabell was up to, her feelings for Mirabell change from love to hate. Now, she will not grant her permission for Mirabell to marry Millamant, an important problem because she controls Millamant's £6,000 dowry.

The night before the first scene of the play, the first time Mirabell has gone back to Wishfort's house since she found out his plan, Wishfort unceremoniously dismisses Mirabell from her "cabal night" club in front of Millamant, who doesn't stand

up for him, and a number of other people. Undiscouraged, Mirabell has already begun hatching a plan to coerce Wishfort into accepting the marriage, a plan that Millamant learns all about through Foible.

While all this is going on, Fainall has been having an affair with his wife's and Lady Wishfort's friend, Mrs. Marwood. Mirabell is the only one who suspects that this is going on. Foible and Mincing have witnessed the affair but have been sworn to secrecy by Marwood.

Unfolding in a single day, the play begins in the morning. Mirabell is waiting for word that his servant, Waitwell, and Wishfort's servant, Foible, have gotten married according to his plan. In the meanwhile, he is playing cards with his enemy, Fainall. Mirabell hints that he knows that Fainall and Marwood are having an affair. But he also reveals to Fainall his love for both Millamant's strengths and weaknesses of character. Hearing this, Fainall encourages him to marry her.

Later, the two men are joined by Witwoud and Petulant. Mirabell learns from the two that last night, Wishfort discussed her plan to marry Millamant off to his uncle, Sir Rowland, in order to disinherit Mirabell from his uncle's fortune (we do not yet know that Sir Rowland isn't a real person and that this is all actually part of Mirabell's plan).

Mirabell's plan is going well until Marwood, while hiding in a closet, overhears Mrs. Fainall and Foible discussing Mirabell's entire plan and learns exactly what he's up to. She shares this news with Fainall and they concoct a plan to ruin Mirabell and blackmail Wishfort.

That same afternoon at Wishfort's house, Millamant also accepts Mirabell's proposal and rejects the proposal of Sir Wilfull, whom Lady Wishfort wanted her to marry.

Together, Marwood and Fainall begin to counteract Mirabell's plan. They reveal Foible's betrayal and Sir Rowland's true identity (Waitwell) to Wishfort, and Fainall has Waitwell arrested. He threatens Wishfort that unless she surrenders her fortune, including Millamant and Mrs. Fainall's shares, he will reveal Mrs. Fainall's affair with Mirabell to the town, which would bring great disgrace to her family. He also demands that Wishfort herself agree never to get married (unless he permits it).

Mrs. Wishfort thinks she has found a loophole in Fainall's plan when she learns that Millamant and Sir Wilfull have agreed to get married. However, Fainall is undeterred because he can still gain control of Wishfort and her wife's fortunes.

All seems lost for Wishfort and her family until Mirabell steps in. Before he offers his help, he has Wishfort promise that she will let him marry Millamant, which she readily does.

Then, he calls forward first Mincing and Foible to reveal the affair between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Wishfort is dissatisfied that this is Mirabell's trump card but Mirabell has one more trick. He calls forward Waitwell, who brings with him a deed to all of Arabella Languish's property. Before marrying Fainall, Mirabell and Arabella suspected that Fainall might try to cheat her, so Arabella agreed to sign over her fortune to Mirabell as a precaution. As her trustee, Mirabell still controls her fortune and the legally binding document thus preempts Fainall's claim on his wife's fortune.

With Fainall and Marwood beaten and Mrs. Fainall and Wishfort's fortunes and reputations saved, Sir Wilfull releases Millamant from the engagement so she can marry Mirabell and he can continue with his plans to travel. Mirabell returns the deed to Arabella and tells her to use it to control a very upset and vengeful Fainall.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mirabell – The protagonist of the play, Edward Mirabell is a fashionable, intellectual, and clever man-about-town, popular with the ladies. He was Mrs. Fainall's lover before her marriage to Fainall and has broken his fair share of hearts (usually unintentionally) by not returning the sentiments of every woman who fancies him. Now in love with Millamant, he's ready to develop a mature and monogamous relationship. Though he wants to get married, he finds himself on the bad side of quite a number of other characters who concoct plans of their own to ruin his chances at doing so, particularly Lady Wishfort and the adulterous couple Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. However, he does have a number of loyal followers ready to assist him in his plan to win Millamant, save her dowry, and defeat Fainall. Members of his team include his servant Waitwell, his servant's wife, Foible, and his former lover and still good friend, Mrs. Arabella Fainall. He is quite generous toward these allies and helps each out of tough scrapes, often by using a combination of capital and cunning.

Fainall – The antagonist of the play, Fainall is a sneaky, insecure, and traitorous fellow with a not so good reputation around town—basically, he has all the negative qualities that Mirabell does not. He is the second husband of Lady Wishfort's daughter, Mrs. Arabella Fainall. A kept man, he hates his rich wife and is having an affair with his wife's friend, Mrs. Marwood. Together, he and Marwood have developed a plan to cheat Millamant out of her dowry, Arabella out of her property, and Lady Wishfort out of her entire fortune. As the play goes on, it becomes clear that Fainall's hot-tempered personality is not compatible with effective scheming. Susceptible to intense jealousy, Fainall believes (correctly) that Marwood loves Mirabell and is unable to hide his anger. Once, he even lashes out at his lover, who almost reveals their affair to all their friends. However, he curbs his temper and expends more energy into ruining Mirabell. Fainall hides his dislike of his wife

but many people around him suspect that their marriage is a sham and that he is having an affair with Marwood. Mirabell is one such doubter. By the end of the play, when it is clear that Mirabell has triumphed, Fainall unleashes all his rage on his wife, threatening her with physical harm.

Marwood – Fainall's lover and Lady Wishfort's best friend, Marwood is cunning and manipulative. Likely in love with Mirabell, who doesn't love her, she is able to convince Fainall that she only loves him, while making him feel incredibly guilty for doubting her. Marwood is an adept liar, particularly around her female friends, Mrs. Fainall and Lady Wishfort. But even despite having a questionable moral compass, Marwood also gives very candid advice to those who would rather follow fashion trends at the expense of following their hearts. In particular, she advises Millamant to stop pretending to be interested in other men and Witwoud to acknowledge his step-brother Wilfull, rather than treat him like a stranger.

Mrs. Arabella Fainall – Known as Mrs. Fainall through much of the play, Arabella Fainall is Lady Wishfort's daughter and Millamant, Witwoud, and Sir Wilfull's cousin. She was once married to a rich man named Languish who died and left her his fortune. While a widow, she began an affair with Mirabell. They ended the affair before she got married to Fainall and remained close friends. Mirabell trusts and admires the steady and clear-thinking Mrs. Fainall immensely and tells her every detail of his plan. Mrs. Fainall esteems Mirabell in the same way and still seems to have feelings for him. However, she never reveals that she still loves Mirabell and doesn't ruin his plan, though she does encourage Sir Wilfull to propose to her cousin, Millamant, and is noticeably less patient with Millamant as the play develops. Mrs. Fainall hates her husband immensely but doesn't learn about his affair until Foible reveals it to her. She distrusts Marwood and suspects that she's in love with Mirabell, too

Lady Wishfort – A wealthy, old widow, mother to Arabella Fainall, and aunt to Millamant, Witwoud, and Sir Wilfull, Lady Wishfort is a vain and silly woman who tries to act younger than she actually is. As a result, she comes off as quite foolish and annoying. Lady Wishfort is eager to remarry and quickly falls in love with Sir Rowland. She wears a lot of makeup to hide her wrinkles, which calls attention to her age. Though throughout much of the play, she claims to hate Mirabell and seeks revenge against him for pretending to flirt with her, her hatred is really fueled by her unrequited love. She is the leader of "cabal-night," a club that consists of mostly women who gather at her house to gossip about how much they hate men, particularly Mirabell. Easily fooled, she trusts the opinion of her best friend Marwood, who is betraying her. Foible, her lady-in-waiting, is actually working for Mirabell. As matriarch, she is in charge of arranging her niece's marriage and protecting her dowry until she gets married. This role, of course, is threatened by Fainall, who she later claims is not the man she wanted her daughter to remarry.

Foible – Foible is Lady Wishfort's servant. She was apparently once a beggar and perhaps homeless before Wishfort saved her from the streets and gave her a job. She is a smart and eloquent woman and Mirabell is very pleased with her service, promising to reward her with land and money for her help in his scheme. She has recently gotten married to Mirabell's servant, Waitwell, in a secret ceremony. She is very much in love with her new husband and teases him often. She deeply respects Mrs. Fainall and is the only character who recognizes and is sensitive to the poor woman's suffering and heartbreak in helping Mirabell marry Millamant.

Millamant – Spoiled, beautiful, and rich Millamant could have any man she wants and knows it too. She is very fashionable and popular in London. Though she can seem cruel and uncaring towards Mirabell, she does love him but is very guarded with her emotions. She is very independent and loves poetry. Before she gets engaged, she enjoys keeping Mirabell on his toes and tries to make him jealous by spending time with the fools, Witwoud and Petulant, even though she isn't romantically interested in them. She mainly supports her aunt Wishfort in all things and doesn't initially offer much resistance to her aunt's proposition to marry her off to first Sir Rowland and then her cousin, Sir Wilfull, in order to thwart Mirabell. When she does agree to marry Mirabell, she sets multiple conditions to assert her continued independence within the marriage, which Mirabell, after setting some conditions of his own, readily accepts.

Sir Wilfull Witwoud – Sir Wilfull is Lady Wishfort's forty-year-old nephew from the countryside. He is unrefined and ignorant but also very sweet and good-humored. Sir Wilfull wants to better himself by travelling to France. He has come to England to learn French but is easily corrupted by the debauchery that life in London offers. He gets drunk at Wishfort's house and makes a bad impression on his cousin, Millamant, who his aunt wants him to marry. He doesn't get along with his half-brother Witwoud, who is ashamed of him, or Witwoud's best friend, Petulant. They often insult him and he patiently bears their slights. Intensely loyal to Mirabell, he helps him win over Lady Wishfort by pretending to accept being married to Millamant. He is also protective of his cousin Arabella Fainall and almost fights Fainall. By the end of the play, he has made friends with Witwoud and Petulant, who agree to be his travel companions to France.

Waitwell – Waitwell is Mirabell's hardworking servant who Mirabell allows to marry Foible. Newly married, he is eager to sleep with his wife throughout the play. In fact, it is one of his many motivators to comply with Mirabell's plan. Though not as cunning as his wife, he does put forth a good effort at trying to deceive Wishfort into thinking that he truly is a gentleman named Sir Rowland.

Witwoud – Petulant's best friend, Lady Wishfort's nephew, Sir

Wilfull's half brother, Millamant and Arabella Fainall's cousin, Witwoud is a "fop," or fool who cares too much about being fashionable. He is often Petulant's mouthpiece, supplying him with vocabulary and interpreting the nonsense he spouts. Witwoud used to live in the countryside with his half-brother but has since moved to London, working first as a clerk. He doesn't seem to have an occupation during the play and spends his time mostly hanging out with Petulant at the chocolate house and attending Lady Wishfort's cabal meetings. Though hardly a wit like Mirabell, Witwoud is not as foolish as Petulant. He knows what people are up to, particularly Fainall, and occasionally reveals his knowledge about Fainall and Marwood's plots to those around him. He has a troubled relationship with his country-bumpkin half-brother, who he at first refuses to recognize. But they later become friends and he joins Sir Wilfull's plan to travel around the continent, along with Petulant.

Petulant – Witwoud's best friend, Petulant is a boisterous, foolish, and naughty fellow, who wants to be known as a ladies' man but goes about it by hiring actors to help him gain a reputation. He likes to start arguments over trivial matters and usually has no real substantive points to make. He thinks Millamant is beautiful as one might think a vase is beautiful, but has no real interest in formally courting her. At first, Witwoud is the only one who really enjoys his company but by the play's end, Sir Wilfull has warmed up to him, as well. Hardly responsible, he can only be relied on to pick arguments and follow Mirabell's orders.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sir Rowland – Waitwell's alter ego, concocted by Mirabell in his plan to blackmail Lady Wishfort into allowing him to marry Millamant.

Mincing – Millamant's loyal servant. She testifies against Marwood about her affair with Fainall.

Betty – The chocolate house waitress

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

JEALOUSY, DECEIT, AND INTRIGUE

In Congreve's play, jealousy, deceit, and intrigue are important and interrelated plot devices that drive the action of the play by creating conflict between characters. In many ways, the play can be thought of as a competition between Mirabell and Fainall to deceive the other by means of opposing schemes to gain control of Lady Wishfort and her fortune. Each man is assisted in his plan to outdo the other. Fainall has one helper, his mistress, Mrs. Marwood, while several major and minor characters participate in Mirabell's plan to win Millamant as his bride and retain her love and inheritance.

Congreve's most duplicitous characters, those carrying on affairs and scheming against love because of their own unrequited love, are themselves the most jealous. Jealousy is a huge motivator for the adulterers, Fainall and Marwood, and also Lady Wishfort to plot and scheme against Mirabell. Both Marwood and Wishfort start off in love with Mirabell, but because he does not return their sentiments, their all-consuming jealousy of him leads them to hate him and plot to ruin his future with Millamant. Fainall is also jealous of Mirabell because he fears his popularity with women, particularly that Marwood still loves Mirabell, and also because Mirabell threatens to gain some of Wishfort's fortune by marrying Millamant.

In portraying how jealousy motivates these characters to behave as they do, Congreve develops several lessons about jealousy's negative effects. In the end, all overly jealous characters end up not getting what they want: revenge against Mirabell. For Fainall, his lack of honesty causes him to distrust the honesty of others and doubt his mistress, which ultimately hurts his plan because he alienates his only ally. Marwood's case is a lesson in what happens when one tries to thwart too many people at once. Though she wants to help Fainall secure Wishfort's money, she also wants to get back at Mirabell by any means necessary. Her jealousy blinds her to the consequences of developing her own separate plans to prevent Mirabell's marriage to Millamant. After suggesting to Lady Wishfort that Millamant marry Sir Rowland, her move threatens the success of Fainall's plot and the couple has to work much harder to try to gain the fortune. Wishfort's jealousy leads her to play right into the hands of both Fainall and Mirabell. So eager is she to hurt Mirabell and prevent him from marrying Millamant that she thinks she's more in control of the situation than she actually is. Instead of playing Mirabell, she gets played by other people, several of whom are below her station as a lady but are more than her superiors in wit, like Foible.

In contrast, though jealousy also affects Mirabell, he is not consumed by it and doesn't feel threatened by the presence of Millamant's other suitors. Consequently, he is able to keep two steps ahead of Fainall and gets Lady Wishfort to comply with his plan.

In addition to jealousy, deception and intrigue also contribute to the rising action that makes the play both engaging and suspenseful. As the main conflict between Mirabell and Fainall develops, it becomes clear that almost every character has something to hide. Deception is practiced in obvious ways, such

as when characters don full-on disguises, like Mirabell's servant, Waitwell, who pretends to be Sir Rowland, or when habitual liars, like Petulant, continue to tell tall tales. But Congreve also examines subtler forms of deception, including self-deception, like in the case of Lady Wishfort, who uses too much makeup to hide her age from her suitor, Sir Rowland, but also herself. Another subtler form of deception is psychological deception, a type of deception Marwood especially utilizes as she pretends to be Wishfort's best friend, while scheming for ways to steal her fortune, or when she convinces Fainall of her faithfulness even though she still cares for Mirabell.

Congreve even uses deception and intrigue to structure his play. The secret marriage of Foible and Waitwell (which occurs in the first act but is not explained until Act 2, Scene 4) and even Mrs. Fainall's secret deed of conveyance to Mirabell, revealed at the end of the play, are examples of deception and intrigue that not only affect other characters within the play but also delight the unsuspecting audience/reader.

WITS AND FOOLS

Congreve opens *The Way of the World* with a prologue that outlines the general struggle of playwrights to satisfy the audience and please all the critics. He suggests that this is a foolish endeavor and that it is better to instead write a play that instructs audience members on what characterizes a fool versus a wit.

This type of instruction is exactly what he proceeds to give through the repartee, or witty dialogue, of the fools of the play, mainly Witwoud, Petulant, and Sir Wilfull. These comedic minor characters often don't fully grasp the significance of the drama going on between Mirabell and Fainall but provide comedic relief with their well-timed puns and "raillery," or good-humored teasing, of other characters.

Additionally, the foolish characters Sir Wilfull, Petulant, and Witwoud model qualities the Restoration gentleman should *not* have and are personality types that a true gentleman should *not* surround himself with. All three men are unintellectual, "foppish" (excessively concerned with fashion), and at times, vulgar. By contrast, Mirabell is the foil to all three men, and represents the highest standards of decorum and wit. Importantly, though the three fools can at times seem like witty fools when they crack jokes, the opposite relationship between wits and foolishness does not hold true in Congreve's play. Instead, Congreve makes it clear that true wits, like Mirabell, are never foolish and never fooled. Hence Fainall, neither quite a wit nor quite a fool, occupies his own category as the villain or rogue of the play and is consequently undone by Mirabell and his team of half-wits, Sir Wilfull, Petulant, and Witwoud.

MEN VS. WOMEN

With its several references to sex taking place inside and outside the marriage, Congreve's play would have riveted the attention of a Restoration audience very much interested to know the gossip of who's sleeping with whom and what really goes on between married and unmarried men and women behind closed doors. Though often described as a sexual comedy-of-manners, *The Way of the World* does not merely titillate the audience with the possibilities of physical union between man and woman. Congreve also examines the question of chemistry: why are some couples more compatible than others? Why do some personalities never get along?

His work suggests the existence of an ever-present tension between men and women that doesn't always manifest itself as sexual tension. In particular, he explores how love/hate relationships tend to develop between men and women, no matter how stubborn or complacent their personalities are. Congreve develops a broad spectrum of these tensions between various male and female pairings and presents different outcomes for each.

On the lighter side of the love/hate spectrum is the relationship between the absurd Wishfort and the flirtatious Mirabell. Wishfort, at first in love with Mirabell, spends most of the play trying to gain revenge against him for pretending to be interested in her, only to discover, at the end, that her intense hatred for him is born from unrequited love. Because she can never be his partner, she becomes an accessory to his plot to marry her niece.

Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum would be Millamant and her ill-matched and foolish suitors, Witwoud, Sir Wilfull, and Petulant. Though these fools all fail to impress her artistic and intellectual sensibilities, they do not stop trying to woo her until she marries Millamant. On her part, she enjoys the attentions they lavish on her but isn't above getting into silly arguments with them.

The darker side of the love/hate spectrum would include the tensions between the adulterers, Fainall and Marwood, and also between Fainall and Mrs. Fainall. Fainall and Marwood have a dysfunctional relationship. They often argue and cannot seem to fully trust one another, which prevents Fainall's plan from running smoothly The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Fainall is marked by mutual hatred between husband and wife. Both characters spend much of the play telling others around them how much they hate their spouse and they expend much of their energy trying to ruin the other. But not until the end, when Mirabell reveals that he has saved Wishfort's fortune, do they openly reveal their hatred toward each other in a shocking scene of domestic violence.

FEMALE (IN)DEPENDENCE

The Way of the World is notable for its positive portrayal of independent, intelligent women. Several female characters are impressively independent and contribute their own helpful ideas to the schemes created by Mirabell and Fainall. The servant Foible is noted for her sharp wit and quick mind, which proves useful when she has to deceive Lady Wishfort. Mrs. Fainall is eager to destroy the plans of her adulterous husband even before she finds out he is untrue. Mrs. Marwood demands better treatment from a jealous Fainall and also coerces him to spend his money on her.

Millamant, though, is perhaps the most independent of all the women. Currently the belle of the town and a much sought after bride, she is clearly not the type to rush into marriage because she feels that she needs a man's support. In the famous "proviso scene" between Mirabell and Millamant, Millamant outlines the terms of her marriage to Mirabell and resolves to retain her independence after marriage. This scene is an important departure from the conventions of the marriage plot—the fundamental plot of any comedy that ends with the engagement or marriage of the hero and heroine—found in other works of this period, expressing thoroughly modern ideas far advanced for Congreve's time.

Yet despite these shows of independence, the women of the play are not entirely free from the constraints of a male-dominated society and are not as independent as they initially may seem. Mrs. Fainall requires the help of Mirabell, her former lover, to save her fortune. Millamant's inheritance depends on whom she marries. Lady Wishfort is almost a victim of Fainall's plan to blackmail her, a plan based on shaming his wife by exposing her affair with Mirabell. Furthermore, the terms Fainall demands to keep quiet about Lady Wishfort's scandalous involvement with the disguised Waitwell would have curbed her power as matriarch, as well as cut down her finances.

LOVE AND MONEY

Money is a distinct concern for several of the characters in Congreve's play. Though greed does exist in the play—Fainall wants all of Wishfort's fortune or as much as he can swindle—Congreve draws a more important connection between familial and romantic love and the desire for money as a means of financial security. This is an interesting coupling because it suggests that the sentiment of love itself is not enough to build a romantic relationship on or to protect family bonds. Money is actually an essential ingredient of love as money provides for a comfortable life, which then allows one to enjoy one's love. For example, Fainall needs to acquire Wishfort's fortune to support his mistress Mrs. Marwood. Meanwhile, Mirabell cannot simply elope with Millamant because then they would lose her £6,000 inheritance, a fact Fainall exploits in his scheme.

Even with the bonds of love that connect family members, money plays a central role. Lady Wishfort has control over the accounts of her daughter Mrs. Fainall and her niece Millamant, and is not above forcing their compliance by reminding them of this fact, especially Millamant. But in addition to using money to coerce her family members, Wishfort is also in charge of *maintaining* the family's finances so these women have a nest egg when they come of age or marry.

Foible and Waitwell's marriage itself is also a testament to this theme. Not only does their marriage benefit from Mirabell's financial incentives (he gives Foible money for her help and promises to buy the couple land and stock their farm, if his plan succeeds), it is also occasioned as a type of insurance for Mirabell and a protection for Lady Wishfort. Waitwell's marriage to Foible assures Mirabell that he can trust Waitwell to play the role of Sir Rowland and that Waitwell will reveal his true identity to Wishfort (because he's already married) when Mirabell is ready to blackmail Lady Wishfort for Millamant's hand in exchange for destroying the evidence of her false marriage to Sir Rowland.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MASKS

Throughout much of the Restoration period, **masks** were often considered part of a fashionable ensemble for ladies and gentlemen attending evening theatre performances. In many early Restoration plays, masks symbolize flirtatious behavior and covert love affairs. In Congreve's late Restoration play, however, the mask no longer seems to be quite the fashion statement it once was. Mirabell forbids Millamant from wearing a mask to the theatre in their marriage contract and she is outraged that he thinks she would ever wear such an unfashionable article. According to Witwoud, the foolish Petulant wears a mask to disguise his true identity when he goes around and tries to make himself look popular by asking people about Petulant's whereabouts. But during the play, only Marwood actually wears a mask, wearing it at the park in full daylight to hide her tears from those who might see her with Fainall and begin to speculate. But the mask doesn't do what typical Restoration masks are supposed to do, like make her seem more fashionable or prevent her from being recognized by Mrs. Fainall and Foible. Finally, it does not even provide cover for what Marwood really wants to hide: her affair with Fainall. If anything, wearing a mask, particularly in daylight, suggests to other characters her lack of innocence and,

throughout the course of the play, comes to symbolize her role as betrayer and adulteress, someone whose own face is a kind of mask for her double-dealing behavior.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Way of the World* published in 1993.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

But for the discovery of this amour, I am indebted to your friend, or your wife's friend, Mrs. Marwood.

Related Characters: Mirabell (speaker), Marwood, Fainall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Mirabell and Fainall are playing cards at a chocolate house in London. The two men have been engaging in playful, competitive banter as they discuss Mirabell's quest to win Millamant's hand in marriage. In this passage, Mirabell tells Fainall that it was thanks to Mrs. Marwood that he realized Lady Wishfort used to think Mirabell was in love with her, and that upon learning he wasn't, decided to sabotage his relationship with Millamant, her niece. The use of the term "armour" to describe these complex social interactions highlights the theme of duplicity and false identity.

Furthermore, Mirabell's words also subtly taunt Fainall. Mirabell first calls Mrs. Marwood "your friend," indicating that he knows that Fainall is having an affair with Mrs. Marwood. By then correcting himself to "your wife's friend," Mirabell highlights the confusing entanglement of people in their social circle. Mirabell's words suggest that although technically forbidden, adulterous affairs within their circle are usually open secrets.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

And for a discerning man somewhat too passionate a lover, for I like her with all her faults; nay, like her for her faults. Her follies are so natural, or so artful, that they become her, and those affectations which in another woman would be odious serve but to make her more agreeable.

Related Characters: Mirabell (speaker), Millamant, Fainall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Fainall and Mirabell have returned to their banter, and have discussed the social situation at Lady Wishfort's house. Mirabell then begins to talk about his love for Millamant, and in this passage tells Fainall that he loves Millamant "with all her faults," declaring that even these faults are attractive because they are "so natural, or so artful." Although somewhat exaggeratedly romantic, Mirabell's words highlight the depth and earnestness of his love for Millamant. Unlike the other characters in the play, many of whom are married to one person while carrying out an affair with another, Millamant clearly has his heart set on one woman only, such that other women now appear "odious" to him. He seems prepared to love Millamant not as an ideal but as a whole person, including her flaws.

Act 1, Scene 9 Quotes

Where modesty's ill manners, 'tis but fit
That impudence and malice pass for wit.

Related Characters: Mirabell (speaker), Witwoud, Petulant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Witwoud has told Mirabell about Lady Wishfort's plan to sabotage him by setting Millamant up with Mirabell's uncle. Dejected, Mirabell has asked Fainall to leave the chocolate house and take a walk on the Mall with him. Witwoud and Petulant have tried to invite themselves along, leading Mirabell to eventually tell them directly that he doesn't want them to come because he doesn't like the way they harass women in public. In the final lines of this scene, Mirabell denounces Witwoud and Petulant's "ill manners," "impudence," and "malice." He suggests that they are not even that witty, despite being the fools of the play. This statement confirms MIrabell's moral righteousness relative to the other characters, who are rude and disrespectful to women.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

...if we will be happy, we must find the means in ourselves, and among ourselves.

Related Characters: Mrs. Arabella Fainall (speaker), Marwood

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Marwood and Mrs. Fainall have been walking in St. James' park, discussing the topics of men and romance. Mrs. Fainall tells Mrs. Marwood that if women want a chance at happiness, they must find it within themselves and the company of other women. This claim reveals Mrs. Fainall's maturity and wisdom, especially in comparison to the rest of the characters in the play (except Millamant), who are all obsessed with love, marriage, and infidelity. Indeed, although the play does conclude with the classical happy ending of an engagement between Mirabell and Millamant, the play's presentation of marriage is hardly idyllic. Judging from the character's actions, it indeed seems that most married people are not satisfied by their marriages, and seek relationships with other people.

Mrs. Fainall's words are also a remarkable statement on female independence. Feminists argue that the problem of women being taught to wait for a man to make them happy is still relevant within contemporary culture; it is thus extraordinary that Mrs. Fainall would make such a statement in 1700. Note how the play demonstrates the truth of her words as well. Women are often depicted socializing with one another, including the groups at Lady Wishfort's house and the scene from which this quotation itself is taken. Furthermore, despite being married to an unpleasant man whom she doesn't seem to get along with, Mrs. Fainall seems fairly content.

Men are ever in extremes; either doting or averse. While they are lovers, if they have fire and sense, their jealousies are insupportable: and when they cease to love...they loathe, they look upon us with horror and distaste, they meet us like the ghosts of what we were, and as from such, fly from us.

Related Characters: Mrs. Arabella Fainall (speaker), Marwood

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are walking in St. James' Park, discussing men and love. Mrs. Fainall has stated that it is better for women to find happiness within themselves than wait to be made happy by a man. In this passage she further explains this view, claiming that men's treatment of women is always in one of two extremes; either they are so "doting" that they become paranoid with jealousy, or they "loathe" women, looking on them "with horror and distaste," and abandon them. This statement, though strikingly cynical, does reflect the behavior of many men in the play. It perhaps less accurately describes the fools, who seem to treat women with a combination of sexual interest and disrespect, but this attitude is of course hardly desirable either.

This passage suggests that perhaps Mrs. Fainall's cynical view of love has emerged from her mistreatment by the men with whom she has had relationships, including Mirabell and her husband, Fainall. Although Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall remain on friendly terms, and although Mirabell appears to have developed a more mature, committed attitude towards love in his quest to marry Millamant, Mrs. Fainall's words indicate that perhaps this will only be a temporary phase, and that once Mirabell's infatuation is over he will begin to treat even Millamant "with horror and distaste."

Love will resume his empire in our breasts, and every heart, or soon or late, receive and readmit him as its lawful tyrant.

Related Characters: Marwood (speaker), Mrs. Arabella Fainall

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

While they are walking together in St. James' Park, Mrs. Fainall has told Mrs. Marwood that she believes that men love women to the point of suffocation and jealousy, before eventually growing to hate and abandon them, and that for this reason women should just learn to be happy by themselves. Mrs. Marwood, however, disagrees; she has admitted that it is a shame when love ends, but that "'tis better to be left, than never to have been loved." She adds

that women can try to focus on their friendships with other women as replacements for relationships with men, but says this is doomed to fail, and in this passage claims it is inevitable that "love [of men] will resume his empire in our breasts."

While Mrs. Fainall's words about the fleeting nature of love appeared cynical, Mrs. Marwood's views are arguably even more so. She claims that, try as they might, women can never be truly happy without men––even if men don't make them happy either. Her characterization of love as an "empire" and a "tyrant" depicts love as a brutal, masculine, even violent force, which exerts a ruthless power over women. Note the contrast of this depiction of love and traditional conceptualizations that construct love as a pleasant, gentle, feminine phenomenon.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

❝ 'Twas for my ease to oversee and wilfully neglect the gross advances made him by my wife, that by permitting her to be engaged, I might continue unsuspected in my pleasures, and take you oftener to my arms in full security. But could you think, because the nodding husband would not wake, that e'er the watchful lover slept?

Related Characters: Fainall (speaker), Mirabell, Mrs. Arabella Fainall, Marwood

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

The lovers Fainall and Mrs. Marwood have been discussing Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall. Mrs. Marwood has expressed concerns that Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall may still be conducting an affair, but Fainall has turned this around in order to accuse Mrs. Marwood, his own lover, of being unfaithful to him with Mirabell. He claims that Mrs. Marwood assumed he would not notice her supposed affair with Mirabell because Fainall's wife was also making "gross advances" on him. This passage reveals the comically complex web of attachments within the social circle the characters inhabit. It also proves correct Mrs. Fainall's earlier point about men's obsessive jealousy. Fainall seems to think that both his wife and his lover are secretly in love with Mirabell, a fact that conveys his possessive (and hypocritical) paranoia.

❝ And have you the baseness to charge me with the guilt, unmindful of the merit? To you it should be meritorious that I have been vicious. And do you reflect that guilt upon me which should lie buried in your bosom?

Related Characters: Marwood (speaker), Fainall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Marwood and Fainall have continued to argue over Fainall's accusation that Mrs. Marwood is secretly in love with Mirabell. Every point Mrs. Marwood makes aiming to demonstrate her innocence has received a rude and dismissive response from Fainall, who accuses Mrs. Marwood of being both a flighty friend and lover. In this passage, Mrs. Marwood concedes that she is duplicitous to Mrs. Fainall, but only in service of her devotion to Fainall himself––a fact that Fainall should consider "meritorious." Mrs. Marwood's words highlight the flimsy and hypocritical moral compass of most of the characters in the play, although especially Fainall. As Marwood points out, Fainall himself should feel just as much "guilt" as she does, and seems to be projecting this guilt onto her.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

❝ While I only hated my husband, I could bear to see him; but since I have despised him, he's too offensive.

Related Characters: Mrs. Arabella Fainall (speaker), Fainall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Mrs. Marwood and Fainall have been watching Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell walk together in the park, so have the latter couple been watching the former. In this passage, Mrs. Fainall tells Mirabell that during the time when she "only hated" Fainall, she could bear to look at him, but "since I have despised him, he's too offensive." This comic line shows the bizarre extent of the antagonism between the characters in the play, particularly husbands and wives. Mrs. Fainall expresses a degree of acceptance over the fact that she "hated" her husband, but also suggests that there is a point when this hatred becomes unbearable. It is somewhat ironic, of course, that while she remains on good terms with

her former lover, Mirabell, she cannot even stand to look at her husband.

❝ You should have just so much disgust for your husband as may be sufficient to make you relish your lover.

Related Characters: Mirabell (speaker), Fainall, Mrs. Arabella Fainall

Related Themes: ⚥

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

While watching Fainall and Mrs. Marwood walk together in the park, Mrs. Fainall has confessed to Mirabell that she despises her husband so much that she cannot bear to even look at him. Rather than being shocked by Mrs. Fainall's words, Mirabell encourages her feelings of hatred. In this passage, he tells her that she should feel "just so much disgust" for Fainall as to make her "relish" her lover. Although a strange and humorous sentiment, this is also a strikingly practical one. As the play shows, men and women are able to tolerate the husbands and wives they hate because of the relief their lovers provide. Although perhaps not the most harmonious or moral social system, Mirabell's words show that the characters are nonetheless able to find some degree of happiness within it.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

❝ One's cruelty is one's power, and when one parts with one's cruelty one parts with one's power, and when one has parted with that, I fancy one's old and ugly.

Related Characters: Millamant (speaker), Mirabell

Related Themes: ♀

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Millamant has asked Mirabell if he was hurt to have been told to leave the "cabal" (get-together) the night before. At first she expresses regret at what happened, but then changes her line, telling Mirabell that she loves to make people suffer. Mirabell, unconvinced, responds that Millamant is only pretending to be cruel, and that her real problem is pleasing people too much. In this passage, Millamant insists that she *is* cruel, and that "one's cruelty is one's power." Although she is using rather exaggerated rhetoric––likely in order to provoke a reaction from Mirabell––Millamant's words nonetheless provide sophisticated insight on the nature of female independence and power.

As a beautiful and charming woman, Millamant possesses a degree of agency and influence within the world of the play. However, as this passage indicates, this influence is conditional on her behaving cruelly to others. If she were to behave in an accommodating and agreeable way with everyone in her life––particularly men––Millamant would effectively be giving up her autonomy, as the course of her life would quickly be decided by the men around her. Millamant emphasizes the link between beauty, cruelty, and power by claiming that women only stop being cruel when they are "old and ugly," and assumedly could not influence anyone through their cruelty even if they tried.

Act 2, Scene 6 Quotes

❝ ...for we shall be sick of one another. I shan't endure to be reprimanded nor instructed; 'tis so dull to act always by advice, and so tedious to be told of one's faults, I can't bear it. Well, I won't have you, Mirabell—I'm resolved...

Related Characters: Millamant (speaker), Mirabell

Related Themes: ⚥ ♀

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Millamant and Mirabell have been debating the viability of their relationship, with Millamant insisting that their personalities clash, that they will continue to argue, and that they will eventually grow tired of each other. In this passage, Millamant emphatically declares that she won't tolerate being "reprimanded or instructed," and concludes by telling Mirabell that she has made up her mind that they can't be together. Millamant's words reveal her powerful force of character. She exhibits no politeness, hesitance, or timidity in revealing the strength of her feelings to Mirabell. Clearly, Millamant prizes her independence above all, a fact conveyed by her refusal to be "instructed." However, as the rest of the play will show, her resolve is not quite as unwavering as it appears in this moment.

Act 2, Scene 7 Quotes

❝ A fellow that lives in a windmill has not a more whimsical dwelling than the heart of a man that is lodged in a woman... To know this, and yet continue to be in love, is to be made wise from the dictates of reason, and yet persevere to play the fool by the force of instinct.

Related Characters: Mirabell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Having told Mirabell that she doesn't want to marry him, Millamant leaves him alone onstage, where he reflects on what has just happened. He compares Mirabell to a "whirlwind," and then complains that a man living in a windmill would be in a less silly and erratic situation than a man whose heart "is lodged in a woman." He laments that, despite all his rational capabilities, he remains in love with Millamant, a fact that forces him to "play the fool."

Note the parallel between Mirabell's words here and the earlier conversation between Mrs. Marwood and Mrs. Fainall about the nature of love. In both cases, the characters accused the opposite gender of being fickle and ruthless in love. Despite his confidence and wisdom, Mirabell feels he is no match for the emotional unpredictability of being in love with Millamant.

Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

❝ Poison him? Poisoning's too good for him. Starve him, madam, starve him; marry Sir Rowland, and get him disinherited.

Related Characters: Foible (speaker), Mirabell, Lady Wishfort

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Foible has told Lady Wishfort that she has given Wishfort's portrait to Sir Rowland, who has fallen in love with her. However, Foible has also pretended that Mirabell claimed that Wishfort is planning to marry for money. Wishfort, infuriated, declares that she will poison Mirabell. In this passage, Foible suggests that instead of poisoning him, Wishfort should "starve him" by marrying Sir Rowland and depriving Mirabell of his inheritance. Foible's words show the many kinds of violence to which the characters subject one another, some more literal and vicious than others. Of course, Foible needs to make sure that Wishfort doesn't actually poison Mirabell; her way of doing this, by claiming that "poisoning's too good for him," is humorous given her duplicity.

This passage also shows the extremes to which the characters take their manipulation and deceit. Ordinarily, it might seem rather absurd to marry someone simply in order to seek revenge on someone else––yet in the world of the play, the suggestion is not implausible.

❝ Let me see the glass. Cracks, say'st thou? Why, I am arrantly flayed: I look like an old peeled wall. Thou must repair me, Foible, before Sir Rowland comes, or I shall never keep up to my picture.

Related Characters: Lady Wishfort (speaker), Foible

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Wishfort has been tricked by Foible into seeking engagement to Sir Rowland that night, so she can marry him the next day and prevent Mirabell from receiving his inheritance. Thinking that Sir Rowland has fallen in love with her from her portrait, Wishfort looks in the mirror only to find that, in her excitement, she's spoiled her makeup and now looks "like an old peeled wall." She asks Foible to help fix her face so she resembles her picture. The fact that Wishfort frets over her likeness to her own picture highlights the absurdity of the false pretenses that dominate the social world of the play. Indeed, Wishfort's makeup becomes a kind of mask, representing her duplicitous and manipulative personality.

The humor in this scene is further increased by the fact that Wishfort's makeup is not a very good mask, and in her excitement ends up "arrantly flayed." Furthermore, Wishfort is foolish in her shortsightedness and denial of the passing of time; it is inevitable, of course, that she would grow old and come not to resemble her younger self, just as it is inevitable that no amount of makeup will convince people that she retains her former youthful appearance.

Act 3, Scene 16 Quotes

Sheart, I was afraid you would have been in the fashion too, and have remembered to have forgot your relations.

Related Characters: Sir Wilfull Witwoud (speaker), Lady Wishfort, Witwoud

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Wishfort and Mrs. Fainall have joined the group of Sir Wilfull, Witwoud, and the others, and Wishfort has introduced the other men to Sir Wilfull. Wilfull remarks that he was afraid Wishfort would have followed the fashion of pretending to forget one's relations, just as Witwoud did in the previous scene. Wilfull's words emphasize the absurdity of this trend, particularly his use of the oxymoronic phrase "remembered to have forgot." This phrase highlights the complete illogicality behind many social customs, and the foolishness of people who follow such trends even when they contradict common sense knowledge about decency and reason.

Act 3, Scene 18 Quotes

I, it seems, am a husband, a rank husband, and my wife a very errant, rank wife,—all in the way of the world.

Related Characters: Fainall (speaker), Marwood

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

While the rest of the characters are having dinner together, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood have a private conversation in which Marwood reveals that Mirabell has been using Foible in his own scheme. She also tells Fainall about the affair between his wife and Mirabell. Fainall scornfully declares himself "a rank husband" and his wife "a very errant, rank wife" before concluding that this new information is "all in the way of the world." Consider the significance of the fact that the play's title is used by one of its most villainous characters. This fact emphasizes the rather cynical depiction of society and marriage contained within the play, but also an acceptance of this darker side of life and love as being all part of "the way of the world."

You married her to keep you; and if you can contrive to have her keep you better than you expected, why should you not keep her longer than you intended?

Related Characters: Marwood (speaker), Mrs. Arabella Fainall, Fainall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Marwood has confessed all that she knows about Mirabell's plotting, and Fainall has cursed the cause of events that inadvertently prevented him from receiving Millamant's fortune for himself. Although Fainall's knowledge of Arabella and Mirabell's affair could allow him to leave his wife he wanted, Mrs. Marwood urges him to stay with Arabella until they find another way for him to access the money. In this passage, Marwood schemingly tells Fainall that, considering he married Arabella for money in the first place, it shouldn't be difficult for him to stay married to her in order to get more money than he originally anticipated.

Here Marwood emerges as a ruthless, calculating, Lady Macbeth-like character who encourages her husband to selfishly scheme even when he is reluctant to do so. Marwood's words highlight that, for many characters in the play, their relationships––whether marriages, friendships, or allegiances––are purely strategic and transactional.

Let husbands be jealous, but let the lover still believe: or if he doubt, let it be only to endear his pleasure, and prepare the joy that follows, when he proves his mistress true. But let husbands' doubts convert to endless jealousy; or if they have belief, let it corrupt to superstition and blind credulity.

Related Characters: Fainall (speaker), Marwood

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Fainall and Mrs. Marwood have hatched a plan of their own, which involves blackmailing Lady Wishfort, disgracing Wilfull in front of Millamant, and exposing Foible's lies. Fainall has promised to share with Marwood the fortune he hopes to secure; when Marwood asks if he now feels confident of her fidelity to him and is no longer jealous of

Mirabell, Fainall claims that he was never jealous. In this passage, he declares "Let husbands be jealous," as long as this leads to even greater joy when husbands find out that their women were faithful after all.

Although he is ostensibly reassuring Marwood of his love for her, Fainall's speech here is decidedly sinister in nature. He speaks approvingly of "endless jealousy" and "superstition," paying no regard to the destructive power of these emotions. He seems to take a perverse delight in the carnage that can arise from jealousy and duplicity, which in turn suggests that all of the characters may on some level enjoy the endless drama and intrigue that results in a world of deceit, plotting, and revenge.

Act 4, Scene 15 Quotes

❝ Oh, what luck it is, Sir Rowland, that you were present at this juncture! This was the business that brought Mr. Mirabell disguised to Madam Millamant this afternoon. I thought something was contriving, when he stole by me and would have hid his face.

Related Characters: Foible (speaker), Lady Wishfort, Sir Rowland

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Wishfort has begun to read the letter aloud, thereby almost discovering that Sir Rowland is in fact not a real person. However, at the last minute Waitwell (still pretending to be Sir Rowland) starts reading the letter himself and manages to convince Wishfort that it is from Mirabell. In this passage, Foible remarks that it is lucky that Sir Rowland is present, reinforcing the notion that the letter is all some elaborate plot of Mirabell's. Although only seconds previously everything seemed to be on the brink of disaster, it has in fact been comically simple to persuade Wishfort that the letter was a false scheme concocted by Mirabell. This simplicity emphasizes the extent to which people are blinded by their prejudices against others.

Foible's comment that Mirabell "stole by me and would have hid his face" alludes to the symbol of masks. Her words highlight how easy it is to accuse people of behaving duplicitously, while Wishfort's gullible reaction shows how difficult it is to know if someone is telling the truth.

Act 5, Scene 6 Quotes

❝ ... I will be endowed, in right of my wife, with that six thousand pound, which is the moiety of Mrs. Millamant's fortune in your possession, and which she has forfeited (...by the last will and testament of your deceased husband...) by her disobedience in contracting herself against your consent or knowledge, and by refusing the offered match with Sir Wilfull Witwoud

Related Characters: Fainall (speaker), Lady Wishfort

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Fainall has entered the parlor in order to announce his demands to Lady Wishfort. In this passage, Fainall declares that he "will be endowed" with the full amount of Millamant's fortune, which Millamant has sacrificed by refusing the hand of Sir Wilfull and getting engaged without Wishfort's "consent and knowledge." Fainall is clearly in a rapture of triumph in this passage. After endlessly complicated manipulations, and having been thwarted in his scheme several times, Fainall clearly feels confident that everything will now turn out exactly how we wants, a sentiment conveyed by his use of the future tense ("I will be endowed"). Rather than bask in his joy graciously, however, Fainall behaves in a ruthless, domineering manner, evidently pleased by the opportunity to control and humiliate Lady Wishfort.

Act 5, Scene 14 Quotes

❝ From hence let those be warned, who mean to wed,
Lest mutual falsehood stain the bridal-bed:
For each deceiver to his cost may find
That marriage frauds too oft are paid in kind.

Related Characters: Mirabell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In the last moments of the play, Lady Wishfort has pardoned "Sir Rowland" and Foible, and blessed Mirabell and Millamant's engagement. The happy couple kiss, and Wishfort exits. Just as a dance is about to begin, Mirabell delivers these rhyming couplets, a warning to future

couples who are false and duplicitous. He claims that such couples ended up paying for their "marriage frauds" one way or another. It is of course somewhat ironic that a play filled with deceit, infidelity, secrecy, and disguise should end with a warning about "falsehood." On the other hand,

Mirabell and Millamant are shown to exhibit a sincere and mature love for one another, suggesting that theirs might truly end up a happy marriage and thus a positive example to others.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The actor who plays Fainall delivers the prologue in which Congreve complains about the high expectations of the audience and the general inability of the poet to please everyone. Congreve also promises that his play will be full of jokes but won't try to reform the audience.

By starting his play by complaining, Congreve lessens the pressure on himself as playwright. But this is also something of a ruse, as he is perfectly confident of his abilities and does not exactly keep to his word. His play does *try to reform the audience but uses humor to point out the vices of society. In having the actor who plays Fainall, rather than Fainall the character (or any other character for that matter, deliver the prologue, Congreve plays with the way that actor's are in fact only pretending to be the characters they portray and therefore emphasizes, in this play about plotting, scheming, and role-playing, that Congreve himself and the play he has created are the ultimate scheme, the plot behind the plot.*

ACT 1, SCENE 1

It is around midday in a London chocolate house, a fashionable meeting place for eighteenth-century gentlemen. Two men, Mirabell and Fainall, are playing cards. Fainall ends the game, though, when he senses that Mirabell's mind is preoccupied with something that's making him contemplative and grave.

Though to the untrained eye, the two men might seem like friends, this is no friendly game of cards. The men are rivals and the act of playing cards mirrors the competition of skill and bluffing that both men will soon engage in to win a huge fortune.

Fainall encourages Mirabell to confide in him about his uncommonly glum demeanor. Mirabell reveals that he's upset because the night before, while he was visiting his love, the popular and beautiful Millamant, both Millamant and her fifty-year-old aunt, Lady Wishfort, asked him to leave in front of their other guests, members of a semi-secret and mostly female society, or "cabal," led by Wishfort that gathers weekly to gossip about various townspeople. Fainall tries to soothe Mirabell, reminding him that Millamant has to go along with the wishes of her aunt, whom she lives with, because Wishfort, who is also Fainall's mother-in-law, controls Millamant's hefty fortune until Millamant gets married.

Fainall does not ask about Mirabell's feelings because he actually cares about him. He is more likely looking for information that might be useful to plot against Mirabell in the future. Meanwhile, this conversation sets out the stakes of the play—Mirabell's attempt to win Millamant's love and to marry her—and also establishes the social forces of family and money that complicate matters of love in Restoration England, when the play was written and set. At the same time, Fainall's knowledge of Wishfort and Millamant's financial affairs hint at his own interest in that money (Fainall is Wishfort's son-in-law, married as he is to Lady Wishfort's daughter).

Fainall also reminds Mirabell that he has only himself to blame for Wishfort's low opinion of him. Up until recently, Mirabell had been hiding his advances toward Millamant by also flattering Wishfort. Wishfort mistook Mirabell's flirtation as evidence that he loved *her*. Once Wishfort realized that Mirabell wasn't interested in her, her attitude toward him completely changed. Now, she seeks revenge by thwarting his efforts to court her niece.

Clearly, Mirabell is not completely innocent in this situation. He led Wishfort on, a woman who doesn't forgive easily, in order to get closer to her niece—a plan that makes Mirabell seem quite ruthless. However, Wishfort also comes off as vain and silly for thinking that the young and attractive Mirabell would be interested in her.

Mirabell refuses to blame himself for what happened. He notes that Wishfort only discovered the truth because it was revealed to her by Mrs. Marwood, a close family friend to both Wishfort and her daughter, Mrs. Fainall (Fainall's wife). Mirabell also hints that Marwood is more than just a friend to Fainall.

The world of love in Restoration at times becomes quite complicated. Fainall spoke of love and family and money, now Mirabell's hints about Fainall's infidelity suggest that beneath the "proper" world of Restoration society there is a world of affairs and secrets. Meanwhile, Mirabell and Fainall's conversation is full of oblique innuendos as the two of them jockey to gain information on and power over the other.

Fainall ignores Mirabell's insinuation that he's having an affair with Marwood. Instead, Fainall asks Mirabell for details about why Marwood might have motives for ruining Mirabell's hopes of winning Millamant's hand.

Fainall's question might seem to arise from his innocent curiosity, but in fact he is worried that Marwood sabotaged Mirabell's chances with Millamant because she *loves Mirabell too. In other words: Fainall worries that his mistress is cheating on him.*

Mirabell admits that he's confused by Marwood's sudden animosity toward him, as he never paid much attention to her. This answer, however, does not satisfy the jealous Fainall, who can't tell whether something more took place between Mirabell and Marwood. The conversation by this point is less friendly, and Fainall ends the conversation by suggesting they go and visit with their mutual friends, Petulant and Witwoud, who are lounging in an adjoining room. Mirabell declines, and Fainall exits.

Mirabell's confusion indicates that he clearly never held feelings for Marwood. However, Fainall's jealousy prevents Fainall from realizing this. Over the course of the conversation, the two men's mutual dislike becomes more apparent, though it is still hidden behind at least a modicum of social pleasantry.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

A messenger arrives at the chocolate house with important news for Mirabell: the secret wedding which he organized took place at the Duke's Place a few hours ago. Mirabell is pleased. The footman also gives Mirabell the marriage certificate and tells him that the clothes Mirabell ordered for Waitwell, Mirabell's manservant, are ready. Before the footman departs, Mirabell gives him further instruction for the newlyweds to meet him at Rosamand's Pond at one o' clock.

The messenger and secret wedding indicate that Mirabell wasn't at the chocolate house just to hang out. He's been waiting for this message all morning, which suggests he's up to something. Though what *he's up to isn't yet clear, it* is *clear that Mirabell is a clever and organized schemer. Moreover, Waitwell seems like he will play an important role in the plan. That Mirabell would order his servant a new and expensive suit certainly has more to do with intrigue than generosity.*

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Shortly after the messenger leaves, Fainall rejoins Mirabell and notes his improved mood. Mirabell responds only that he is engaged in a matter of "some mirth" that he is not yet prepared to divulge. Mirabell also mentions that he's glad that tonight isn't a "cabal-night." He asks Fainall whether he allows Mrs. Fainall to attend these "cabal" gatherings of Wishfort's. Fainall responds that he's not jealous of the company his wife meets at these parties because most of the women are relatives, like Millamant, his wife's cousin, and the men are pathetic. Mirabell disagrees with Fainall, suggesting that scandal arises precisely when women hang around with fools. Fainall responds by asking Mirabell whether that means he is jealous that Millamant often entertains their foolish friend, Witwoud.

The two men's verbal jousting continues, in which they seek to prove their wit while also ferreting out "dirt" on each other. Fainall doesn't realize that Mirabell's good news actually foretell Fainall's defeat and Mirabell's victory. Mirabell realizes it, however, and secretly finds it very funny to be congratulated by his opponent. Note how women and men have separate social circles where they gossip and talk about at each other—the women at Wishfort's cabal, the men at the chocolate house. Mirabell understands human nature better than Fainall. He knows that smart women, like Millamant, only surround themselves with fools for attention. But he also recognizes the way such behavior can harm a reputation.

Rather than arguing further with Fainall, Mirabell describes his love of Millamant. He explains that he loves the entirety of Millamant, both her charms and her flaws. This admission seems to surprise Fainall, who encourages him to marry her. However, Fainall warns Mirabell that when he becomes a married man, he should focus more on Millamant's faults than on her charms, if he wants to maintain his independence.

Mirabell's love for Millamant is mature and deep: he sees her for what she is and accepts her shortcomings. The depth of Mirabell's love for Millamant show that he is more than just a witty, charismatic trickster. Though the play is driven by his schemes, those schemes are driven by love. Fainall lacks such love, and in fact sees love not as a positive but as something that threatens to "capture" a man.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

While Mirabell and Fainall are in conversation, a messenger approaches Betty, the chocolate house waitress, who has been waiting on the two men. He tells her that he is there to deliver a letter to Witwoud from Sir Wilfull Witwoud, Witwoud's older and unfashionable half-brother from the countryside. Betty instructs him to do so.

Servants and attendants are often seen but not heard. Betty has been standing in the room the whole time that Mirabell and Fainall have been in discussion, but the men consider her part of the room and don't pay attention to her presence until they need to. This decision will come back to bite Marwood and Fainall when other, less discreet servants are ignored.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Having witnessed the exchange between Betty and the messenger, Mirabell and Fainall begin gossiping about Sir Wilfull. In particular, they criticize his plan to better himself by traveling abroad. During this conversation, Mirabell learns that Sir Wilfull is related to Mrs. Fainall and Millamant—his mother is Wishfort's sister. Fainall remarks that if Mirabell were to marry Millamant, then he, too, would be related to Sir Wilfull. If given a choice between being related to Wilfull or being his friend, Mirabell says that he would rather be related.

The men look down on Sir Wilfull's decision to travel for his education because they consider him too old to undertake the "continental tour" of Europe, which was typically undertaken by men who were coming-of-age. Mirabell's sentiment reflects the adage, "You can choose your friends but not your family." At the same time, this may be Mirabell's way of indirectly saying that he'd prefer to be married to Millamant, since that is what would make Wilfull his relative.

Fainall describes Sir Wilfull as an altogether lovable and harmless fool, with a penchant for drunkenness. Mirabell calls him "a fool with a good memory," whose lack of wit makes him exceptionally good-natured. According to Mirabell, Wilfull is unable to tell when he is the butt of the joke. Just then, Sir Wilfull's half-brother, Witwoud, enters the room.

The way in which the men describe Sir Wilfull emphasizes his lack of wit, thereby emphasizing their own wit and reaffirming their sense of superiority. They also remark on Sir Wilfull's inability to understand wit as a problem of translation: he doesn't understand London's culture.

ACT 1, SCENE 6

Witwoud joins the men and immediately takes over the conversation, remarking that he's not looking forward to Sir Wilfull's visit and stresses the fact that they are only step-brothers. Witwoud then says he doesn't want to dwell on the topic of his half-brother, and instead turns the conversation to Fainall, and compliments Fainall for having a happy marriage. Mirabell responds that Mrs. Fainall would draw a more accurate and vastly different picture of her marriage.

Witwoud, with his domination of the conversation followed by his humorous statement that he doesn't want to dwell on the topic he brought up, is immediately established as less witty than the other two men (which of course raises the question of just how non-witty Sir Willful must be). Mirabell's hint of the underlying dysfunction between Mr. and Mrs. Fainall reveals that he's on Mrs. Fainall's side. It also gives another view on love: that marriages aren't always as happy as they seem to outsiders, perhaps particularly for women.

Witwoud is shocked and scolds Mirabell for his impertinence, but then forgets what he meant to say next and apologizes for his poor memory. Mirabell warns him that fools often reveal themselves as fools by complaining about their poor memories.

Whereas Sir Wilfull has a good memory, Witwoud is clearly a fool with a bad memory. He is not savvy enough with repartee to admonish Mirabell using wit and so must use direct language.

The conversation turns to Petulant, who has recently won quite a bit of Witwoud's money in a game of cards. Fainall teases Witwoud that it's only fair that Petulant should have won Witwoud's money because Witwoud is the wittier of the two and always dominates conversations with Petulant. Mirabell tries to get Witwoud to bad mouth Petulant by suggesting that Petulant would not admit Witwoud is wittier. Witwoud is unwilling to insult his friend. However, the more he tries to defend Petulant, the more he begins to insult Petulant's character in the process of trying "excuse" his flaws.

Petulant lacks conversational skills but has practical skills, unlike Witwoud. Witwoud and Petulant, then, make quite a complementary pair. The two serve as comic relief in the play, and in portraying such non-wits Congreve establishes what wit is through its negative. Meanwhile, Mirabell incites Witwoud in order to get information out of him that will be helpful to his plot. Mirabell is good at reading people and knows what buttons to push to make them do what he wants.

Witwoud refuses, though, to name the particular flaw of Petulant's that most annoys him. This leads Mirabell and Fainall to suggest numerous defects in Petulant's personality: illiteracy, small vocabulary, etc. But Witwoud claims to actually admire these traits as they allow Witwoud to "explain his meaning." Finally, Mirabell hits close to the answer when he suggests that Petulant tells unbelievable lies because he doesn't have enough wit to invent more compelling lies. Witwoud laughs, responding that in fact he hates that Petulant never tells the truth at all, which to him is an unpardonable fault. 01000

The Way of the World is a comedy, and Witwoud and Petulant are meant to be comic fools. Here Witwoud, clearly a fool, indicates that he likes his friend Petulant's faults because they make Witwoud look wise. Witwoud does not put up with Petulant's compulsive lying because Petulant doesn't draw a distinction between lying to outsiders and his best friend.

ACT 1, SCENE 7

In the meantime, three women sitting in a coach just outside the chocolate house send a coachman in to inquire whether Petulant is there. Betty responds that he is indeed. The coachman, then, asks for refreshments for his passengers: two dishes of chocolate and a glass of cinnamon water.

The women in the coach are part of one of Petulant's ridiculous plots to make himself seem more popular than he is. Notably, they don't enter the chocolate house because, as women, they wouldn't be welcome inside.

ACT 1, SCENE 8

Witwoud observes the exchange between Betty and the coachman and comments to Mirabell and Fainall that Petulant actually hired the women outside to pretend to be his lovers and thereby make him look more popular. He then adds that Petulant often goes to even greater lengths in order to be noticed.

The women were hired by Petulant to call on him at public places in order to make him seem promiscuous and desirable to eyewitnesses. Just as the contrast offered by Petulant the fool highlights Mirabell's wit, Petulant's silly schemes emphasize just how sophisticated Mirabell's schemes are in comparison.

Witwoud explains Petulant's trick of "calling on himself" to a baffled Mirabell and Fainall. Petulant used to slip out of the chocolate house, rush home, disguise his appearance, and return to ask the staff at the chocolate house about where he could find Petulant, sometimes even going so far as to leave a letter for himself.

As his antics suggest, Petulant is a ridiculous fellow who cares a lot about what other people think about him. He will go to great lengths to make himself popular and become the object of gossip, whether good or bad, because he wants to have a reputation as a flirt and wit, like Mirabell. Of course, he isn't a wit, and so he can't have that reputation.

ACT 1, SCENE 9

When Petulant arrives he tells Betty to send the coach away, even if the women inside snivel and cry. Mirabell and Fainall of course, begin to tease him about his ill treatment of the three unknown women. Petulant doesn't seem to understand their subtle jokes, and talks about the women as if they were his former lovers. Witwoud periodically interrupts to clarify Petulant's meaning and supply him with more elegant words to use. Petulant, then, jokes that the three women are Witwoud's cousins and aunt: Mrs. Fainall, Millamant, and Wishfort, respectively. Rather than being offended, Witwoud laughs off Petulant's insult toward his family.

Petulant doesn't realize that Mirabell and Fainall know his secret, which makes him feel bold enough to mistreat the women. He has mistaken ideas about what it takes to be in gentlemanly society. Petulant takes the joke too far by insulting Witwoud's family and Fainall's wife. He doesn't know how to imitate a wit's personality and betrays his foolishness and crass nature instead. Meanwhile, Witwoud acts as Petulant's "translator," which he thinks makes him look intelligent. Everyone is trying to be witty, but only some people actually are.

Mirabell, however, half-jokingly, warns Petulant to stay away from Millamant. In response, Petulant suggests that he's not the biggest threat to Mirabell's courtship of Millamant. Mirabell presses Petulant for details. Petulant explains that at Wishfort's "cabal" the night before, he learned that Mirabell's uncle is coming to stay at Wishfort's and is the favored contender for Millamant's hand. He adds that Millamant's marriage to this uncle, who already has a bad relationship with Mirabell, would lead to Mirabell's disinheritance should the marriage produce a child.

At this point, things look bad for Mirabell, as he seems to be finding out more and more information that now threatens not just his chances with Millamant but his own wealth. Wishfort seems to favor this "contender" precisely because it would be most harmful to Mirabell.

Mirabell wants even more details, and tells Petulant that he will regard him as wittier than Witwoud, if Petulant reveals what he knows. Petulant demands that Mirabell admit, in public, that he, Petulant, has common sense. Mirabell promises to do what he can. Fainall, remarks that Mirabell seems worried about Petulant and Witwoud as competitors for Millamant's affections.

Mirabell knows that gossip operates by principles of trade: you have to give something to get something. Petulant wants Mirabell's stamp of approval because he thinks it will be more effective than his other schemes for gaining a reputation. Mirabell thinks it's just one more harebrained scheme. Fainall, meanwhile, enjoys what he thinks is Mirabell's discomfort.

Witwoud comforts Mirabell, though, explaining that Millamant laughs at Petulant's advances and that his own interest in Millamant is not serious. Though he admires her beauty, he claims that he cannot love Millamant because she's so inconsistent in her loyalties. For instance, she expressed interest in Mirabell's uncle at the cabal. Witwoud also reveals that Wishfort knows that Mirabell and his uncle don't get along and is planning to use this fact to develop a plot against Mirabell.

Fainall is trying to undermine Mirabell and make him feel insecure. Though Witwoud tries to reassure Mirabell by reminding him that he and Petulant are in fact bad matches match for Millamant, his comment about Millamant's inconstancy raises the possibility that she actually isn't a match for anyone.

After Witwoud's report, Mirabell invites Fainall to leave the chocolate house with him and go for a walk in the Mall. When Witwoud invites himself and Petulant along, Mirabell wonders aloud whether Witwoud should instead stay and wait for his half-brother. Witwoud responds that Wilfull is going to arrive at Wishfort's house that evening, at which point Mirabell gets to the point: he doesn't want to walk with Witwoud or Petulant at the Mall. He doesn't approve of the way they try to make female passersby blush with their suggestive and rude remarks. Petulant defends himself, arguing that the women who blush are either guilty of knowing too much about sex or are ill-bred.

Witwoud and Petulant lack the social graces to understand when they are or aren't invited along. Meanwhile, Petulant's defense about his suggestive remarks to women reveal two things: 1) his vulgarity; 2) more importantly, it captures the difficulties that women face socially with men, who both want them for sex and blame them for being anything other than completely innocent about sex.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Two friends Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood walk in St. James's Park, discussing men and love. Mrs. Fainall remarks that because men only love women temporarily, women would be better off to spurn men. Marwood disagrees—women would not last long, she argues, if they try to restrain their lust. She also advocates enjoying one's youth and falling in love: though such pleasures may only be short-lived, they are better to enjoy, even fleetingly, rather than not at all.

The philosophies of both women reflect their dealings with men. Mrs. Fainall views love pessimistically, while Marwood seems to see love in terms of pleasure and enjoyment rather than anything deeper. Her views are no doubt a product of her being an adulteress. Of course, Marwood is actually having an affair with her supposed friend Mrs. Fainall's husband, so there is a lie behind this entire interaction.

Mrs. Fainall is surprised by Marwood's philosophy, as it stands in contrast to the anti-men ideology of Wishfort's cabal. She accuses Marwood of hiding her true beliefs to appease Mrs. Fainall's mother, Wishfort. Marwood admits that this is true and urges Mrs. Fainall to be honest and admit that she agrees with Marwood's, view of men. But Fainall maintains her hatred of men, and under Marwood's questioning confirms that her hatred applies even—and completely—to her husband.

The members of Wishfort's group are now men-haters, a policy likely enforced as a sort of revenge after Wishfort discovered Mirabell didn't love her. Mrs. Fainall is quick to recognize Marwood's tendency to lie. Mirabell commented in the chocolate house that he thought Mrs. Fainall might not describe her marriage as happy—here is proof he was right. Mrs. Fainall's marriage likely influences her views of love.

Marwood switches her stance. She tells Mrs. Fainall that she, too, despises men and only lied about liking them to see if she could trust Mrs. Fainall. Marwood adds that in fact she hates men so much, she'd like to conduct an experiment in which she marries a man and then tricks him into thinking that she was carrying on an affair without actually doing so. By only pretending to make her husband a "cuckold," Marwood would be able to enjoy seeing her husband feel perpetually fearful and jealous and he would never be able to achieve closure by catching her in the act of being unfaithful.

Marwood is trying to feel Mrs. Fainall out and see if she can get her to trust her. Mrs. Fainall plays along to see what Marwood is up to. She doesn't actually trust her. This conversation is a mirror of the one between Fainall and Mirabell in the chocolate house, with two supposed friends trying to find out information on each other. Marwood's cold, deceitful experiment reflects her cruelty as well as her intelligence. Yet it also seems to suggest an even deeper hatred of men than any espoused by Mrs. Fainall.

Mrs. Fainall replies that it's too bad, then, that Marwood isn't married to Mirabell. Marwood blushes, and wishes aloud if only she were. When Mrs. Fainall notices Marwood's blush, Marwood quickly replies that she hates Mirabell. Mrs. Fainall does not buy Marwood's excuse and points out that she herself also hates Mirabell but doesn't blush at his name.

Mrs. Fainall's reply is meant to derail Marwood and help her find out why Marwood sold out Mirabell's efforts to win Millamant to Wishfort. Marwood's body betrays her lies by revealing her feelings for Mirabell on her face. Mrs. Fainall is sharp and witty, not one Marwood can trick as she tricks Wishfort (who is Mrs. Fainall's mother).

Marwood insists that she hates Mirabell, because he's so proud, but Mrs. Fainall insists Marwood is lying. Marwood responds that Mrs. Fainall also acts more like a friend to Mirabell than an enemy and that her coloration suggests that she likes Mirabell, too.

The characters are always concealing things from each other. This is the way of the world. Mirabell's charm and wit make him attractive to basically every woman.

Mrs. Fainall changes the subject, saying she feels sick because she has just spotted her husband walking toward them.

Mrs. Fainall changes the subject both because she knows she is in dangerous territory regarding Mirabell. At the same time, her hatred of her husband really is that intense.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Mirabell and Fainall, also walking in the park, have just seen Mrs. Fainall and Marwood and head towards them. Before the men are within earshot, Marwood jokes that Fainall has come to see his wife. Mrs. Fainall retorts that Fainall must be coming over for Marwood, since Mirabell is with him.

Marwood and Mrs. Fainall launch cheap parting shots at one another to try and unsettle the other before the men join them. They each point out the man who would make the other the most uncomfortable.

The married couple greets each other with pet names, like "my dear" and "my soul." Then, Fainall tells his wife that she looks ill. Mirabell gallantly says that Fainall is the only man who could think so, but Fainall responds that he's just concerned for her health.

The Fainall's pet names are for appearance's sake and not said with feeling. Fainall insults his wife while making it look like concern for her. Mirabell's better manners—and, generally, his underlying goodness—show through.


Mrs. Fainall ignores her husband's remark and addresses Mirabell, telling him that she wants to hear more about the subject he was discussing last night before Wishfort asked him to leave the cabal.

Mrs. Fainall is Mirabell's ally and is sending him a signal that she wants to speak with him about his plans by bringing up the topic in an indirect way.

Mrs. Fainall then adds that she doesn't want to walk with her husband, joking that by not walking with him she'd be avoiding a scandal. She and Mirabell walk off together, leaving Marwood and Fainall alone.

That Mrs. Fainall calls it a "scandal" to be seen walking with Fainall alludes to the fact that she and her husband don't spend much time together, so being seen with him in the park would have raised eyebrows. That a husband and wife walking together would be a scandal is a twist that the Restoration audience—interested as it was in marriage and deceit—would have enjoyed.


ACT 2, SCENE 3

Once alone with Marwood, Fainall comments that if he lived long enough to be "rid" of his wife, he would be miserable. Marwood is surprised, to which Fainall then clarifies: that if this one hope—actually getting rid of his wife—were ever to be accomplished, he would not have anything left to hope for and so he would feel wretched.

Both Fainall's wit and general awfulness are evident in his indirect speech, the way he can insult his wife that wouldn't be clear to a random passerby. Fainall's earlier comments to Mirabell about not getting trapped in marriage now have more context as his hatred of his marriage becomes clearer.


Marwood asks Fainall if he wants to follow Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell. Fainall does not. Yet Marwood encourages the idea because she has "a reason." Fainall immediately asks her if she's jealous. Marwood is puzzled, wondering who he thinks she's jealous of. Fainall responds: Mirabell.

Mirabell has insinuated that Fainall and Marwood are having an affair. Mrs. Fainall thinks Marwood loves Mirabell. Now it's clear that Fainall has similar suspicions about Marwood.

Marwood responds that in fact she is trying to protect Fainall's "honor." Fainall realizes her insinuation, that she believes Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall are more than friends. Marwood replies that she believes Mrs. Fainall does not actually hate Mirabell. Fainall claims to be unconvinced. And when Marwood says that Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall are probably deceiving him, he responds that he does sense that he is being deceived: he suspects that Marwood herself is deceiving him. He accuses her of being "false," or of pretending to love him.

Marwood thinks Fainall can't see that his wife might be keeping something from him, but as it will be revealed in a bit he just doesn't care. Fainall is focused on Marwood, not on his wife. Here is proof that he and Marwood are having an affair. But note how Fainall, a cheater himself, is so quick to jealousy, so quick to accuse others of cheating. Falseness seems to breed the sense that everyone is false, resulting in relationships not built on trust.

Marwood is shocked. Fainall accuses her of loving Mirabell and "dissembling," or hiding her love by pretending to hate Mirabell. He also tells Marwood he thinks that Mirabell is in love with her. He cites her blushing cheeks and "sparkling" eyes as signs of guilt.

Rather than question Marwood carefully, Fainall's jealousy leads him to see what he wants to see. Though he's right to feel suspicious about her motives, his emotions weaken his argument. Once again, the body is seen as betraying a truth that a person is trying to keep secret.

Marwood angrily denies Fainall's accusations. But Fainall persists: he says that he recognized and ignored Mirabell's "gross advances" toward Mrs. Fainall because, with his wife occupied, he could spend his time with Marwood without being suspected of cheating by his wife. He rebukes Marwood for thinking that just because he was ignoring his wife's indiscretions that he was equally blind to his lover's wandering eye.

Fainall's deceptions become clear: he wanted Mrs. Fainall to be deceiving him because it gave him cover to deceive her in turn. The entire marriage is based on lies. But he has a different standard for his marriage and his affair. He seems really to love Marwood, but this love makes him possessive, jealous, and angry.

Marwood asks him to tell her what, exactly, he is accusing her of. Fainall responds that she is guilty of "infidelity, with loving another, with love of Mirabell." Marwood demands he prove his "groundless accusation," and repeats that she hates Mirabell. Fainall thinks he knows why she hates him: because Mirabell is indifferent to Marwood's affection. He argues that she had no reason otherwise to interfere with Mirabell's chances of marrying Millamant, unless she did so out of spite.

Fainall makes good (and correct!) points here, though Marwood of course admits no such thing. This is the second instance of the play linking unrequited love with hate—both Marwood and Wishfort seem to have responded to Mirabell's lack of love to meet their own love with hatred and efforts to harm him.

Marwood again denies this, saying that her "obligations" as a friend to Wishfort, someone she could not stand seeing Mirabell toy with, led her to reveal to Wishfort his true intentions in flattering her. Fainall doesn't buy Marwood's explanation, mocking the idea of her "professed" friendship to Wishfort and denouncing "the pious friendships of the female sex!"

Marwood bases her defense on virtue and friendship. Painting herself as a loyal and dedicated friend, Marwood is also trying to make Fainall feel guilty for doubting her. But Fainall does not trust women or believe that a person in general can be intrinsically good. Opportunistic and conniving himself, he sees all people as opportunistic and conniving.

Marwood retorts that female friendship is "more tender, more sincere, and more enduring" than the "vain" and "empty vows" of men to their lovers and to one another. To this, Fainall reminds Marwood that she claims to be his wife's friend, too. Marwood responds angrily that Fainall has no right to reproach her, particularly about her friendship to his wife. After all, she reminds him, she has sacrificed a lot to be with him. Though false to her friend, she is faithful to him. She continues that he should be happy that she has been "vicious" to his wife given the development of their relationship. She then asks whether he is displacing his own guilt for cheating on his wife onto her.

Marwood argues that women in general are more trusting and loving than men ever are. When Fainall attacks her with her affair to him, she turns the argument around on him, saying that men *are what make her—and women in general—sacrifice their love and trust in each other. It is unclear if Marwood truly believes this, despite the fact that even at this moment she is lying to Fainall about her feelings for Mirabell, or if she's just trying to win the argument with Fainall.*

Fainall, chastened, says that Marwood misinterpreted him. He meant only to remind her of how she used to place even her closest relationships beneath her love to him. Marwood doesn't buy this explanation, and accuses him of wanting to cause her pain intentionally. Fainall responds that it's her "guilt" rather than her "resentment" that's made her angry. He says that if she actually loved him, she would forgive his jealousy. He adds that she's "stung" that he's discovered her secret love of Mirabell.

The argument seems to follow a predictable course: Fainall sort of apologizes while trying to make things Marwood's fault, Marwood guilt-trips him back, and then Fainall tries to use her love for him to guilt-trip her into forgiving him even as he also tries to make her admit that he was right all along! This spot-on portrayal of an argument/battle between men and women is the point – this is the way of the world.

Marwood angrily says she's going to reveal their affair to his wife and that she'd rather be exposed as an adulteress than allow Fainall's continued bad behavior. She says the world needs to know about the "injuries" he has done to her fame and fortune, both of which she entrusted to him. Fainall, shocked, responds that he has protected her fame and used her fortune on "pleasures" that they both shared.

Again it is unclear if Marwood is honest here—if she'd actually rather publically expose her adultery than be privately harassed by Fainall—or if this is just another tactic to defeat Fainall. Fainall discusses his affair in monetary terms. The "love" in this relationship seems based on surface things—"pleasures"—rather than the sort of deep love Mirabell described earlier in his feelings for Millamant.

Fainall adds that if Marwood hadn't been untrue, he would have repaid her expenses. He explains that if Marwood hadn't intervened, and Mirabell and Millamant had married without Wishfort's consent, Wishfort would've been so upset that she would've disinherited Millamant. Millamant's fortune would then have gone to Mrs. Fainall and Fainall would have had access to that money to spend on Marwood. Marwood doesn't believe Fainall. He implores Marwood to reconcile with him and with the "truth," but Marwood responds that he and "truth" are "inconsistent," and says she hates him.

Now Fainall's plotting is revealed: he was doing nothing to stop Mirabell because he saw how Mirabell marrying Millamant would make him money (it also shows how dependent Fainall is on women for money: he wants to pay back Marwood with his own wife's inheritance. For Fainall, money is not something that can secure a life of love, it and the pleasures it buys are the same as love. Marwood hypocritically wants her affair to be based on truth

Fainall replies that they must not part like this, and grabs her hands. Marwood tells him to let her go. Fainall apologizes, but Marwood doesn't care. He refuses to let her go. She again asks him to let her go, then tells him to break her hands, as she'd go to that length in order to get away from him.

Unable to use his words to keep her from leaving, Fainall must rely on his physical strength to restrain her. Though the violence doesn't go beyond what is shown here, in this display there is a suggestion of the physical threat that men pose to women.

Shocked to hear Marwood speak to him like this, Fainall promises her that he would never hurt her, but still does not let go of her. He asks her if there is no other hold than his physical restraint that keeps her standing there with him. He tells her he loves her. Marwood replies that she hates mankind, herself, and the "whole treacherous world."

Marwood and Fainall have incompatible ideas of the power structure of a relationship. Both want to dominate the other, rather than work together. Marwood's deeply bitter final comment suggests how much she hates her position. Her identity as a false friend and false lover contributes to her low self-esteem and pessimism about the entire world.

Fainall says she's being dramatic, but asks her forgiveness, and tells her not to cry. He accepts the blame for the situation and says that he couldn't love her and "be easy in [his] doubts" at the same time. He tells her he believes her and again apologizes. He promises to leave his wife and steal all her money. He also tells Marwood that they'll run away together and get married to get her to stop crying.

In Marwood's tears Fainall can finally see physical evidence indicating how much he has hurt her. Awakened to his brutish behavior, Fainall snaps back into a gentlemanly pose—though of course this pose involves stealing from and leaving his wife. And note how Fainall equates love with jealousy, the latter following naturally from the former

Suddenly, he sees Mirabell and his wife approaching. He urges Marwood to compose herself and hide her face behind a **mask** she has with her. Then, he guides her down a different path to avoid Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall.

Twice Marwood's face has revealed the truth behind her lies. Now she wears a mask to even more fully hide. The different paths of the couples suggest their growing opposition.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Mrs. Fainall and Mirabell watch Marwood and Fainall take another path in the park. Mrs. Fainall remarks that while she "only hated" Fainall, she could still bear to see him. But now that she "despise[s]" him, she can't stand the very sight of him. Mirabell lightly suggests that she hate "with prudence."

While Marwood and Fainall's interactions were full of lies and accusations, Mrs. Fainall is here speaking openly and honestly to Mirabell, who responds with advice. This is a relationship based on friendship.

Mrs. Fainall agrees, admitting she loved with "indiscretion." Mirabell suggests a formula of sorts for hating her husband: she should only feel as much disgust for her husband as it takes to appreciate her lover. Mrs. Fainall reminds Mirabell that he is the reason why she loved "without bounds." She asks him why he would set a limit on the "aversion" he has for her husband when Mirabell himself is the cause for her "aversion." She concludes by asking him why he "made her" marry Fainall.

Yet things get complicated as it becomes clear that Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall used to be lovers and that Mrs. Fainall still *loves Mirabell. One the one hand, this is an example of unrequited love leading to friendship and loyalty as opposed to Marwood and Wishfort's hatred. At the same time, there is a sense that Mirabell's advice about moderation is unfair given that he is the only one with moderate feelings.*

Mirabell tells her that marrying Fainall was a means of saving her reputation. He reminds her that if she had gotten pregnant while they were still carrying on their affair back when she was a widow, she would never have found a father for her child and a man willing to marry a pregnant widow.

For his part, Mirabell seems to have always liked Mrs. Fainall but never loved her—he never thought of marrying her. His plan to set her up with Fainall to protect her honor both reveals his concern for her and reveals how unfair society at the time was for women. Mrs. Fainall wasn't having an affair when she was with Mirabell. She was a widow! She wasn't doing anything wrong, and yet she was forced into a bad situation to protect her "honor."

Mirabell adds that he selected Fainall as a husband for her because he fit a certain type. Mirabell wanted someone who seemed good, but in reality was not. Mirabell didn't want to "sacrifice[e]" a better man but also didn't want someone who was known for having a bad reputation to marry his old lover. He concludes by reminding her that she knows the "remedy" when she is "weary" of him.

Mirabell's complicated thought-process here reveals his talent for elaborate plans. And that he wanted to protect Mrs. Fainall's honor does him some credit. The "remedy" is further evidence of Mirabell's planning skill and will become important at the end of the play.

Mrs. Fainall is not satisfied with this explanation and reproaches Mirabell, telling him that she "ought to stand in some degree of credit with him." Mirabell agrees, proving that he trusts her and needs her help by telling her that he will share his whole plan to marry Millamant and secure her fortune. He admits that in doing so, she has the power to advance or expose his scheme.

Mrs. Fainall recognizes, though, that Mirabell's planning rather coldly deposited her into a loveless marriage. Yet in contrast to the recriminations and lies between Fainall and Marwood, Mirabell responds to Mrs. Fainall's frustration by showing her how much he trusts and needs her: he makes her his full confidant in his plans and trusts she won't betray him.

Mrs. Fainall is intrigued and asks him whom he has chosen to play the role of his uncle, Sir Rowland, the same relation that Witwoud described as estranged from Mirabell. Mirabell reveals that Waitwell, his servant, will play the role. Mrs. Fainall suggests that he get Waitwell to persuade Foible to also help with the plot, at which point Mirabell informs her that he has already won over Foible by having the two servants marry each other in a secret ceremony that took place that very morning.

The mention of Mirabell's "fake uncle" suddenly reveals that the "uncle" mentioned back in the chocolate house was part of Mirabell's plan! In fact, it makes clear, that the entire scene in the chocolate house, in which things looked bad for Mirabell, was part of his plan! In this way, the play is similar to a heist film such as Ocean's Eleven. The entire play becomes a kind of play-within-a-play, as characters who think they are acting in their own interests are in fact already caught up in Mirabell's scheme and even the audience isn't as fully aware of what is going on as Mirabell is.

Mirabell explains that he decided to have the servants get married because he feared that Waitwell might try to betray him. Mirabell worried that Wishfort might try to marry his "uncle" in order to cut him, Mirabell, off from his supposed inheritance. Waitwell could then double-cross him by going through with the marriage to Wishfort in order to gain access to her wealth. But with Waitwell already married to Foible a marriage to Wishfort would be invalid.

Waitwell and Foible were the mysterious married couple Mirabell was waiting to hear news of. Mirabell has thought of almost every angle from which someone might try to ruin his plan. He uses his knowledge of people's weaknesses and personalities to design his plan and devise counter-measures, marks of a great mastermind. Note his awareness of the lure of money and how here he uses marriage to stop Waitwell from being swayed by it (but also, then, how marriage keeps Waitwell from jumping into the upper class).

Mrs. Fainall checks whether he would release her mother from the marriage by producing Waitwell's marriage certificate to Foible, if Wishfort proceeded to marry Sir Rowland/Waitwell.

Mrs. Fainall, though a good schemer herself and willing to help Mirabell, is not going to do so at the expense of her mother's reputation. Mrs. Fainall is a caring and dutiful daughter.

Mirabell adds that Wishfort would have to consent to his marriage to Millamant and release Millamant's fortune before he would produce the certificate. Mrs. Fainall, evidently in approval of the plan, informs Mirabell that her mother spoke just last night of marrying Millamant to Mirabell's uncle. Mirabell responds that this, too, is part of his plan. Foible suggested the idea to Wishfort, under his instruction.

In addition to Foible, Mrs. Fainall is Mirabell's eyes and ears at the cabal night meetings. Mirabell knows that the key to victory is ample support. Fainall, who only has Marwood's help and doesn't even really trust her, is at a significant disadvantage in this respect.

Mrs. Fainall thinks Mirabell's plan looks promising because her mother "will do anything to get a husband." Mirabell agrees, joking that Wishfort would marry "anything" resembling a man even though he were nothing more than "what a butler could pinch out of a napkin."

Lady Wishfort is established as hypocritical and ridiculous. Her man-hating cabal is founded entirely on resentment and despair about her own singleness. Of course, this leaves her open to Mirabell's manipulation.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

As he stands with Mrs. Fainall, Mirabell spots Millamant from afar. He compares the outfit she is wearing to a ship in "full sail," while he describes her companions, Witwoud and Mincing, her lady-in-waiting, as a "shoal of fools." Mrs. Fainall also describes Millamant's company with a nautical metaphor, describing Witwoud as an "empty sculler" who tows Mincing along.

Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall are eloquent and witty conversationalists. They are able to take what they see in life and express their ideas using poetic diction. Moreover, they are able to build off the wit of the other, as they craft quick responses to each other's metaphors.

Mirabell greets Millamant by remarking on the diminished number of friends she has following her these days. He teases her that she used to have the "Beau Monde" around her.

Mirabell is comfortable around the beautiful Millamant and takes charge of the situation. He is used to teasing her and reminding her that he is different from other men, neither afraid of her nor in awe of her presence.

Witwoud, not Millamant, responds to Mirabell's teasing. He quips that Millamant's male admirers used to gather around her "like moths about a candle." He also says that he is winded to the point that he almost "lost his comparison for want of breath."

Witwoud is not witty like Mirabell or Mrs. Fainall. He jokes in similes (rather clichéd ones), and needs the strict grammatical construction that simile requires in order to create a metaphor.

Millamant says she has denied herself "airs" today. She begins to set up her own simile, remarking that she walked "as fast through the crowd" but Witwoud cuts her off, completing her sentence by saying "as a favorite just disgraced, and with as few followers."

Millamant's puns on Witwoud's physical frailty shows that she is cleverer than he is but is unable to show it when around him because he always interrupts her. Witwoud is a typical over-talking man.

Millamant is annoyed with him for interrupting her and asks him for a "truce" with his "similitudes" because she is "as sick of 'em…" but is again cut off by Witwoud's simile: "as a physician of good air." Then Witwoud apologizes by saying that he cannot stop himself from completing her similes, though he admits that doing so is hurting Millamant's opinion of him.

Witwoud, unlike Petulant, is well aware of the effect of his humor on women. However, foolish behavior has become such a critical part of his personality that he cannot change his behavior to seem more gentlemanly in front of more elegant companions.

Millamant asks Mincing to stand between her and Witwoud's "wit" and Witwoud encourages Mincing to follow Millamant's command. For he is "like a screen before a great fire." He compliments his own wit, remarking that he "blaze[s] today" and is "too bright."

Witwoud continues to make puns and similes, pleasing himself (and himself alone) with his "wit." He considers himself brimming with intelligence and thinks that his jokes are on fire.

Mrs. Fainall changes the topic, asking Millamant, why she took so long to meet her at the park. Millamant complains that she did hurry to meet her but couldn't find her.

Mrs. Fainall, as a kindness to Millamant, tries to steer the conversation back toward Millamant, who has been interrupted a number of times by Witwoud's nonsense.

Mrs. Fainall enquires again what took Millamant so long to arrive at the park. Mincing reminds her that she stayed to look through a packet of letters. Millamant then explains that she was "persecuted" with letters sent by admirers. However, she says that she hates receiving them because no one knows how to write good letters anymore. She also says that she uses the letters to curl her hair.

Millamant is admired by many men and speaks of her letters to remind Mirabell of this fact. Millamant wants to seem aloof about her suitors. She is not easily impressed and doesn't seem to value the feelings of the men courting her. She literally uses her relationships with men (the letters) to make her more attractive.

Witwoud, interested, asks Millamant if pinning her hair with letters is the best way to curl hair. He also asks her if she uses all her letters to pin her hair, adding that he keeps copies of his letters. Millamant explains that she only uses letters composed of poetry to pin her hair, as prose letters never produce the perfect curls.

Witwoud's interest in this routine allows Congreve to advance the goal set forth in his prologue to point out problems in society, in this case vanity. Congreve isn't heavy handed, though, and uses humor to make his point: that poetry is better used as a device to curl hair than a good genre to read.

Mincing swears by using poetry to pin her lady's hair: it makes her curls "so pure and so crips." Feigning interest in her hair styling technique, Witwoud makes fun of Mincing's grammar by repeating her mispronunciation of the word "crisp." "Indeed, so crips?" he asks her to which she retorts that he's "such a critic."

Witwoud maliciously picks on the unlearned Mincing to feel superior, further evidence that he is more a fool than a wit. But Mincing isn't one to let someone like foolish Witwoud criticize her without responding. She is tough and principled.

Millamant, who up to this point has ignored Mirabell, finally addresses him. She asks him whether he was upset about being asked to leave the cabal last night. At first, she tells him that just thinking about last night makes her angry but then changes her mind and tells him that she's pleased that she asked him to leave because she gave him "some pain."

Millamant attempts to hurt and embarrass Mirabell in front of their friends by bringing up his disgrace. In doing so, she reveals a changeable personality and also a desire to seem independent and cold. She wants his dismissal to seem as much her doing as her aunt's.

Mirabell asks if it pleases her to give him pain. Millamant admits that it does – she "love[s] to give pain." Mirabell responds that she's pretending to be cruel in a way that isn't "in her nature." He tells her that her "true vanity" is "in the power of pleasing" rather than causing people pain.

Mirabell sees right through Millamant's front. He claims to know her better than herself, which is incredibly infuriating for a woman as strong-willed as Millamant. Mirabell begins purposely pushing her buttons because he likes arguing with her and making her think.

Millamant asks him to forgive her for being a people pleaser because she thinks that "one's cruelty is one's power." She adds that when a person loses the ability to be cruel that person loses power. Without one's power, she concludes, "one's old and ugly."

Millamant's philosophy that cruelty guarantees power and independence is one that she will be forced to reconcile with throughout the play. Once she realizes that she doesn't need to be mean to get her way, she begins to mature.

Mirabell critiques her philosophy arguing that if she persists in being cruel, she will actually ruin the object of her power, her lover, and then will be nothing but a "vain," "lost thing." He continues that she won't be "handsome" once she's lost her lover because without her lover, her beauty "dies upon the instant." He reminds her that it is the lover that makes a woman beautiful and not the mirror. He argues that even an ugly, old woman could discover her beauty in her mirror after a lover flattered her because it is the lover's suggestion that allows the woman to discover her own beautiful features.

Mirabell's argument that it is love rather than power or objective physical attraction that provides beauty is in some sense idealistic and an argument against vanity, and in another deeply self-serving as it makes a woman dependent on a man's love in order to be beautiful. Both Millamant and Mirabell's wits are in full evidence during their back-and-forth.

Mirabell's outlook annoys Millamant, who exclaims to Mrs. Fainall about the "vanity of these men," who believe that feminine beauty comes from the compliments of men. Millamant argues that men would not flatter women if they weren't already beautiful and also that women can replace their old lovers with new ones as "fast as one pleases."

Millamant turns around the accusation of vanity that Mirabell has leveled against women, recognizing that by claiming it is men who give women beauty through their love that he is being just as vain about men's role and importance. Millamant at this point doesn't see a relationship as a two-way partnership but more as an occasional tryst that reminds her of her popularity (though it's not clear if she's being honest).

Mirabell sarcastically compliments Millamant's confidence in her power to create her lovers, but Millamant remarks that women owe their beauty to a lover no more than one owes one's wit to an echo. Lovers, like echoes, she explains, can only "reflect" what's already there. Lovers and an echo are, therefore, she remarks, "vain empty things."

Neither Mirabell nor Millamant can be said to be entirely wrong. There is a real tension between men and women that the play explores, and that tension creates attraction but is also a representation of the way that men and women actually do impact each other's independence, self-esteem, etc. This tension is the way of the world.

Mirabell retorts that women owe "those two vain empty things" the "greatest pleasures of [her] life." Millamant asks him how this is so. Mirabell explains that women owe their lovers the pleasure of hearing themselves praised and an echo the pleasure of hearing themselves talk.

Mirabell is arguing that men and women need each other and sees in Millamant the perfect complement to his personality, though she herself does not see it yet (or refuses to see it).

Witwoud, again interrupts the conversation, to tell a silly story about a woman who talked so much without stopping that her echo has to wait until her death to repeat her. Millamant dismisses Witwoud story as "fiction" and urges Mrs. Fainall to depart with. But at Mirabell's discreet request, Mrs. Fainall asks to speak with Witwoud so that Mirabell can have a moment to speak with Millamant alone.

Witwoud, who has been uncharacteristically quiet, has been listening to Mirabell and Millamant's intense debate, waiting for an opportunity to add his two cents—which are immediately obvious as less interesting and intelligent than anything Mirabell or Millamant have been saying. This allows Millamant a chance to extricate herself from Mirabell's probing conversation and steady gaze and return to safer topics of conversation. Mrs. Fainall, Mirabell's helpful agent, takes up Mincing's role as the screen that excludes Witwoud.

ACT 2, SCENE 6

Mrs. Fainall and Witwoud depart, leaving Mirabell, Millamant, and Mincing. Mincing is ignored for the entirety of the scene and doesn't speak. Mirabell tells Millamant he wants a "little private audience" with her. He believes that she sent him away from the cabal, even though she knew he was visiting her in order "to impart a secret to [her] that concerned [his] love."

This is the first time that Mirabell and Millamant have been alone together (despite Mincing's presence) for some time. Mirabell uses this time strategically to find out Millamant's attitude toward him and the reason for her coldness.

Millamant retorts that he saw she was "engaged." Mirabell exclaims she was entertaining a "herd of fools," men who have no wit, and is shocked that she can "find delight in such society" who are unable to admire her properly. Or, if they are able to admire her, he continues, then it should be embarrassing to her because "to please a fool is some degree of folly."

Millamant wants Mirabell to think that she doesn't care about him at all so she says and does things that she knows he doesn't like to further emphasize her independence. Mirabell knows that this is what she's doing and reminds her that fools are unsuitable company for a woman of her intellect.

Millamant replies that she pleases herself and that "besides, sometimes to converse with fools is for [her] health." Mirabell is outraged. He asks her if there is "a worse disease" than speaking to fools. Millamant replies that the "vapours" are worse because fools use them along with "assafoetida," a strong-smelling root, to treat their ailments.

During the course of their argument, Mirabell and Millamant demonstrate great chemistry. Both are incredibly stubborn and passionate. Even though they're in strong disagreement, they are able to hold a stimulating and witty conversation.

Mirabell asks her if she's following a "course of fools" as a medicinal regimen. Millamant warns him to back off, and that if he persists speaking to her with "this offensive freedom," he will "displease" her and she will "resolve after all not to have [him]" because they won't be able to ever agree.

When Mirabell persists in arguing after Millamant is ready to stop, however, she quickly cuts back to the real topic at hand, the possibility of their engagement, and uses it to coerce Mirabell into silence.

Mirabell admits that they may not ever agree on matters of health, but Millamant continues to criticize their relationship in general. She tells him that in terms of their "distemper" they will also disagree and grow "sick of one another." She admits that she doesn't like to be corrected and won't "endure to be reprimanded nor instructed." She finds it "dull" to follow the advice of others and "tedious" to be told of her flaws. Having explained her views on why their relationship is doomed, Millamant decides to call it off, telling Mirabell that she is "resolved" to let him go. After breaking up with him, she laughs in his face. She asks him what he would give to stop loving her.

Earlier in the chocolate house, Mirabell said that he loves Millamant for both her virtues and her flaws. Here Millamant lists her own flaws as reasons that their relationship is doomed. She doesn't realize that Mirabell loves her for those flaws. There is a sense here that Millamant is scared to enter a relationship and give up her freedom—or doesn't yet have Mirabell's mature sense of love—and that she relies on making Mirabell feel bad when she breaks up with him because it preserves her reputation as an independent woman and lessens the risk of feeling painful regret for her rash decisions later on.

Mirabell responds that he would give something that would let her know he could not help loving her. Millamant scolds him gently, telling him not to "look grave" and then asks if he has anything to say to her by way of an apology. Mirabell does not apologize to her but, instead, complains that "a man may as soon make a friend by his wit, or a fortune by his honesty, as win a woman with plain-dealing and sincerity."

Mirabell, patient with her weaknesses, responds sincerely. He wears his emotions on his face, which demonstrate how much he cares about her. Interestingly, Mirabell, in this sincere moment, claims that it is impossible to actually win a woman through sincerity—that it requires wit and banter and some game-playing.

Millamant teases Mirabell, telling him not to look "inflexibl[y] wise" like King Solomon does when he orders the baby boy to be cut in half to give to the two women who both claim to be his mother. Mirabell gravely tells her that she is being "merry" at a time when she needs to be serious.

Millamant relies on joking at this serious time to lighten the tension between them. Mirabell, usually not one to be grave himself or ask others to be serious, has lost his patience with her lighthearted attitude. In asking her to be serious, he is trying to get her attention.

Millamant calls him tedious for being so serious and bids him farewell. She sees Mrs. Fainall and Witwoud from a distance and says that she is going to join them.

Millamant, too concerned with her own pleasure, would rather spend time with those of similar lighthearted temperament.

Again, Mirabell urges her to stop being so "merry" for a moment and try to act serious. But Millamant interrupts him and asks him whether he wants her to be serious so he can tell her about Foible's marriage and his own plot to marry Millamant. Mirabell is shocked, and asks how she discovered his plan. Millamant shoots back that she either learned of it on her own or either through the help of the devil herself, Foible. And, she adds, when he's done thinking about that, then he should think of her. She leaves him to join Mrs. Fainall and Witwoud, taking Mincing with her before Mirabell can finish what he was trying to say to her.

Millamant is a force to be reckoned with. She is a good actress, convincing enough to fool Mirabell, the most perceptive character in the play. Having known all along about Mirabell's plan, her behavior towards him is all the more problematic for Mirabell's intentions. It truly seems like she doesn't want to marry him and doesn't really care about his feelings. Her unceremonious goodbye only emphasizes her disinterest.

ACT 2, SCENE 7

Now alone, Mirabell reflects on what just transpired between him and his love. He tells himself that a whirlwind offers more consistency than Millamant. He complains further about the craziness of love and loving strong-willed women. Yet, in spite of knowing this, men still love and "play the fool by force of instinct," exclaims Mirabell.

Though he can clearly see how loving Millamant is hurting him and goes against reason, seeing as she is so unwilling to love him in return, he cannot help but love her. Mirabell reconciles his unreasonable love for Millamant with his understanding that the course of love is not smooth or easy to traverse for anyone, which makes his frustration more bearable.


Suddenly, he sees his "pair of turtles," the newly married Foible and Waitwell. He calls out, teasing them by asking if they are still celebrating Valentine's Day.

Even as he contemplates his own problems in love, Mirabell spots the two characters who he directed into a kind of arranged marriage, bringing another kind of love into view in the next scene. Also, his delight at seeing them suggests he is undaunted in continuing with his scheme.


ACT 2, SCENE 8

It is now one o' clock and Waitwell and Foible have arrived at Rosamond's pond to meet Mirabell. Mirabell jokes that Waitwell seems to think that he was married to Foible for his own "recreation" rather than Mirabell's "conveniency."

Mirabell has essentially organized the marriage to serve his needs and is paying the couple handsomely for their participation. As such, he requires them to work for him and manages their time until the plan is successful.


Waitwell apologizes. He admits that he and his new bride have "been solacing in lawful delights" but that they both have an "eye to business" and are ready to follow his orders. He tells Mirabell that if Foible can follow Mirabell's directions as well as she follows his own instructions when they have marital relations, then Mirabell's plan will succeed.

Waitwell always defers to Mirabell. He is a good and faithful servant, eager to serve. And yet it's obvious that Waitwell and Foible have been vigorously enjoying their new, marital relations. Their love, which seems real despite its artificial origins, is deeply physical, and Waitwell even defines his wife's sexual willingness in terms of faithfulness and duty.

Mirabell congratulates Foible on her marriage. Foible, though, is worried: she is "ashamed" because she left her lady, Wishfort, without telling her where she was going or what she was doing. Waitwell affirms that his wife did try to get back to Wishfort's but that it's his fault that she's late in getting back. Mirabell slyly responds that he can believe that Waitwell had a lot to do with Foible's delay.

Foible is just as loyal and hardworking as her new husband but is the brains of the pair (in the play women are usually, though not always, smarter than the men). She is extremely clever and knows that serving Mirabell before Wishfort will be the best means of achieving a better life. She is also an adept liar and a good secret-keeper, judging from her participation in Mirabell's schemes while working for Wishfort, who hates Mirabell.

Foible changes the topic back to the issue at hand: Mirabell's plan to marry Millamant. She tells Mirabell that she promised to bring Wishfort a picture of Mirabell's (fake) uncle, Sir Rowland. She also plans on lying to Wishfort that, after seeing *her* picture, Sir Rowland was so overcome by her beauty that he burns with impatience to meet her. Mirabell praises Foible's clever idea, attributing her eloquence in matters of love to her marriage. Waitwell also agrees and tells Mirabell that he thinks she has "profited" from the marriage.

Foible is able to take initiative to further Mirabell's plans on her own because her ideas are always really good additions to Mirabell's plans. Like Mirabell, she is good at reading people and knows how to use the information about people's characters to manipulate them into doing what she needs them to do. In this way, she is able to coerce the naïve and trusting Wishfort very easily. And yet both men attribute Foible's good ideas here as resulting from her marriage rather than from her own smarts! In this light it is understandable why Millamant might be leery of getting married.

Then, Foible asks Mirabell if he has seen Millamant. She tells him that she decided to tell Millamant of Mirabell's plan because she was afraid that Mirabell would be unable to find a chance to, particularly because male admirers often surround Millamant. Mirabell again praises Foible for her diligence and good ideas, and as a reward gives her some money. Foible thanks him, calling herself his "humble servant." Waitwell turns to his wife and begins to ask her to give it to him.

Mirabell knows that good behavior needs to be rewarded. The trusting relationship he develops with his allies is based on a system of immediate financial compensation and also promises of long-term payouts. The way of the Restoration world seems very businesslike. It is a society based on financial incentive and cooperative partnerships.

Mirabell steps in and tells Waitwell to back off. The money is only for Foible, he warns. He tells her to prosper and promises to reward her with a lease to a well-stocked farm, if their plan succeeds.

Mirabell is harder on his own servant than Foible. It seems that he doesn't quite trust Waitwell and wants to preserve the servant-master relationship.

Foible thanks him and assures him that they will succeed. She asks if he has any more directions for her before she heads back to Wishfort, whom she guesses is waiting for help to get dressed for dinner. Just then, she thinks that she spots Marwood walk by wearing a mask. Foible worries that Marwood might have seen her with Mirabell and will tell Wishfort. She hastens home to prevent her from doing so.

Foible is observant, a very useful skill given the high-stakes intrigue Mirabell has developed. Not even the mask can prevent her sharp eyes from recognizing an enemy. Foible knows that Marwood is not trustworthy and believes that Marwood would sooner try to gain Wishfort's confidence than give Foible the benefit of the doubt.

ACT 2, SCENE 9

Mirabell and Waitwell are left standing near the pond. Waitwell jokes that Foible forgot to call him by his new name, Sir Rowland. Mirabell encourages him to transform into Sir Rowland soon. Waitwell assures him he will give such a convincing performance that he himself will forget his own identity. He reflects on his strange and eventful day, one in which he has been "married, knighted, and attended," and predicts that it will be quite difficult to recover an "acquaintance and familiarity with [his] former self." He suddenly realizes, however, that even when he stops pretending to be Sir Rowland, he won't even be exactly the same Waitwell because he's a newly married man and actually can't be his "own man again."

Waitwell jokes that in pretending to become Sir Rowland—a man of a different class—he will have an identity crisis. But this joke is then turned on its head with his realization that after he stops pretending to be Rowland he still won't be the same Waitwell he was before because now he is married. Again and again the play forwards an idea that marriage and its responsibilities to and joining with another is something that changes a person into something new and different. It is precisely this changing that both Fainall and Millamant seek to avoid with their thoughts of maintaining independence, though Fainall does that by lying to his wife and being cold to her while Millamant wants to avoid marriage entirely.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

At home and sitting at her dressing table, Wishfort asks her servant, Peg, if she's heard from Foible yet. When Pegs says no, Wishfort complains that her constant worrying is ruining her complexion and making her look pale. She demands that Peg fetch her "the red." Not understanding that Wishfort wants her makeup, Peg asks her if she wants "ratafia," a cherry brandy. After Wishfort scolds her for being impertinent, Peg informs her that she can't get the makeup because Foible has the key to its cabinet. This being the case, Wishfort dejectedly asks for the cherry brandy.

Wishfort is immediately established as utterly foolish. She is a vain and needy woman, and yet because she is wealthy those around her must pretend that she is beautiful and independent or suffer because of her bad moods. Innocent and clueless Peg does not understand that she needs to humor Lady Wishfort and is heavily abused by Wishfort, who thinks she is an idiot (when it is Wishfort who seems the most foolish).

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Peg has left to get the brandy. Alone in her dressing room, Wishfort again criticizes the paleness of her skin. She yells for Peg, "the wench," to hurry up, asking her if she's taking so long because she's sneaking a taste of the brandy.

Wishfort, though she hates her natural complexion and knows she looks old, doesn't realize that makeup isn't helping her to look more attractive. She looks to short term fixes to take her mind off her woes.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Peg returns, explaining that she was looking for a cup. Wishfort complains about the size of the cup she brings, saying that Peg must think her a "fairy" to drink out of an "acorn" sized cup. Finally Wishfort tells Peg to pour her a drink, but they are interrupted by a knock at the door. Wishfort orders Peg to see who it is but then calls her back to first hide the bottle before she answers the door. It's Marwood. Wishfort tells Peg to invite her inside.

The foolish Peg's innocence invites her tormenter Wishfort to rain down abuse on her. However, though Wishfort's criticisms of Peg are funny and Wishfort thinks herself vastly superior to her young servant, she herself is not any wiser than Peg. And, like Peg, she often makes more mistakes than she gets things right.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Marwood greets Wishfort and says she's surprised to see her still wearing her morning clothes. Wishfort replies that Foible has been away since morning and left no note as to her whereabouts or when she would return. Marwood says that she just saw Foible in the park talking to Mirabell.

It doesn't take much for the news of Foible and Mirabell's conference in the park to be brought up. Importantly, Marwood doesn't lead with this news but brings it up casually. Perhaps she doesn't yet suspect Foible, or perhaps she's being patient as she pieces things together.

Wishfort is shocked, exclaiming that Mirabell makes her so angry that just the sound of his name brings blood to her face. Then Wishfort worries that Foible might have told Mirabell about an important errand Wishfort had sent Foible on, an errand that needs to be kept secret from Mirabell.

Wishfort is not one to keep a secret from Marwood. She has been waiting for someone to whom she could complain to about Mirabell and Marwood, who we know is lying to her, is her favorite confidant. The errand Wishfort mentions of course relates to Sir Rowland, meaning that this "secret" from Mirabell is in fact all part of Mirabell's plan, creating a scene of dramatic irony in which the audience knows more than the characters onstage.

Marwood reassures Wishfort of Foible's integrity. But Wishfort replies that integrity is no match for Mirabell's cunning. She says that Mirabell could wheedle the truth out of even Foible if he felt that there was something to gain.

Now that she has experienced Mirabell's cunning first hand, Wishfort is not eager to repeat her mistake. She is rightfully cautious toward anyone who has dealings with Mirabell. At the same time, she completely underestimates Foible's ability to be duplicitous, perhaps because she just trusts women or because she thinks that the lower classes are just naturally loyal to their "masters."

While talking to Marwood, Wishfort hears Foible approaching. She urges Marwood to hide in a closet while she, Wishfort, interrogates Foible about why she was talking to Mirabell.

This is an important event in the play. Marwood's hidden location will deepen the intrigue and create significant problems for Mirabell's plan.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

When Foible enters, Wishfort rushes to question her about what kept her away so long and whether she's told Mirabell anything. Foible lies, saying that she's given Wishfort's picture to Sir Rowland, who fell immediately in love with her. Foible promises Wishfort that she hasn't betrayed her to Mirabell, but does add that Mirabell insulted Wishfort by saying that she's hatching a plot to marry a rich man to improve her finances.

Foible is easily a match for Wishfort's questioning. The "insult" Foible makes up for Mirabell is funny for a few reasons: 1) Mirabell's pretend anger is about a plot he himself made up, which Wishfort doesn't know 2) Wishfort doesn't want to marry Sir Rowland in order to get rich, she wants to do it in order to get revenge on Mirabell by making him poor!

Wishfort vows to murder Mirabell by poisoning his wine. Foible proposes that Wishfort instead "starve him" by marrying Sir Rowland, which will disinherit Mirabell. Foible adds that Mirabell still thinks that Wishfort's plan is to marry Millamant to Sir Rowland and doesn't suspect Wishfort's interest. Wishfort is so angry that Mirabell thinks he can interfere with her plans that she vows to marry Sir Rowland tomorrow and be engaged to him by tonight.

Foible has to talk Wishfort down from taking irreversible and criminal action. She highlights the long-lasting and painful consequences of her alternative plan of starving Mirabell in a way most likely to appeal to Wishfort's vindictive nature. Wishfort complies immediately, and now it looks like Mirabell's plan will come off without a hitch.

Foible also informs Wishfort that Rowland longs to see her, but Wishfort can't stop talking about her revenge against Mirabell. Her excitement spoils her makeup, and she blames this on Mirabell too. She gets Foible to "repair" her makeup to make her look like her picture.

Wishfort's excitement about her revenge reveals that her "love" for Rowland is in fact a warped displacement of her unrequited love for Mirabell. Her focus on looking like her picture recalls Mirabell's comment that beauty should come from love rather than be thought of as a tool to entice love (though of course many women might argue that that's easy for a man like Mirabell to say).

Wishfort wonders how Rowland will try to court her. Will he be obvious about his love or play it coy, expecting *her* to pursue *him*? She hopes that he won't expect her to make the first move because she's old-fashioned. She tells Foible that she will act slightly disdainful and a little scornful to excite his interest. Foible agrees that this is a good plan.

Wishfort wonders about the (somewhat clichéd)"games" of love Rowland will play, all while planning to play her own games to seem more innocent and proper than she is. Foible, meanwhile, humors Wishfort, as her mistress giddily plans out how she will woo a man who is, in reality, Foible's husband.

Wishfort is not done talking, however. She goes on to say that acting tenderly, with "a sort of dyingness" is a special skill she has to intrigue men, one that her niece, Millamant, only "affects." She begs Foible to tell her more about Rowland, particularly whether he is handsome. She is happy to hear that he is a "brisk" man and bets that he will make all the moves. Wishfort leaves Foible to clean the dressing table.10000

"Dyingness" likely means a lazy, relaxed, indifferent demeanor around men to entice their interest. That Wishfort thinks her own use of this "technique" exceeds Millamant's only makes her seem more foolish. Wishfort is all obvious show, all overdramatic faints and swoons.

ACT 3, SCENE 6

After Wishfort leaves the room, Mrs. Fainall enters to warn Foible that Marwood saw her with Mirabell in the park and will tell Wishfort. Foible plays it coy because she does not know whether Mrs. Fainall is in on Mirabell's secret plan to marry Millamant. Mrs. Fainall reveals that she knows about Mirabell's entire plan, including Foible's marriage to Waitwell that very morning.

Another case of dramatic irony, as all of Foible's precautions to figure out Mrs. Fainall's allegiances are ultimately useless because Marwood is hidden in the closet. As Mrs. Fainall reveals everything she knows about Mirabell's plan to prove her trustworthiness, that plot is in fact falling apart because Marwood is learning all about it.

Foible explains that she wasn't sure whether Mirabell told Mrs. Fainall the entirety of his plan to marry Millamant. She compliments Mirabell for being such a good gentleman and Mrs. Fainall for being so generous, and adds that Mrs. Fainall still "has his heart." Foible also updates Mrs. Fainall on Wishfort's eagerness to get married.

Foible apologizes for doubting Mrs. Fainall and regains her favor by remarking on how important Mrs. Fainall is to Mirabell and alluding to her former relationship with Mirabell. As Foible updates Mrs. Fainall on the progress of Mirabell's plan, she solidifies their sense of solidarity.

Before leaving the room, Foible asks Mrs. Fainall to give Mirabell an update about Wishfort's interest in Rowland and that Marwood seems to be watching them. Mrs. Fainall exits with Foible, taking the servant's staircase to avoid running into Marwood.

Foible's fear that Marwood is watching them is an instance of dramatic irony because Marwood is literally watching them right now, though only the audience realizes it.

ACT 3, SCENE 7

Marwood comes out of her hiding place in the closet, having heard everything Foible and Mrs. Fainall said. She vows to watch Foible more closely and reflecting that her suspicion that Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall were once lovers has now been confirmed. She spies Wishfort coming back.

Everything she has suspected was true and she has information useful to Fainall, who still slightly doubts her fidelity.

ACT 3, SCENE 8

Wishfort apologizes to Marwood for forgetting her in the closet. Marwood responds that she has been well entertained. Wishfort informs Marwood that her nephew, Sir Wilfull, is coming to visit before going to travel across Europe to improve his mind. Marwood responds that since Willful is forty, he should think about getting married instead and suggests that he and Millamant would make a good match. Wishfort promises to think about that idea more, especially because she values her judgment.

Marwood begins to act on the new information she has gained right away by once again, interfering with Millamant's (and Mirabell's) love life. Yet her action is one of short-sighted spite: she's looking for the quickest way to frustrate Mirabell's goals and has not yet concocted a master plan to steal Wishfort's fortune. Her hastily made marriage suggestion will later actually turn out to be useful to Mirabell later. Note how she doesn't actually tell Wishfort anything, though; she just uses the woman who thinks she is her friend.

ACT 3, SCENE 9

Foible reenters the dressing room to announce the arrival of Witwoud and Petulant for dinner. Wishfort implores Marwood to entertain the men, while she finishes getting dressed.

Marwood, like Foible, is Wishfort's right hand and is often expected to take a leading role in running the household.

ACT 3, SCENE 10

Marwood leaves Foible and Wishfort to entertain the guests but finds, not Witwoud and Petulant, but rather a very angry Millamant and her servant Mincing. Millamant greets Marwood and complains that Petulant upset her so much by contradicting everything she said that she broke her fan. If only one could change acquaintances like one changes clothes, Millamant muses, life would be better. Marwood responds that then fools could occasionally be worn as accessories. She then adds that she thinks that Millamant surrounds herself with fools to hide her affair with a "lover of sense," Mirabell, and that Millamant should go "barefaced" by revealing to the town what they already suspect: that she has cultivated relationships with Petulant and Witwoud to disguise her true feelings.

When she isn't enjoying the company of her fools, Millamant is usually complaining about them. Here Marwood calls Millamant out on her inconstant attitude toward Mirabell and reveals that she knows that Millamant is actually afraid of showing the town that she cares about Mirabell. The women have this discussion almost entirely in metaphor, so Marwood is not only schooling Millamant about how to behave toward men, she's proving that she's more than capable of taking up Millamant's fancy way of talking, while chastising her.

Millamant is annoyed with Marwood's honesty and tells her so. She tells Mincing to invite Witwoud and Petulant up because she would rather be in their company than lectured by Marwood.

Millamant realizes that she in danger of losing the argument so to prove her belief in the philosophy that fools provide good company she invites the men upstairs.

ACT 3, SCENE 11

Once Mincing departs, Millamant angrily responds that Mirabell's love for her is no more a secret than it is a secret that Marwood revealed his love for her to Wishfort because Marwood is in love with Mirabell herself. Mrs. Marwood retorts that Millamant is upset and should calm down before she breaks another fan.

Once Mincing leaves, the argument takes a nasty turn. Millamant is openly angry and tries to strike Marwood in a soft spot, her love for Mirabell. But Marwood, perhaps because she knows the details of Mirabell's plot, is much calmer and so has a much cleverer response. Millamant's anger reveals her actual love for Mirabell.

Millamant laughs in Marwood's face, and claims that Mirabell's love for her, which she seems not to care about, has made him so upset and morose. She tries to convince Marwood that she isn't encouraging Mirabell's love because she doesn't care about him, but Marwood doesn't believe her. Marwood tells Millamant to tell Mirabell that she hates him.

Millamant usually laughs when she's uncomfortable or has nothing clever to say and so chooses to seem mean instead. Here it is both these reasons that cause her to laugh in Marwood's face. The laughter doesn't seem to bother Marwood much, though.

Again, Millamant laughs at Marwood, commenting that she's surprised that Mirabell loves her, Millamant, when Marwood is as beautiful and as young as she. Marwood threatens that Millamant's happiness will run out sooner than she thinks.

Millamant's comment that Marwood is just as young and beautiful as Millamant suggests that beauty and youth alone are not *enough to create love. Notably, this is the opposite of what Millamant argued to Mirabell in Act 2, Scene 6. Perhaps Millamant is realizing that Marwood's cruelty is what makes her uninteresting to Mirabell, and therefore Millamant's own attempts at cruelty are misguided.*

ACT 3, SCENE 12

Mincing returns to tell Millamant that the men will be ready soon. Millamant instructs Mincing to have the singer hired for the event to sing a song that Millamant likes. The singer sings about love being like a sickness when it is not joined with ambition. Love is also like a dying fire, if it is not fed by encouragement. The singer concludes by claiming to delight in love when it gives pain to others, either rivals or the lover himself.

It is little wonder that Millamant likes a song that describes love the way that she herself understands love and practices loving others. The song also describes the various romantic relationships Congreve portrays in the play.

ACT 3, SCENE 13

When Witwoud and Petulant arrive, Millamant asks them whether they're finished being hostile toward her and each other. They both make light of the disagreement they had, explaining that sometimes they just get in moods where they must disagree with one another, and then argue about who is the better arguer. But Marwood interrupts them by complimenting them both on being able to debate and handle issues very learnedly.

Witwoud and Petulant foolishly believe that their pointless argument demonstrates true wit and is a debate worth having. The play regularly highlights true wit by sometimes showing its opposite. Marwood shows her own intelligence through her ability to manipulate them.

Petulant claims that learning hurts him and is his enemy. Millamant comments that she hates illiterate men and thinks them incapable of properly wooing a lady. She claims that she would never marry a man who could neither read nor write.

This is a very clear rejection of Petulant's advances, which he, of course, doesn't understand. Though Millamant may prefer Petulant's company right now, he is clearly not the right man for her.

Petulant jokes that being ignorant should not prevent a man from getting married because there are people in the ceremony who can do all the reading for him, such as the priest. Plus, he continues, a man doesn't need a book for the night that follows the wedding. Millamant, disgusted, leaves the room.

Petulant is quite comfortable talking about delicate matters, like sex, in front of ladies. This would have been considered very impolite in Restoration society. Petulant is again demonstrating his lack of tact.

ACT 3, SCENE 14

Witwoud, Petulant, and Marwood remain behind, and spot Sir Wilfull Witwoud being led to the house by a footman. At first, Witwoud pretends not to recognize his half-brother Willful. Marwood, who has never seen Sir Wilfull before, correctly identifies him to Witwoud. Only then does Witwoud pretend to remember Wilfull, who he hasn't seen since the revolution.

Witwoud snubs his relation because he is embarrassed by Sir Wilfull's unfashionable dress and demeanor. This is another example of a character thinking that cruelty to another can make one seem powerful or protect one's reputation. Of course, such behavior only makes the person engaging in it seem cruel.

The footman delivers Wilfull to the company of friends and tells him that Wishfort is dressing. When Wilfull asks the footman whether his aunt has eaten dinner, the footman admits that he has only worked in the house for a week and can't actually recognize Wishfort until she is dressed. Wilfull asks the footman to tell Wishfort that he has arrived and also asks the names of the men standing with Marwood. Again, the footman says he cannot help because he doesn't know who they are, so many men come to the house.

Willfull's introduction to the house portrays it as hectic and poorly run. That the footman can only recognize Wishfort when she is dressed suggests how money is only expressed through outer attributes, like clothes. In normal clothes, Wishfort would just be another person. The constant parade of men is humorous for a household run by the supposedly man-hating Wishfort.

ACT 3, SCENE 15

As the footman leaves, Wilfull complains that the man knows so little that he probably doesn't even know his own name. Marwood, observing all this, remarks to Witwoud that his half-brother also seems to have forgotten him.

Though, at first, Sir Wilfull doesn't recognize his brother, his mistake is sincere, unlike Witwoud's. The contrasting levels of sincerity mark an important difference between the two brothers.

Wilfull greets the group first. Marwood admonishes Witwoud for not speaking to Wilfull. Witwoud, in an aside, instructs Petulant to speak on his behalf. Petulant greets Wilfull. Witwoud remarks to himself that Wilfull seems vile and tells Petulant to heckle him.

Marwood tries to get Witwoud to stop behaving foolishly but her efforts are ignored. Witwoud, normally Petulant's interpreter, gets Petulant to do all of his insulting for him.

Petulant begins to inspect Wilfull's dress from top to bottom. He remarks that it looks like Wilfull has just come from a journey. Wilfull admits that he has. Witwoud, in another aside to Petulant, tells him to insult Wilfull by focusing on his boots. Petulant tells Witwoud that he looks like he has been on a long journey from the condition of his boots.

Witwoud and Petulant judge people's merits from their exterior qualities, focusing on Sir Wilfull's travel-stained clothes as evidence that he is unfashionable and therefore inferior to them. This means that they also measure their own worth by their fashionableness rather than by their actual qualities.

Witwoud retorts that if the boots aren't enough evidence of his trip, then Petulant should go to the stable and ask his horse. Petulant exclaims that Wilfull's "horse is an ass." Wilfull heatedly asks him if he means to be offensive.

Sir Wilfull is not easily intimidated by the efforts of Petulant and Witwoud to make him feel uncomfortable. However, he doesn't defend himself very skillfully from their insults.

Marwood quickly tells Wilfull that Petulant is just trying to be funny and that he is amongst friends, even if he doesn't realize it. She asks him if he is Sir Wilfull Witwoud. Witwoud then introduces himself as Wishfort's niece. With a little prodding from Marwood, Wilfull suddenly recognizes his half-brother (whom he calls Antony, which is Witwoud's first name). Affectionately calling him Tony, Wilfull adds that he hardly recognized Witwoud in his fashionable London clothes.

She encourages Wilfull to recognize his brother, which he does begrudgingly. Sir Wilfull's affection for his half-brother is genuine and warm. He never refers to Witwoud as a step-sibling. Marwood's kindness to Wilfull seems strange given her recent behavior in general, but it may be that she is being kind because Wilfull figures in her plot to marry off Millamant.

Witwoud pretends to suddenly remember Wilfull and calls him brother, but Wilfull is deeply hurt that Witwoud didn't recognize him. Witwoud explains that it's fashionable not to recognize relations in London, but Wilfull criticizes this trend and his brother as foolish. He tells the group that he began to suspect that Witwoud was becoming a London "fob" after he began to leave out affectionate salutations in his letters and to include instead boasts about his sexual conquests and unwholesome adventures.

As an outsider, Sir Wilfull recognizes that certain "fashionable" London trends are too silly to be worth participating in. He is therefore unfashionable but distinguishes himself as a more genuine personality by recounting to Witwoud's friends his humble origins and remarking on Witwoud's changed personality.

Furthermore, Wilfull complains, when Witwoud was new to London and a clerk at Furnival's Inn, he would write tender letters, asking his brother to send his regards to old country friends. Petulant interrupts to laugh at the news that Witwoud used to work for the Furnivals as an attorney clerk.

In reminiscing about old Witwoud, Sir Wilfull reveals too much. He uncovers Witwoud's past, which Witwoud himself has tried to bury and distance himself from.

Witwoud brushes off these insults and explains that it was only a temporary move until he could find a better position. Working for Furnival, Witwoud explains, was the only way he escaped from the countryside and the life his brother planned for him as an apprentice to a feltmaker. Wilfull sarcastically responds that in London Witwoud has served his apprenticeship as a fop.

To account for his unfashionable first job in London, Witwoud belittles the time he spent living in the countryside with Sir Wilfull and paints the job as a necessary evil to get away from Sir Wilfull, a worse evil. Again, Witwoud puts down others to try to raise himself.

Marwood interrupts the argument by asking Wilfull about his intention to travel. Wilfull, still mad at Petulant and Witwoud, addresses only Marwood. He tells her that he wants to see other countries but before he leaves, he wants to learn French. Marwood tells him about an academy for that purpose and supports his decision to see the world, telling him that he's sure to return improved. Witwoud muses that Wilfull will return as improved as a Dutch skipper from whale-fishing.

Sir Wilfull recognizes that he is unlearned and wants to improve himself. But his advanced age and his country habits lead others around him to look down on his desire. Even the ignorant and silly Petulant mocks Sir Wilfull's goal. Witwoud, for his part, thinks it will be impossible for an old dog like Sir Wilfull to learn new tricks.

ACT 3, SCENE 16

Wishfort and her daughter, Mrs. Fainall, join the group. Wishfort welcomes Wilfull and he greets his cousin, Mrs. Fainall. Wishfort introduces the other men to Wilfull. Willful tells Wishfort that he's glad she hasn't "remembered to forget [her] relations," and mentions Witwoud's behavior. Wishfort waves away the insult, saying Witwoud was just being witty and means nothing by it. When he comes back from going abroad, she continues, he will understand "raillery." Wilfull, to himself, remarks that Witwoud should keep quiet in the meantime and "rail" when he comes back then.

Wishfort, like Petulant and Witwoud, thinks there is nothing wrong with trying to follow all the behaviors London society has deemed fashionable conduct. She herself doesn't realize that Petulant and Witwoud's attitude towards Sir Wilfull isn't true "raillery" but actually mean-spirited foolishness. However, Wilfull knows that he is being abused. Though he does not yet have the conversational skills to defeat them, he vows that he one day will.

ACT 3, SCENE 17

Mincing enters, and tells Wishfort that dinner is "impatient." Wilfull overhears her and asks if dinner can wait until he pulls off his boots and puts on a pair of slippers. Wishfort chides him for trying to take off his boots in front of company and tells him to do it in the hall and that they will wait for him. She apologizes to everyone for his behavior and encourages her guests to join her at the table.

Sir Wilfull retains his country mannerisms, which fuel Petulant and Witwoud's feelings of superiority and embarrass Wishfort. Wilfull doesn't mean to be offensive, he just doesn't know any better because he hasn't been trained in how to behave like a gentleman. Yet his non-fashionable sincerity still comes off to the audience as superior to the fashionable but foolish antics of Witwoud and Petulant.

ACT 3, SCENE 18

While everyone else is at dinner, Marwood and Fainall meet alone in Wishfort's house. She has just finished telling Fainall everything she has learned, from Foible's involvement with Mirabell's plot to his wife's affair with Mirabell. Fainall complains that the problems they face are "all in the way of the world."

Fainall sees the world as a treacherous place where the only people that get ahead are those that are the best at scheming and cheating. Of course, part of why he sees the world as being this way is that he is this way. The characters in the play who are least kind and open also have the darkest outlook on the world.

Marwood advises him to consider the bright side: he now has a reason to leave his wife. However, first, she advises, he should prevent Mirabell's plan to marry Millamant and gain her dowry.

In helping Fainall, Marwood wants to secure for herself marriage and a fortune. These aims, for the most part guide her plans.

Fainall curses and then complains that the fortune would easily have been his if Marwood had not told Wishfort that Mirabell was using her. For, if Mirabell had married Millamant without Wishfort's consent, Mirabell would have forfeited the dowry and the money would have gone to the Fainalls.

However, though helping herself is her most important goal, Marwood's hatred of Mirabell sometimes blinds her to smarter moves, which Fainall points out.

Marwood urges him to hold on to his wife, then, until the money can come to him by other means. She reveals another plan that would get Fainall the money. If he reveals Mrs. Fainall's former affair with Mirabell to Wishfort and threatens to leave Mrs. Fainall because of it, Wishfort will do anything to save her daughter's reputation and keep the news quiet, including parting with control over her niece's fortune.

Marwood's more complicated second plan involves more deceit and is much more risky than the first because it requires Fainall to unmask his true self to Wishfort. The lure of having more than just Millamant's dowry makes this path more appealing. Note how the plan takes advantage of what people today would see as the unfair demands that Restoration society placed on a woman's "honor," the way the loss of that honor could stain an entire family, and the way that the older generation controlled the fortunes of the younger.

Fainall likes this plan. Marwood then apologizes for suggesting to Wishfort that Millamant should marry Wilfull, as that might pose an obstacle to this new plan. However, Fainall tells her that he is going to get Wilfull drunk so that Millamant will be disgusted with him and refuse his proposal.

Fainall, like Mirabell, is always looking for ways that the people around him can help get him what he wants. Unlike Mirabell, Fainall doesn't care about injuring the other person's reputation to get what he wants.

Next, Fainall affirms that he doesn't love his wife and that he and Marwood will be victorious. He says that his reputation can't be hurt by losing his wife because he didn't marry to gain a reputation. Furthermore, he doesn't believe that his affair with Marwood does damage to his reputation because cheating is related to marriage, which is an honorable vocation, and so cheating must have some honor too.

Fainall's poor rationalization of his affair reveals how cold-hearted and wicked he is. While about to extort money from Mrs. Fainall because of her "dishonorable" relationship with Mirabell, Fainall rationalizes that his own affair is honorable! Like Marwood, he wants to maximize pleasure (and money) in his life, regardless of consequences.

The adulterers plan the next steps to ruin Mirabell's plot. Marwood suggests that she could write an anonymous letter that will be delivered when Wishfort is with Sir Rowland. The letter will reveal the truth of Sir Rowland's identity and Foible's betrayal. Marwood cautions that they try to avoid provoking Foible, who is quite clever and eloquent when under pressure.

Now the audience knows both Mirabell's plan and Marwood and Fainall's plan, creating lots of opportunities for dramatic irony. Marwood recognizes Foibles' intelligence.

Fainall agrees to this plan and says that if worst comes to worst, he can always turn his wife out of the house because he got her to transfer the deed for her estate to him. This he promises to share with Marwood.

Fainall's backup plan, which involves physically throwing his wife out of their house and taking her property, reveals an even darker side of marriage and money—and makes Fainall even more of a villain.

Marwood asks him if he believes that she hates Mirabell now and if he'll be jealous again. Fainall denies being jealous and seals his promise to not become so again with a kiss.

Forgiveness comes easily for Fainall now that he has Marwood's plan to ruin Mirabell. With a pact to scheme for their mutual benefit, he trusts her fully.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

At Wishfort's house, Wishfort and Foible are waiting for Sir Rowland. Suddenly, Wishfort sees a coach approaching from her window. She asks Foible whether Wilfull has greeted Millamant as she ordered. Foible informs her that Wilfull is busy getting drunk in the parlor. Wishfort, annoyed, tells Foible to call Millamant down. Wishfort goes out to tell Wilfull that he is to meet her niece. Before she leaves, she gives Foible one last piece of instruction: Foible is to see that Wilfull and Millamant meet and then come find her, so that she doesn't stay with Sir Rowland too long.

Even while preparing herself to meet her "lover," Wishfort cannot cease in what she believes are her duties as matriarch: getting her niece married to someone. She wants her family members and friends to behave like puppets that respond to her directions readily and for them to be in full compliance with her plans for their lives. However, no one in the family really does what Wishfort wants them to, though they all pretend to try in part because Wishfort, for all her foolishness, controls the family money.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Foible finds Millamant pacing about the living room, reciting poetry. Mrs. Fainall is there, too, watching Millamant. Foible informs Millamant that Mirabell has been waiting the last half hour to talk with her alone but Wishfort has ordered her to talk with Wilfull. Millamant says to tell Mirabell that she's busy and that he should come again another time. Foible leaves. Millamant goes back to reciting verse in order to memorize a poem.

Millamant's focus on the poem and dismissal of Mirabell can be seen as continuing her pattern of trying to remain distant and free, to focus on the things she cares about. Her focus on the poem also sets up a humorous situation in which the simple Willful will try to talk to Millamant who is focused on reading.

Foible comes back to say that Wilfull is coming. She asks if she should send Mirabell away. Millamant changes her mind and decides to see Mirabell. She tells Mrs. Fainall to entertain Wilfull so that she can focus on memorizing the poem. Mrs. Fainall, curtly, thanks her for giving her the opportunity to be a "proxy" in the situation with Wilfull but declines because she has business of her own to deal with.

Mrs. Fainall's allegiance is to Mirabell, not Millamant. If anything, there is some tension in this scene because Mrs. Fainall sees Millamant as having taken her place as Mirabell's love. This tension between the two women never goes anywhere, but does show another complication of love.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

As Mrs. Fainall is about to leave the house, Sir Wilfull arrives. Mrs. Fainall greets him, telling him he has come at the right moment, and encourages him to woo Millamant right now. Wilfull responds that his aunt wants him to do the same, but that he is a little shy and needs something to drink first. He begins to leave, saying that some day he will be ready to woo Millamant. Mrs. Fainall chides Wilfull for being scared and pushes him into the room with Millamant. She locks the door behind him, telling him that she doesn't want him to lose this opportunity.

Mrs. Fainall does not have the best interests of either Sir Wilfull or Millamant at heart by encouraging Sir Wilfull to propose to Millamant, when Millamant clearly doesn't want to see him. Mrs. Fainall might be trying to throw the two together because she is frustrated with Millamant's attitude toward Mirabell and secretly wants to get back at her for her privileged attitude.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

Sir Wilfull begs Mrs. Fainall through the door to let him out because he's forgotten to wear his gloves. As Millamant paces and recites poetry, he tries to make small talk with her. She ignores him and continues to recite. Then, she begins to speak aloud in praise of Suckling's poetry.

This scene is a humorous one contrasting the educated, cultured Millamant and the good-hearted but simple Willful. It also establishes a contrast for the following scene when Mirabell will enter the room.

Wilfull thinks that she is addressing him and is confused. He tells her that he can only answer in plain English. Suddenly, Millamant turns to address Wilfull and asks why he has come to see her. He responds that he came to see if she wanted to walk with him this evening.

Wilfull doesn't even understand that Millamant is reading poetry—he lacks the wit or the culture to interact with Millamant. He is simply not in the same league with her. He does not speak her language.

Millamant tells him that she hates walking and anything related to the country. She also reveals that she hates the town, too. Wilfull, happy that she's making conversation with him, laughs that she hates them both. She laughs too and asks if he has anything else to say to her. He doesn't, but hints that he will likely propose to her soon. She asks him to leave her alone with her thoughts and helps him find another exit out of the room. He leaves. Millamant, alone again, goes back to reciting poetry.

Sir Wilfull doesn't realize that Millamant is not laughing because she thinks he's funny but because she finds his attempts to talk to her pathetic. She humors him for a bit but then curtly suggests that he leave. Wilfull is simple enough hat he doesn't understand that she is patronizing him and thinks that he has fared quite well in his first conversation with Millamant.


ACT 4, SCENE 5

Mirabell quietly enters the room and begins to recite the next lines of the poem by Edmund Waller that Millamant is trying to learn from *The Story of Phoebus and Daphne, Applied*: "Like Daphne she, as lovely and as coy." He flirts with Millamant, asking her if she locks herself away to make his search more interesting or to signify that she's done running away from him. Millamant responds that she'll always run away, even on the day she gets married.

Sir Willful's failed visit offers a stark contrast to Mirabell's visit. Judging from his suave entrance, Mirabell is more than Millamant's intellectual match. Not only does he know she is reading poetry, he knows the poem by heart! Millamant, meanwhile, flirts with him but also reasserts her desire for independence.

They begin to speak about their ideas of love. Millamant says that she won't marry unless her husband assures her that she can keep her independence and will provide her pleasure. Mirabell asks her if she wants both now, or would she be content to wait for the latter until after they marry.

Millamant's comment here speaks to the importance of money in love. While she wants to marry for love, there would be no point if it did not come with the money to leisurely enjoy that love. Mirabell's joke purposely misinterprets her comment as a suggestion that they have sex right now.


Millamant tells him not to be impertinent and insists that she cannot give up the habits she has developed as an independent woman, like waking up late and daydreaming. Mirabell remarks that if she keeps those habits up, then he will wake up as early as he wants once they're married.

Here, Millamant and Mirabell begin to outline the terms of their ideal marriage, a famous scene which scholarly studies of the poem have termed the "proviso scene." What they begin sketching out is a marriage in which they marry for love but neither gives up their independence.

Millamant agrees to this and tells him that she also won't be called by pet names once married. She begins to outline her ideal marriage to Mirabell. They won't kiss in public or act familiar towards one another. They won't go to the park on the first Sunday of every month as is the fashion with married couples, only to not be seen together again thereafter. She tells him that she wants them to be "strange" toward one another, as if they were married for a long while and "well bred," so that others wouldn't think them married at all.

Millamant is concerned with seeming too attached to Mirabell. Her worry is not only that other people will judge them if they don't always look like they're in love but she also worries that loving him too much will lessen her independence and cause them to take each other for granted. She seems not to want to put on a show of being married.

Mirabell asks her if she has any more "conditions" to add and compliments her demands as pretty reasonable, thus far. She adds other conditions: she will be allowed to pay and receive visits to and from anyone she wants, can write and receive letters without Mirabell's jealousy, won't have to spend time with his friends, can come to dinner when she wants or dine by herself without giving him a reason. She must also be in control of the tea table, designing the menu, etc. He must also always knock before entering her room, she adds. If he lets her have her way in these matters, then she might "by degrees dwindle into a wife."

Mirabell is happy with the terms because he, too, is wary of becoming too attached to Millamant to the point that it lessens his admiration and appreciation of her. Millamant's other terms all speak to her need to retain a separate identity after getting married—she wants to be a person, not just a role. She wants to be Millamant, not just a wife. She doesn't want her marriage to be ruled by the dictates of her husband and instead expects him to remember that that she is her own person.

Mirabell's accepts her conditions and says that when she dwindles into being a wife then he must be "enlarged into a husband." Then, he adds his own conditions to their marriage: she must not have close female friends who would try to lead her astray and ruin her marriage, she must not dislike her own face as long as he likes it, she must not wear masks, she must also not wear corsets while pregnant, and must only have simple English fare at her tea table. He says that if she agrees to these articles, then he will be an accommodating husband. They agree to abide by the rules they have devised and Mirabell kisses Millamant's hand to seal the contract. Mrs. Fainall approaches to bear witness to their agreement.

Mirabell is not going to simply let Millamant make all the demands. Though he doesn't counteract her wishes, he does make sure that she realizes that his role as her future husband is important and should be honored. He demands concessions that protect their friendship and insist upon openness. In this way, his requirements for their marriage are much less self-serving than hers. Having established the "contract," the two are engaged.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

Still in the living room, Millamant looks to Mrs. Fainall and asks her for advice: should she marry Mirabell? She admits that she really wants to. Mrs. Fainall agrees that she should. Millamant, however, cannot say the three little words to Mirabell, so she says instead, "I'll endure you." Mrs. Fainall tells her to tell him in plain terms how much he means to her. But Millamant does not. She tells him not to kiss her or thank her for the engagement.

Millamant's fierce independence limits her ability to express tenderness. She still believes that admitting her love to Mirabell, even at her engagement, would be a sign of weakness. Mrs. Fainall, watching this exchange, is probably highly annoyed with Millamant for still playing hard to get.

Mrs. Fainall interrupts the happy couple to tell Mirabell that he has no time to talk or stay with Millamant. Her mother is coming and will be enraged if she sees him in the house. She also reveals that things seem to be going well between Sir Rowland and Wishfort. She urges Mirabell to slip out the back and wait for news from Foible. He departs.

Ever protective of Mirabell's safety and happiness, Mrs. Fainall keeps Mirabell up to speed about the goings on in the rest of the house, an important task because it keeps Mirabell focused and determined to achieve his goal of changing Wishfort's mind. It also brings the audience back to the realization that even as the marriage between Mirabell and Millamant is taking shape, Marwood and Fainall's plot to thwart Mirabell's plot is ongoing.

ACT 4, SCENE 7

Once they are alone, Mrs. Fainall tells Millamant that Wilfull has gotten so drunk and noisy that her mother had to leave Sir Rowland's side to go out and quiet him. She adds that Wilfull was quarreling with Petulant the last time she saw him.

Poor Wishfort, it seems, can have no peace in her house. Though Wilfull is an obvious nuisance to her, she doesn't realize that he isn't her biggest problem, given the secret engagement.

Millamant, totally ignoring everything that Mrs. Fainall has just said, admits to Mrs. Fainall that she loves Mirabell "violently." Mrs. Fainall is exasperated and tells her that if she ever doubts Mirabell, then she should marry Wilfull. Millamant is disgusted by this idea.

Mrs. Fainall has reached the limits of her patience with Millamant. She bluntly points out how lucky Millamant is to be engaged to Mirabell rather than forced to marry Sir Wilfull.

ACT 4, SCENE 8

A drunken Witwoud joins the women in the parlor. When Mrs. Fainall asks him if Petulant and Wilfull, have made up, Witwoud responds that he had to leave because he was laughing so much he thought his sides would burst. He reveals that Wishfort came in and stopped the fight and the drinks. Millamant asks him what the dispute was about and he says that's why he was laughing: there was no real dispute because both men were too angry to do or say anything to the other.

The argument is a testament to the foolish nature of the three men involved. Their drunkenness also reveals their immaturity. The men, Sir Wilfull, Petulant, and Witwoud, are no better than children that must be closely watched to ensure that they stay out of trouble.

ACT 4, SCENE 9

Petulant, also drunk, joins the women and Witwoud in the parlor. He has just made up with Wilfull and has come to tell Millamant that she must decide, right then, whether she will have him, Petulant, as a lover or not.

A gentleman would realize that a state of drunkenness is not a good time to profess love to a lady nor demand that she tell him whether he stands a chance.

Now it becomes clear that Wilfull and Petulant were arguing about Millamant. Petulant tells her that he was defending her beauty to Wilfull. But after Millamant refuses to accept or encourage his love, Petulant tells her to "fight for her own face" next time and informs his companions he is going to bed—with his maid. Petulant exits.

Neither Petulant nor Sir Wilfull ever stood a chance of marrying Millamant, which makes their argument and their gravity about the topic all the more hilarious because they could never hope to understand Millamant, who of course is now already engaged!

Mrs. Fainall, then, asks Witwoud how the three men came to be so drunk and start arguing in the first place. Witwoud tells her that Fainall caused them to get drunk, as part of a plot to get rid of Sir Rowland, and later snuck off.

Witwoud's comment here again makes clear that Fainall's plot is in full effect. The seeming happy ending between Millamant and Mirabell is not yet clear-cut.

ACT 4, SCENE 10

Wishfort joins Millamant, Mrs. Fainall, and Witwoud. She has dragged along a very drunk and, apparently, smelly Wilfull to propose to Millamant. Wishfort yells at Wilfull to behave himself, warning him that Millamant will never have him in this condition. Wilfull responds by accusing his aunt of withholding her liquor from him. He offers to pay her for his tab and hands her a purse of money so he can have more wine. He sings a drinking song and promises her he will marry his cousin if she requires him to because he's a man of his word.

The third proposal of the night for Millamant is arguably the worst. Not only is Wilfull being made to propose against his will by his aunt, he bluntly admits as much to everyone around him. At this point, Wilfull's drunken behavior is beyond pardonable. While he may have seemed misguided and naïve while sober, now he just seems disgusting and pathetic to the posh Londoners.

Wishfort tries to smooth over Wilfull's outrageous behavior, saying that he's been drinking to her health. Wilfull affirms this and tells Millamant that if she's ready to marry him, he's ready too, even if she's not a virgin. If she doesn't want to marry him, he tells her that they should all have another round of drinks.

Despite Wilfull's antics, Wishfort is still trying to sell her niece on the prospect of marrying Wilfull. Wilfull's comments about marriage are both vulgar and deeply unserious, again offering a contrast to Mirabell.

Millamant is disgusted, and asks her aunt to be excused before she faints from Willful's stench. She urges Mrs. Fainall to leave with her. The two women exit, leaving Wishfort behind with Wilfull and Witwoud.

Luckily for Millamant, her aunt doesn't seem to be forcing the marriage on her. Millamant has the final power to accept or deny the suitors her aunt suggests.

ACT 4, SCENE 11

Wishfort, exasperated with Wilfull, tells him he stinks and to get out of her sight. Meanwhile, Foible has arrived. She whispers in Wishfort's ear that Sir Rowland is growing impatient waiting for her return. Wishfort begs Witwoud to babysit her nephew, promising to reward him greatly, so that she can get back to more important matters.

Rather than a means of getting the brothers to bond, urging Witwoud to stay with Wilfull secures Wishfort alone time with her suitor. Financial incentive is closely associated with family duty, as Wishfort's promise to reward Witwoud for his help with Wilfull indicates.

Witwoud invites Wilfull to a cockfight. Wilfull agrees to this idea and asks whether there will be wenches there. Wishfort, hearing all of this, resignedly admits to herself that Wilfull, at the moment, is not ready to marry her niece. She hopes that after he has been abroad he will prove more suitable to Millamant.

The two men have in common a taste for lowbrow pursuits. Their debauched evening plans lead Wishfort to finally realize the futility of trying to wed her sophisticated niece to her unrefined nephew.

ACT 4, SCENE 12

Wishfort rejoins Waitwell, who is disguised as Sir Rowland, in her dressing room. She apologizes for her absence and tells him that they should act more casually with each other, now that they're better acquainted. They begin to speak of their plans to marry. Wishfort, at first, suggests that they wait at least two days before getting married in order to be decent. But Sir Rowland claims that he will die of a broken heart if she forces him to wait so long. He admits that he also wants to marry her to gain revenge against Mirabell.

Waitwell plays his part convincingly, though it doesn't take much convincing for the love-starved and revenge-motivated Wishfort to fall in love with Sir Rowland. Sir Rowland's eagerness to marry her makes Wishfort feel flattered but has more to do with Waitwell's desire to please his master and reap the rewards Mirabell has promised if he can get Wishfort to accept a proposal.

When Wishfort tells him about all the ways that Mirabell has wronged her, Waitwell pretends to be angered by this news and vows to kill Mirabell. Wishfort urges him to reconsider murder and instead suggests that he "starve" Mirabell by disinheriting him.

Waitwell acts the part of a passionate lover threatening to kill to protect his beloved. Meanwhile, Wishfort has adopted—word for word—Foible's suggestion to starve rather than kill Mirabell. She has adopted Foibles' wit as her own (without attribution, of course).

Rowland quickly agrees to follow her plan instead. Wishfort, happy they have decided to take this course of action, goes back to flirting with Rowland. She tells him not to think that she wants to marry him because she wants revenge or that she is tired of being celibate. Rowland tells her that he thinks no such thing, but she continues as if she hasn't heard him.

As Wishfort fishes awkwardly for compliments, everything seems to be going perfectly with Mirabell's plot. Of course, the audience knows that Marwood and Fainall are about to act, so this entire scene is like a double dose of dramatic irony in which the audience knows that Wishfort is being taken in by a plot, while also knowing that Waitwell is also about to be ensnared by Fainall and Marwood's competing plot!

ACT 4, SCENE 13

Suddenly, Foible arrives in the dressing room and interrupts the exchange between Sir Rowland and Wishfort. She informs Wishfort that the dancers hired to entertain Rowland have arrived and one of them has a letter she must deliver to Wishfort herself. Wishfort excuses herself and exits.

More dramatic irony, in which Foible is dutifully delivering the very letter—Marwood's anonymous letter—that is about to reveal that she and Waitwell and tricking Wishfort. Congreve is playing with the audience's expectations.

ACT 4, SCENE 14

Alone with his wife, Waitwell turns to Foible and complains about his job playing Sir Rowland. He begs her for a drink. Foible teases him for being so easily tired out by "panting" his love and lying to a lady. Waitwell tells her that Wishfort is "the antidote to desire" and that Foible herself will suffer for it. He says that he has no more energy for "iteration of nuptials" for the next 48 hours and is ready to stop pretending to be Sir Rowland.

Waitwell and Foible enjoy a private moment, shedding their contrived personas to share their true sentiments. They are each other's own reward and are eager to be done with Mirabell's scheme so they can enjoy each other's company and the simple pleasures of life as husband and wife. Meanwhile, for the audience this seems clearly to be the calm before the storm. Through dramatic irony, Congreve makes it so that the audience feels almost like they are a part of the schemes taking place.

ACT 4, SCENE 15

Wishfort returns holding an unopened letter from the dancer and calls the dancers to begin. She tells him that she will open the letter with his permission and in front of him as a show of her loyalty. She offers to burn it without reading it if it would make him feel better. However, she tells him, he has no cause to be jealous because the letter is in a woman's hand.

Wishfort is the opposite of Millamant. She symbolizes the old ways of understanding relationships between men and women. She is submissive and wants only to please her lover, unlike Millamant who demands her independence at the expense of Mirabell's feelings. Of course, the audience is at the same time focused on the fate of the letter as it impacts whether Mirabell's plot will be revealed.

Foible instantly recognizes the penmanship as Marwood's and knows that it can contain nothing good. She whispers to Waitwell to take it from Wishfort. Sir Roland exclaims that he recognizes the handwriting and that the letter is from his nephew, Mirabell. Wishfort, happy to see him openly jealous, tries to reassure him that she will answer the letter writer with a frank decline for further communication.

Foible, as usual, is quick to recognize what is going on. But Wishfort's ridiculous misinterpretation of "Rowland's" alarm about the letter as jealousy, and her subsequent feeling of being more loved because of that jealousy, make it seem like the truth is about to be revealed….

She opens the anonymous letter and begins to read its contents to Rowland. She reads that Rowland is not a real person and is shocked. Though Foible exclaims to herself that the plan is ruined, Waitwell intervenes. Still pretending to be Sir Rowland, he grabs the letter and begins to read it aloud to prevent Wishfort from reading more. Foible, encouraged by this, quickly whispers to him to convince Wishfort that the letter is from Mirabell. He does so and Wishfort begins to believe Rowland. Waitwell tells Wishfort that he has other letters in the same hand that were clearly written by Mirabell. Foible interrupts to exclaim how lucky it was that Sir Rowland is here tonight. She tells Wishfort that she thought she saw Mirabell in the house this evening trying to find Millamant.

...and the truth is revealed! But in a twist on the audience's expectations the expected explosion doesn't come as Foible and Waitwell are able to convince Wishfort that the letter is in fact a plot by Mirabell (when actually they are trying to preserve Mirabell's plot). Wishfort's hatred of Mirabell, again, provides the means for the deception to continue, blinding Wishfort from recognizing her best friend's handwriting.

Wishfort believes Foible and tells her that she remembers that her niece left rather quickly when Wilfull was proposing to her. Foible quickly lies that she didn't give Wishfort the news earlier because she didn't want to upset her while she was with Sir Rowland. Sir Rowland cuts off the dialogue between the women. He vows to kills Mirabell, then and there, with his pistol. Wishfort begs him not to break the law. She fears that he will be killed if he and Mirabell should duel. She takes matters into her own hands and offers to go find out what's happened from her niece. She accepts Rowland's offer to give her his black box, which contains the deeds to his estate and fortune, as a sign of his fidelity and love. He, then, asks her if she will accept his proposal of marriage tonight. She delightedly accepts and he leaves to get the documents.

Foible and Waitwell are able to manipulate Wishfort and to make themselves seem like a loving suitor and dutiful servant, respectively, in the process. Meanwhile, Rowland's offer to duel Mirabell for the sake of love is another romantic cliché that Wishfort just loves. At this point, after Congreve has both introduced the letter and shown Foible and Waitwell defusing it, the audience might expect things to go smoothly. But in this play depicting the twists and turns of its character's plots, Congreve has twists and turns of his own. He seems to delight in playing on the expectations of his audience, in turning his plot into a kind of scheme to wring maximum tension and enjoyment.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

It is still evening of the day in which all the events up to now have taken place. Wishfort and Foible are still in the dressing room. However, Wishfort is yelling angrily at Foible to get out of her house. She has discovered Foible's hand in Mirabell's plan sometime between the end of the last scene of Act 4 and the beginning of this scene.

The previous scene ended with all looking well for Mirabell and his allies. Then Congreve has events happen offstage that smash all that to pieces! Congreve was essentially playing a trick on the audience, which must now adjust quickly to the unanticipated complications that come about now that Wishfort knows of Mirabell's scheme but not Fainall's.

Foible begs her forgiveness but Wishfort is unmoved. She tells Foible that she will end up back on the streets where she found her. Foible tries to plead her innocence, telling Wishfort that Mirabell seduced her and promised her all sorts of rewards for her help.

Foible again tries to use Mirabell's roguish personality as an excuse for her deceit. However, Wishfort is no longer so easily tricked by her servant.

Wishfort doesn't care. She is beyond furious that Foible would have destroyed her honor by marrying her to Mirabell's servant. Foible tries to explain that Waitwell was already married to her and that she would never have allowed the deception to go so far. Wishfort tells Foible that her husband has been arrested and that she s going to call the constable to have Foible arrested and sent to prison, too. Wishfort exits the room, leaving Foible to consider her fate.

Wishfort has taken control of the scene and is bent on hurting anyone in the least way connected with Mirabell. Foible and Waitwell are easy targets to punish and bring her immediate satisfaction. Her jealousy has kindled into white-hot rage now that she knows how far Mirabell was willing to go to get his way and marry Millamant, and despite her foolishness as a wealthy high-class woman she has a lot *of power.*

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Mrs. Fainall enters the dressing room. Seeing Foible distressed, she tries to comfort her and find out what has happened. Foible tells her that she and her husband are doomed to be sent to prison. Mrs. Fainall informs her that Mirabell has gone to post bond for Waitwell's release. She recognizes Marwood and Fainall's hand in this turn of events. Foible tells Mrs. Fainall how Marwood came by the information by hiding in the closet, sent an anonymous letter, and then how Fainall had Waitwell arrested while he went to go get the deeds and engagement document, and Marwood approached Wishfort and told her everything.

Foible and Waitwell suffer a harsh reversal of fortune. From being happily married in the morning, now they face the possibility of spending years apart in prison. The repercussion of participating in Mirabell's scheme now greatly outweigh the rewards he promised, as they realize the cost of being associated with Mirabell (especially as poor people; Mirabell certainly isn't going to prison). The one good thing is that Mirabell does not desert his supporters and provides them a different type of financial help, one that secures their freedom from jail, at least.

Mrs. Fainall realizes that, if her mother knows everything, then she also knows of her own affair with Mirabell. She tells Foible that her comfort is knowing that today is the last day she will have to live with her husband. Foible wants to give Mrs. Fainall more comfort and so informs her of her husband's affair with Marwood, which she knew nothing about. Mrs. Fainall is excited and asks Foible if she can prove that they are having an affair.

Mrs. Fainall, though her reputation is in jeopardy, is excited by the prospect that she can finally come clean about her bad marriage and perhaps, leave Fainall. The prospect of escaping the deceit of her life outweighs her fear of shame. And she still has the wit to recognize the possibilities ingredients for a counter-plot.

Foible says that she can prove it. She tells her that Mincing also knows about the affair, too, but that they were bound to secrecy by Marwood, who made them swear not to tell. However, Foible says that she has no qualms about breaking the oath because they made the oath by swearing on a book of poetry, not the Bible.

Foible easily finds a loophole in Marwood's pact, not only because she's clever, but also because her loyalties lie with Mirabell and not with Fainall. As Mincing's loyalty lies with Millamant, getting her to reveal what she knows won't be hard for Foible to do.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Mincing arrives in the dressing room with news: Waitwell has been released from prison, while Wishfort is terribly upset over something that Fainall has told her. He is shouting at a crying Wishfort that he'll have her fortune or get divorced. Mincing continues that Mirabell and Millamant have sent her to find Wilfull. She believes that Millamant will indeed marry Wilfull in order not to lose her dowry.

As relayed by Mincing, the audience can see how Mirabell's plot has completely fallen apart. Fainall has gone through with his threat to extort Wishfort's fortune by revealing Mrs. Fainall's former relationship with Mirabell. Even further, it seems that to save her fortune Millamant has been forced to sacrifice both her love and her independence.

Mrs. Fainall orders Foible to tell Mincing that she must reveal what she knows about Marwood's affair with Fainall when called on. Mincing promises to help no matter what happens to her.

Mrs. Fainall takes matters into her own hands and begins to organize a counter scheme for Mirabell's benefit and her own, as well.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

In the parlor, Wishfort praises Marwood as a true and good friend for all her help in revealing Mirabell's falsehoods and the imposter, Sir Rowland. She also thanks her for taking the lead role in negotiating with Fainall about his demands. She then tells Marwood that at the end of all this nasty business that they should both retire to the countryside and be celibate shepherdesses.

Wishfort, deceived before by Mirabell's plot, now is deceived by Marwood and Fainall's plot. Once again the audience enjoys the dramatic irony and feels "in" on the plot. Wishfort has gone from clichéd romantic ideas about love with Sir Rowland back to clichéd ideas about becoming a celibate shepherdess (while the adulterous Marwood couldn't be farther from a celibate shepherdess)!

Mrs. Fainall enters. Wishfort condemns her daughter and tells her that because of her affair, she must now part with her wealth. Mrs. Fainall tells her mother that Marwood is lying to her and that she is innocent. Wishfort doesn't believe her daughter, while Marwood tries to disentangle herself from the situation and excuse herself from the room by pretending to be upset by Mrs. Fainall's accusations.

Now the audience gets to enjoy Marwood's plot slowly begin to unravel but Marwood extricates herself from the situation before it does. Wishfort clearly believes that she will have to part with her money in order to protect the reputation of her daughter.

Wishfort apologizes to Marwood and scolds her daughter for her ungratefulness. Mrs. Fainall, however, sticks to her story and defiantly offers to stand trial to prove her innocence. She exits the room.

Marwood's pretended anger at Mrs. Fainall's accusations makes Wishfort think that her daughter is even worse than she thought.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

With her daughter gone, Wishfort reveals to Marwood her doubts about her daughter's guilt. After considering how carefully she raised her daughter to be virtuous and her daughter's overall good nature, she begins to believe that a trial would be the best thing to determine her daughter's innocence or guilt. She concludes that her daughter should be considered innocent until Fainall proves otherwise.

Wishfort begins to think rationally when she considers allowing the matter to go to court. However, Marwood must convince her not to do so because allowing truth and justice to prevail would foil Fainall's scheme.

Marwood tries to convince her that a trial would be a very bad thing because it would open up a private scandal to public debate. She mounts a convincing case to Wishfort that her name and reputation will be ruined if word of her daughter's history gets out, which will inevitably happen if the case goes to trial. Wishfort agrees that Marwood is right: it is better to pay Fainall for keeping silent than to demand justice.

Marwood is a better liar than Wishfort is committed to the truth. She preys on Wishfort's fear of being the subject of scandalous gossip to manipulate the old woman to do her bidding. Wishfort doesn't have the courage to stand up to Fainall and fears public condemnation.

ACT 5, SCENE 6

Fainall has joined the women in the parlor to make his demands known to Wishfort. Marwood acts as the go-between and tries to make each concession seem more appealing to Wishfort by proclaiming the benefits of following Fainall's demands. Fainall states that his terms are the following: Wishfort will never marry unless he allows it, he has the authority to choose her husband, should he decide she needs one for health reasons. He will also gain his wife's entire fortune and the entirety of Millamant's, too, because Millamant has broken the terms set by Sir Jonathan Wishfort, Wishfort's late husband, by getting engaged without consent and refusing the match with Wilfull that Wishfort offered to her.

Fainall's terms express his desire for total control. On the one hand, he wants to make sure that Wishfort can do nothing to threaten the money he is now extorting from her. On the other, he seems to relish the idea of humiliating Wishfort and having power. And he expresses this power by asserting his dominance over women: Wishfort, Mrs. Fainall, and Millamant.

Wishfort tries to object to this last stipulation by pointing out a loophole. She says that Wilfull was indisposed and did not properly propose to her niece. Fainall, however, tells her that he isn't there to debate but only make demands. She asks for time to consider his terms and he allows her only as much time as it takes to draw up the contract. He exits the room to arrange the document, leaving Wishfort in Marwood's company.

Wishfort tries to find loopholes in Fainall's plot, but is unable. Earlier Congreve set things up so that it seemed as if Mirabell's plot was going to sail smoothly along. Now Fainall's plot seems unstoppable.

ACT 5, SCENE 7

Once Fainall leaves, Wishfort again complains to Marwood. She asks whether she should agree to Fainall's terms. Marwood insists that it is a shame that Wishfort must pay for her daughter's sins but that there really is no other option.

It is worth noting that Wishfort's actions here are to protect her daughter (and herself) rather than to hold on to her money. Meanwhile, Wishfort continues to be tricked by the deceitful Marwood.

Wishfort complains that marrying Fainall was her daughter's idea. She bemoans the loss of good and noble Languish, her daughter's late husband, a match that she herself made. Seeing her niece, Millamant, arriving with Wilfull, she is brought out of her reverie.

Wishfort, who has been revealed as foolish throughout the play, here suggests that everyone else is a fool and she was the one who made good choices.

ACT 5, SCENE 8

Wilfull, now sober, greets his aunt and apologizes for his unbecoming behavior. He promises to marry his cousin to please her and make amends. Wishfort is surprised by the apparent change in Millamant's attitude toward Willful and asks her if she's indeed willing to marry her cousin to save her from Fainall's treachery.

Millamant's decision to marry Willful, who himself seems somewhat less ridiculous here, is surprising. Wishfort is delighted that she is finally being obeyed. But the audience might have a feeling that some other plot is at play here…

Millamant promises that she will marry Wilful and furthermore, that she has had no role in plotting against her aunt. She tells her aunt that she has commanded Mirabell to come witness the ceremony after he formally releases her from the engagement in front of Wishfort. Though pleased with the obedience of her niece and nephew, she is appalled that Mirabell is waiting to be received in her house and does not want him to come in.

Millamant and Wilfull continue to act dutifully to Wishfort, and this dutifulness convinces Wishfort of their honesty. Of course, Wishfort is herself compelled to this course of action by Fainall, but in her foolishness she is pleased with their obedience to her.

Millamant warns her that if she refuses him entry that he might be inclined to insist on his engagement to her to spite Wishfort. Wishfort reluctantly agrees to let him in, as long as it's the last time she sees him in her house. Millamant, addressing Wilfull, asks him if it's true that Mirabell is to be his travel companion when he leaves for the continent. He admits that this is the case and adds that Mirabell is a good man and that they are great friends. He goes to the door and calls Mirabell in.

Everyone continues to act as if Fainall's plot has won out, and that they must accord with his demands.

Marwood observes all of this quietly and says to herself that Mirabell is up to something. She starts to leave but Wishfort, alarmed, asks her to stay. Marwood promises not to go far and to come back quickly. She exits.

Unlike Wishfort, Marwood recognizes that Mirabell must have some kind of plot afoot. And the audience, who may or may not have had this sense before Marwood's comment, now certainly is primed for Mirabell's counter-scheme.

ACT 5, SCENE 9

As Mirabell enters the room, Wilfull whispers that he will stand by him and support him in his efforts to win over Wishfort. He also tries to comfort Mirabell by telling him that the worst Wishfort can do is frown at him, and even then, she cannot frown too much or else she'll spoil her makeup.

Wilfull's loyalty to Mirabell is interesting in that it seems to come from nowhere. Further, Willful's observation about Wishfort and her makeup suggests that Willful might not have been quite as silly as he seemed to be earlier in the play. Perhaps all of that was just acting…?

Mirabell apologizes profusely to Wishfort. He tells her that he only wants to be forgiven and that just looking at her brings up fond memories of how he was once favored by her and allowed to worship her. He tells her that he only wants her pity and then wants her to forget him, nothing else. Wilfull urges her to forgive Mirabell out of a Christian sense of mercy.

Mirabell puts on his old act in front of Wishfort, playing up his innocence and devotion to Wishfort. Willful's suggestion that forgiveness is a Christian virtue is interesting, as both religion and forgiveness have been so generally absent from the play.

Finally, Wishfort relents and forgives Mirabell, explaining that she does so because Wilfull wants her too. But, she adds, she wants Mirabell to release her niece from the engagement immediately and wants it in writing, too. Mirabell tells her the papers have already been drawn up and that he has dispatched his servant to bring them.

Wishfort still wants Mirabell to suffer for his past behavior. However, she has no power to make these demands of him. Mirabell lets her think she has the upper hand, giving her a fleeting sense of victory before revealing his true plans.

Wishfort tells herself that Mirabell has "witchcraft" in his eyes and in his tongue but that seeing him has rekindled her passion for him.

After all her desire for revenge against him, as soon as Mirabell starts to flatter her again Wishfort falls for him. Her animosity was always fueled by unrequited love.

ACT 5, SCENE 10

Marwood returns to the living room, with Fainall following. Fainall addresses Wishfort and tells her that the time for her to deliberate has run out. He produces an "instrument," a contract for her to sign that gives him power over her fortune.

Finally holding the "instrument" of Wishfort's undoing in his hands, Fainall thinks that he is going to be victorious against Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall.

Wishfort replies that even if she were ready to sign, she no longer needs to because Millamant has agreed to marry Wilfull, a move that legally prevents her from turning all her fortune over to Fainall. At first, Fainall doesn't believe this could be true. But Millamant assures him that she is prepared to marry Wilfull and Mirabell confirms that he has broken off the engagement, leaving nothing in the way of the marriage.

Fainall's plan isn't exactly bulletproof. He did not foresee the possibility that Millamant would actually agree to marry Wilfull. He should be more suspicious that Mirabell is giving up so easily. However, his greed and the proximity of success blinds him to the fact that his adversaries are a lot more cunning than he gives them credit for.

Wilfull, too, speaks out against Fainall, threatening to use *his* "instrument," meaning his sword, to slice through Fainall's contract if he does not revoke his demand. Wishfort and Millamant both tell Wilfull to calm down. Fainall tells Wishfort that it doesn't matter if Millamant has found a way to save the £6000 dowry because he is still going to have Wishfort's share of the fortune, as well as his wife's portion. Otherwise, he threatens that he will turn his wife out and tell the town about her affair with Mirabell.

Wilfull reveals his confidence through deeds of strength and bravery rather than in a clever come back. This is not appreciated by the women of the group, who prefer when men use language to do their fighting rather than immediately suggest the use of actual weapons. Fainall again reveals his willingness to shame a women in exchange for gaining her fortune.

Wishfort wails for a way to prevent Fainall from ruining her. Mirabell begins to answer that he knows of a remedy but dismisses his idea because he is sure that she will not accept help from him.

Mirabell has been waiting for Wishfort to say this, carefully calibrating the moment for him to offer his help. And he says it diffidently to ensure that Wishfort draws it out of him rather than feeling like he is pushing it on her. He's a real master.

Hearing this, Wishfort grows excited and hopeful. She tells Mirabell that she will forgive him for everything he's done if he prevents Fainall's plan from succeeding. Mirabell agrees to help her even as he laments the loss of the one reward that he desired, Millamant's hand in marriage. Wishfort praises him for being so generous and promises to give him her niece and her fortune, if he saves her from ruin. Mirabell accepts her offer and then asks if she will allow two criminals to come forward. Wishfort readily agrees and Mirabell calls Foible and Mincing into the room.

Mirabell has successfully manipulated Wishfort into not only giving him what he wanted in the first place but gets her to praise him while giving in to him. Now in complete control of the situation, Mirabell slowly begins to reveal his trump cards to the entire group.

ACT 5, SCENE 11

Seeing the two servants enter together with Mrs. Fainall, Marwood instantly realizes that they are going to expose her affair with Fainall to Wishfort. She confides her fears to Fainall, who responds that they must bear whatever happens because it is "but the way of the world." He assures her that the revelation of their affair won't make him lessen his terms but increase them.

Fainall is deluded by power and thinks that as a master con man, only he will be victorious because he sees the world for what it is, a corrupt place, where those who are willing to take part in that corruption are the ones who will thrive.

Meanwhile, under questioning, Foible and Mincing both swear that Marwood was having an affair with Fainall. Wishfort, angrily, turns to Marwood and asks her whether she has deceived her. Marwood asks Wishfort if she would take the word of two "mercenary trulls" over her good friend

Marwood's lying is revealed, but Marwood does the only thing she knows to do and continues to lie.

Mincing is upset to be called a "mercenary" and tells Marwood that she actually saw Fainall and Marwood together. Furthermore, Mincing continues, she could have been justly called mercenary if Marwood had bribed them to keep quiet. However, that did not happen.

Mincing, though, insists on there being objective truth: that she can't be called a "mercenary" because she was never paid. Further, this comment shows just how "mercenary" Marwood and Fainall and perhaps all the other characters have also been, driven as they are by monetary concerns.

Fainall tells Mincing to get lost and reminds her that she has not profited by telling Wishfort the truth. He grows increasingly angry and calls his wife to come forward. He threatens her with physical harm, but Mrs. Fainall seems unaffected by his words. She tells him that she despises him and that he has wronged her, but she has proven him false. Wishfort is disappointed by Mirabell's smoking gun. Mirabell assures her that there are more surprises for her and asks permission for Waitwell, Petulant, and Witwoud to enter.

Fainall and his wife can now openly admit their hate. Whereas Mrs. Fainall is calm, cool, and collected throughout Mirabell's revelation, Fainall lets his anger control his words and is very close to losing his self-control, showing the group assembled his true nature, for the first time. Certainly his behavior should scare Marwood, who has already seen him use his strength against her.

ACT 5, SCENE 12

When Waitwell enters the room carrying a box of papers, Wishfort asks him what he wants. Waitwell tells her that he has brought the papers at last. As Mirabell accepts the box, he tells Wishfort to remember her promise. Then, he asks for Petulant and Witwoud, who are slow to arrive because they have just woken up from their drunken naps. Fainall expresses his annoyance at Mirabell's slow and suspenseful manner of revealing his plan.

Mirabell has clearly thought beforehand about the order in which he wanted to reveal his plan. Building up slowly to the most important revelations, Mirabell is the center of attention, a role he is all too used to being in, especially in Wishfort's house. Waitwell's comment about the box is an ironic reference to when he was pretending to be Sir Rowland and went off to get his papers to give to Wishfort as a sign of his love.

ACT 5, SCENE 13

Petulant and Witwoud finally show up with no clue about what's going on, as usual. Mirabell reminds them that they once served as his witnesses to a certain legal document. Then, he calls them forward to examine the document they signed. The two agree that the document contains their signatures but they do not remember what they signed. Mirabell now begins to unveil his trump card, but before doing so, again reminds Wishfort of her promise.

Only fools like Petulant and Witwoud would serve as witnesses to a legal agreement without first reading what they are signing. Mirabell knew that they wouldn't read the document, which is why he chose them as witnesses in the first place. In this way, he could keep the means of thwarting Fainall secret.

Mirabell addresses Fainall and informs him that before his wife married him, she signed away her fortune to Mirabell to prevent him from trying to wheedle it out of her. Mirabell continues to explain that he warned Arabella Languish (Mrs. Fainall) of Fainall's bad temper and reputation. However, she was fond of Fainall and gave him the benefit of the doubt. But she did accept Mirabell's advice and took precautions against her future husband, the parameters of which are contained in the binding legal document Mirabell holds.

Though Mirabell didn't want to commit to Mrs. Fainall and marry her, he did feel a sense of obligation toward her as a good friend. All his behavior toward her once the affair is over is guided by this sense of duty, rather than love. Thus, his decision to take on the role of her secret legal adviser seems noble rather than cruel for remaining such an integral part of her life after the affair.

At first Fainall thinks that Mirabell is bluffing. But then he begins to read the document, and realizes that he has been outwitted and his case against Wishfort and her daughter is no longer valid. Mirabell continues that Arabella's precautions are "the way of the world" with the "widows of the world."

Mirabell's outlook on the world turns out to be superior to Fainall's because Mirabell understands that planning *for the worst while giving people the option to act well is a better approach than simply* thinking *the worst about other people and then pre-emptively acting terribly toward them.*

Enraged, Fainall charges at Mrs. Fainall and screams that he will get revenge. However, Wilfull steps in between them and blocks Fainall. Fainall shouts that Mirabell hasn't heard the last of this. Arabella addresses Marwood and tells her that she looks so upset that she better vent her anger. Marwood, humiliated and defeated, swears that she'll spend the rest of her life trying to exact revenge. Fainall and Marwood depart.

Wilfull's manly bravado finally becomes useful when Fainall tries to attack his wife and Wilfull defends her. The once foolish Wilfull is maturing and his progress makes the decline of Marwood and Fainall seem even more pronounced. Meanwhile, Fainall and Marwood are now lost to a desire for revenge—they are doomed to loveless and trustless lives.

ACT 5, SCENE 14

Once the two villains leave, Wishfort turns to her daughter and praises her prudence. Arabella gives all the credit to Mirabell, her "cautious friend." Wishfort, then, turns to thank Mirabell for his help and tells him that she will keep her promises. First, she pardons "Sir Rowland" and Foible. But she tells Mirabell that it will be awkward to break the news to her nephew, Wilfull, that he will not be marrying Millamant.

As Wishfort is forced to undo all her vengeful acts, happy spirits and forgiveness flow readily from everyone onstage. Both love and fortunes have been preserved, all according to Mirabell's plan.

Mirabell assures her not to worry. He tells her that he only needs her consent to the marriage because Wilfull never actually intended on marrying Millamant but only said he did as a generous favor to his friend Mirabell. Wilfull reaffirms his desire travel and asks if she can spare Petulant and Witwoud to serve as his travel companions. Wishfort is delighted by this turn of events and readily agrees. Petulant and Witwoud are still confused by what's happening but find the idea of traveling with Wilfull more or less agreeable.

After Mirabell unveils his last secret, the pretend engagement between Wilfull and Millamant, Congreve fulfills the audience's expectations that characters loyal to Mirabell will be rewarded for their participation in his schemes. Notably, the three fools have joined forces, finding friendship and intellectual compatibility in each other.

Turning to the lovers, Wishfort blesses their engagement. Millamant complains good-naturedly about Mirabell not "taking" her. She asks him whether he wants her to give herself to him again. He kisses her and tells her that he would have her do so, over and over. He implores heaven that he love her "not too well."

Millamant is slowly coming around to relinquishing some of her staunch ideas about independence. Mirabell's prayer not to love Millamant excessively suggests that he will work hard to fulfill her expectations, to give her love and *freedom.*

Wilfull interrupts the lovers and tells them they'll have time to make love later. He calls for a dance and a song. Wishfort excuses herself from the festivities, claiming that she is fatigued and worried that Fainall will do something desperate. Mirabell reassures her that Fainall cannot hurt the family. Before Wishfort leaves, Mirabell returns the deed to Arabella, and advises her that if she uses it properly, it will be the best way to keep Fainall in check.

It is significant that Mrs. Fainall is now being called Arabella, her given name. The name change corresponds to her regaining of her independence, both in her freedom from Fainall and, now, by being given the document that controls her fortune. She has become once again herself, in control of herself, in love and money.

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