

A painting of a woman in 18th-century attire sitting on a sofa, holding a bouquet of flowers and a letter, with a dog lying on the floor.

CLASSICS TO GO

**THE WAY
OF THE WORLD**

WILLIAM CONGREVE

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**TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
RALPH, EARL OF MOUNTAGUE, ETC.**

MY LORD,—Whether the world will arraign me of vanity or not, that I have presumed to dedicate this comedy to your lordship, I am yet in doubt; though, it may be, it is some degree of vanity even to doubt of it. One who has at any time had the honour of your lordship's conversation, cannot be supposed to think very meanly of that which he would prefer to your perusal. Yet it were to incur the imputation of too much sufficiency to pretend to such a merit as might abide the test of your lordship's censure.

Whatever value may be wanting to this play while yet it is mine, will be sufficiently made up to it when it is once become your lordship's; and it is my security, that I cannot have overrated it more by my dedication than your lordship will dignify it by your patronage.

That it succeeded on the stage was almost beyond my expectation; for but little of it was prepared for that general taste which seems now to be predominant in the palates of our audience.

Those characters which are meant to be ridiculed in most of our comedies are of fools so gross, that in my humble opinion they should rather disturb than divert the well-natured and reflecting part of an audience; they are rather objects of charity than contempt, and instead of moving our mirth, they ought very often to excite our compassion.

This reflection moved me to design some characters which should appear ridiculous not so much through a natural folly (which is incorrigible, and therefore not proper for the stage)

as through an affected wit: a wit which, at the same time that it is affected, is also false. As there is some difficulty in the formation of a character of this nature, so there is some hazard which attends the progress of its success upon the stage: for many come to a play so overcharged with criticism, that they very often let fly their censure, when through their rashness they have mistaken their aim. This I had occasion lately to observe: for this play had been acted two or three days before some of these hasty judges could find the leisure to distinguish betwixt the character of a Witwoud and a Truewit.

I must beg your lordship's pardon for this digression from the true course of this epistle; but that it may not seem altogether impertinent, I beg that I may plead the occasion of it, in part of that excuse of which I stand in need, for recommending this comedy to your protection. It is only by the countenance of your lordship, and the *few* so qualified, that such who write with care and pains can hope to be distinguished: for the prostituted name of poet promiscuously levels all that bear it.

Terence, the most correct writer in the world, had a Scipio and a Lelius, if not to assist him, at least to support him in his reputation. And notwithstanding his extraordinary merit, it may be their countenance was not more than necessary.

The purity of his style, the delicacy of his turns, and the justness of his characters, were all of them beauties which the greater part of his audience were incapable of tasting. Some of the coarsest strokes of Plautus, so severely censured by Horace, were more likely to affect the multitude; such, who come with expectation to laugh at the last act of a play, and are better entertained with two or three unseasonable jests than with the artful solution of the fable.

As Terence excelled in his performances, so had he great advantages to encourage his undertakings, for he built most on the foundations of Menander: his plots were generally modelled, and his characters ready drawn to his hand. He copied Menander; and Menander had no less light in the formation of his characters from the observations of Theophrastus, of whom he was a disciple; and Theophrastus, it is known, was not only the disciple, but the immediate successor of Aristotle, the first and greatest judge of poetry. These were great models to design by; and the further advantage which Terence possessed towards giving his plays the due ornaments of purity of style, and justness of manners, was not less considerable from the freedom of conversation which was permitted him with Lelius and Scipio, two of the greatest and most polite men of his age. And, indeed, the privilege of such a conversation is the only certain means of attaining to the perfection of dialogue.

If it has happened in any part of this comedy that I have gained a turn of style or expression more correct, or at least more corrigible, than in those which I have formerly written, I must, with equal pride and gratitude, ascribe it to the honour of your lordship's admitting me into your conversation, and that of a society where everybody else was so well worthy of you, in your retirement last summer from the town: for it was immediately after, that this comedy was written. If I have failed in my performance, it is only to be regretted, where there were so many not inferior either to a Scipio or a Lelius, that there should be one wanting equal in capacity to a Terence.

If I am not mistaken, poetry is almost the only art which has not yet laid claim to your lordship's patronage. Architecture and painting, to the great honour of our country, have flourished under your influence and protection. In the

meantime, poetry, the eldest sister of all arts, and parent of most, seems to have resigned her birthright, by having neglected to pay her duty to your lordship, and by permitting others of a later extraction to prepossess that place in your esteem, to which none can pretend a better title. Poetry, in its nature, is sacred to the good and great: the relation between them is reciprocal, and they are ever propitious to it. It is the privilege of poetry to address them, and it is their prerogative alone to give it protection.

This received maxim is a general apology for all writers who consecrate their labours to great men: but I could wish, at this time, that this address were exempted from the common pretence of all dedications; and that as I can distinguish your lordship even among the most deserving, so this offering might become remarkable by some particular instance of respect, which should assure your lordship that I am, with all due sense of your extreme worthiness and humanity, my lord, your lordship's most obedient and most obliged humble servant,

WILL. CONGREVE.

PROLOGUE.

Spoken by MR. BETTERTON.

OF those few fools, who with ill stars are curst,
Sure scribbling fools, called poets, fare the worst:
For they're a sort of fools which fortune makes,
And, after she has made 'em fools, forsakes.
With Nature's oafs 'tis quite a diff'rent case,
For Fortune favours all her idiot race.
In her own nest the cuckoo eggs we find,
O'er which she broods to hatch the changeling kind:
No portion for her own she has to spare,
So much she dotes on her adopted care.

Poets are bubbles, by the town drawn in,
Suffered at first some trifling stakes to win:
But what unequal hazards do they run!
Each time they write they venture all they've won:
The Squire that's buttered still, is sure to be undone.
This author, heretofore, has found your favour,
But pleads no merit from his past behaviour.
To build on that might prove a vain presumption,
Should grants to poets made admit resumption,
And in Parnassus he must lose his seat,
If that be found a forfeited estate.

He owns, with toil he wrought the following scenes,
But if they're naught ne'er spare him for his pains:
Damn him the more; have no commiseration
For dulness on mature deliberation.
He swears he'll not resent one hissed-off scene,
Nor, like those peevish wits, his play maintain,
Who, to assert their sense, your taste arraign.

Some plot we think he has, and some new thought;
Some humour too, no farce—but that's a fault.
Satire, he thinks, you ought not to expect;
For so reformed a town who dares correct?
To please, this time, has been his sole pretence,
He'll not instruct, lest it should give offence.
Should he by chance a knave or fool expose,
That hurts none here, sure here are none of those.
In short, our play shall (with your leave to show it)
Give you one instance of a passive poet,
Who to your judgments yields all resignation:
So save or damn, after your own discretion.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

MEN.	
FAINALL, in love with Mrs. Marwood,	<i>Mr. Betterton.</i>
MIRABELL, in love with Mrs. Millamant,	<i>Mr. Verbruggen.</i>
WITWOUD, follower of Mrs. Millamant,	<i>Mr. Bowen.</i>
PETULANT, follower of Mrs. Millamant,	<i>Mr. Bowman.</i>
SIR WILFULL WITWOUD, half brother to Witwoud, and nephew to Lady Wishfort,	<i>Mr. Underhill.</i>
WAITWELL, servant to Mirabell,	<i>Mr. Bright.</i>
WOMEN.	
LADY WISHFORT, enemy to Mirabell, for having falsely pretended love to her,	<i>Mrs. Leigh.</i>
MRS. MILLAMANT, a fine lady, niece to Lady Wishfort, and loves Mirabell,	<i>Mrs. Bracegirdle.</i>
MRS. MARWOOD, friend to Mr. Fainall, and likes Mirabell,	<i>Mrs. Barry.</i>
MRS. FAINALL, daughter to Lady Wishfort, and wife to Fainall, formerly friend to Mirabell,	<i>Mrs. Bowman.</i>
FOIBLE, woman to Lady Wishfort,	<i>Mrs. Willis.</i>
MINCING, woman to Mrs. Millamant,	<i>Mrs. Prince.</i>

DANCERS, FOOTMEN, ATTENDANTS.

SCENE: London.

The time equal to that of the presentation.

ACT I.—SCENE I.

A Chocolate-house.

MIRABELL *and* FAINALL *rising from cards.* BETTY *waiting.*

MIRA. You are a fortunate man, Mr. Fainall.

FAIN. Have we done?

MIRA. What you please. I'll play on to entertain you.

FAIN. No, I'll give you your revenge another time, when you are not so indifferent; you are thinking of something else now, and play too negligently: the coldness of a losing gamester lessens the pleasure of the winner. I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune than I'd make love to a woman who undervalued the loss of her reputation.

MIRA. You have a taste extremely delicate, and are for refining on your pleasures.

FAIN. Prithee, why so reserved? Something has put you out of humour.

MIRA. Not at all: I happen to be grave to-day, and you are gay; that's all.

FAIN. Confess, Millamant and you quarrelled last night, after I left you; my fair cousin has some humours that would tempt the patience of a Stoic. What, some coxcomb came in, and was well received by her, while you were by?

MIRA. Witwoud and Petulant, and what was worse, her aunt, your wife's mother, my evil genius—or to sum up all in her

own name, my old Lady Wishfort came in.

FAIN. Oh, there it is then: she has a lasting passion for you, and with reason.—What, then my wife was there?

MIRA. Yes, and Mrs. Marwood and three or four more, whom I never saw before; seeing me, they all put on their grave faces, whispered one another, then complained aloud of the vapours, and after fell into a profound silence.

FAIN. They had a mind to be rid of you.

MIRA. For which reason I resolved not to stir. At last the good old lady broke through her painful taciturnity with an invective against long visits. I would not have understood her, but Millamant joining in the argument, I rose and with a constrained smile told her, I thought nothing was so easy as to know when a visit began to be troublesome; she reddened and I withdrew, without expecting her reply.

FAIN. You were to blame to resent what she spoke only in compliance with her aunt.

MIRA. She is more mistress of herself than to be under the necessity of such a resignation.

FAIN. What? though half her fortune depends upon her marrying with my lady's approbation?

MIRA. I was then in such a humour, that I should have been better pleased if she had been less discreet.

FAIN. Now I remember, I wonder not they were weary of you; last night was one of their cabal-nights: they have 'em three times a week and meet by turns at one another's apartments, where they come together like the coroner's inquest, to sit upon the murdered reputations of the week. You and I are excluded, and it was once proposed that all the male sex should be excepted; but somebody moved that