WILLIAM CONGREVE

THE OLD BACHELOR

William Congreve

The Old Bachelor

A Comedy

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INTRODUCTION

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Before repeating such known facts of Congreve’s life as seem agreeable to the present occasion, and before attempting (with the courage of one’s office) to indicate with truth what manner of man he was, and what are the varying qualities of his four comedies, it seems well to discuss and have done with two questions, obviously

pertinent indeed, but of a wider scope than the works of any one writer.

The first is a stupid question, which may be happily dismissed with brief ceremony. Grossness of language—the phrase is an assumption—is a matter of time and place, a relative matter altogether. There is a thing, and a generation finds a name for it. The delicacy which prompts a later generation to reject that name is by no means necessarily a result of stricter habits, is far more often due to the flatness which comes of untiring repetition and to the greater piquancy of litotes. I am told that there are, or were, people in America who reject the word ‘leg’ as a gross word, but they must have found a synonym. So there is not a word in Congreve for which there is not some equivalent expression in contemporary writing. He says this or that: your modern writers say so-and-so. One man may even think the monosyllables in better taste than the periphrases. Another may sacrifice to his intolerance thereof such enjoyment as he was capable of taking from the greatest triumphs of diction or observation: he is free to choose. It may be granted that to one unfamiliar with the English of two centuries since the grossness of Congreve’s language may seem excessive—like splashes of colour occurring too frequently in the arrangement of a wall. But that is merely a result of novelty: given time and habit, a more artistic perspective will be achieved.

The second question is more complex. Since Jeremy Collier let off his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, there has never lacked a critic to chastise or to deplore—the more effective and

irritating course—not simply the coarseness but, the immorality of our old comedies, their attitude towards and their peculiar interests in life. Without affirming that we are now come to the Golden Age of criticism, one may rejoice that modern methods have taught quite humble critics to discriminate between issues, and to deal with such a matter as this with some mental detachment. The great primal fallacy comes from a habit of expecting everything in everything. Just as in a picture it is not enough for some people that it is well drawn and well painted, but they demand an interesting story, a fine sentiment, a great thought: so since our national glory is understood to be the happy home, the happy home must be triumphant everywhere, even in satiric comedy. The best expression of this fallacy is in Thackeray. Concluding a most eloquent, and a somewhat patronising examination of Congreve, ‘Ah!’ he exclaims, ‘it’s a weary feast, that banquet of wit where no love is.’ The answer is plain: comedy of manners is comedy of manners, and satire is satire; introduce ‘love’—an appeal, one supposes, to sympathy with strictly legitimate and common affection and a glorification of the happy home—and the rules of your art compel you to satirise affection and to make the happy home ridiculous: a truly deplorable work, which the incriminated dramatists were discreet enough for the most part to avoid. The remark brings us to the first of the half-truths, which cause the complexity of the subject. The dramatists whose withers the well-intentioned and disastrous Collier wrung seem to have thought their best answer was to pose as people with a mission—certainly Congreve so posed—to reform the world with an exhibition

of its follies. An amusing answer, no doubt, of which the absurdity is obvious! It does, however, contain a half-truth. The idea of *The Way of the World's* reforming adulterers—observe the quotation from Horace on the title-page—is a little delicious; yet the exhibition in a ludicrous light of the thing satirised is surely an end of satiric comedy? The right of the matter is indicated in a sentence which occurs in the dedication of *The Double-Dealer* far more wisely than in Congreve's answer to Collier: 'I should be very glad of an opportunity to make my compliment to those ladies who are offended: but they can no more expect it in a comedy, than to be tickled by a surgeon, when he's letting 'em blood.' Something more than a half-truth is in Charles Lamb's theory, that the old comedy 'has no reference whatever to the world that is': that it is 'the Utopia of Gallantry' merely. Literally, historically, the theory is a fantasy. What the Restoration dramatists did not borrow from France was inspired directly by the court of Charles the Second, and nobody conversant with the memoirs of that court can have any difficulty in matching the fiction with reality. I imagine that Congreve in part accepted a tradition of the stage, but I am also perfectly well assured that he depicted what he saw. How far the virtues we should associate with the Charles the Second spirit may atone for its vices is a question which would take us far into moral philosophy. It is enough to remark that those vices are the exclusive possession of no period: so long as society is constituted in anything like its present order, there must be a section of it for which those vices are the main interest in life. But Charles Lamb's gay and engaging defiance of the kill-joys of

his day has this value: it is most certainly just to say that, in appreciating satiric comedy, ‘our coxcombical moral sense’ must be ‘for a little transitory ease excluded.’

For one may apprehend the whole truth to be somewhat thus. Satiric comedy, or comedy of manners, is the art of making ludicrous in dramatic form some phase of life. The writers of our old comedy thought that certain vices—gambling, adultery, and the like—formed a phase of life which for divers reasons, essential and accidental, lent itself best to their purpose. They may, or may not, have thought they were doing society a service: their real justification is that, as artists, they had to take for their art that material they could use best. They used it according to their lights: Wycherley with a coarse and heavy hand, so that it became nauseous; Etherege with a light touch and a gay perception; Congreve with an instinct of good-breeding, with a sure and extensive observation, and with an incomparable style. But all were justified in choosing for their material just what they chose. They sinned artistically, now here, now there; but to complain of this old comedy as a whole, that vice in it is crammed too closely, is to forget that a play is a picture, not a photograph, of life—is life arranged and coloured—and that comedy of manners is composed of foibles or vices condensed and relieved by one another. In so far as they overdid this work, the comic writers were artistically at fault, and Jeremy Collier was a good critic; but when he and his successors go beyond the artistic objection, one takes leave to say, they misapprehend the thing criticised. To complain that ‘love’ and common morality have no place in satiric comedy is either to contemplate ridicule of them or to ask

comedy to be other than satiric. We know what happened when the dramatists gave way: there followed, Hazlitt says, ‘those *do-me-good*, lack-a-daisical, whining, make-believe comedies in the next age, which are enough to set one to sleep, and where the author tries in vain to be merry and wise in the same breath.’ These in place of ‘the court, the gala day of wit and pleasure, of gallantry, and Charles the Second!’ And all because people would not keep their functions distinct, and remember that as a comedy they were in a court of art and not in a court of law! The old comedy is dead, and its spirit gone from the stage: I have but endeavoured to show that no harm need come to our phylacteries, if a flame start from its ashes in the printed book.

II.

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William Congreve was born at Bardsey, near Leeds, and was baptized on 10th February 1669 [1670]. The Congreves were a Staffordshire family, of an antiquity of four hundred years at the date of the poet’s birth. Richard, his grandfather, was a redoubtable Cavalier, and William, his father, an officer in the army. The latter was given a command at Youghal, while his son was still an infant, and becoming shortly afterwards agent to Lord Cork, removed to Lismore. So it chanced that the poet had his schooling at Kilkenny (with Swift), and proceeded to Trinity College, Dublin, in 1685, rejoining Swift, and like his friend becoming a pupil of St. George Ashe, the mathematician. In 1688 he left Dublin, remained with his people in Staffordshire for

some two years, entered himself at the Temple, and came upon the town with *The Old Bachelor* in January 1692. *The Double-Dealer* was produced in November 1693. In 1694 a storm in the theatre led to a secession of Betterton and other renowned players from Drury Lane: with the result that a new playhouse was opened in Lincoln's Inn Fields, on 30th April 1695, with *Love for Love*. In the same year Congreve was appointed 'Commissioner for Licensing Hackney Coaches.' *The Mourning Bride* was produced in 1697, and was followed, oddly enough, by the controversy, or rather 'row,' with Jeremy Collier. In March 1700 came *The Way of the World*. The poet was made Commissioner of Wine-Licences in 1705, and in 1714 with his Jamaica secretaryship and his places in the Customs and the delightful 'Pipe-Office,' he had an income of twelve hundred pounds a year. He died at his house in Surrey Street, Strand, on 19th January 1728 [1729].

One or two comments on these dates are obvious. They dissipate the Thackerayan fable that on the production of *The Old Bachelor*, the fortunate young author received a shower of sinecures, 'all for writing a comedy.'

> 'And crazy Congreve scarce could spare
> A shilling to discharge a chair,'

writes Swift, and 'crazy' indicates that Congreve was gouty before he was rich. But then, the gout was a very early factor in his life, and one may call the line an exaggeration. Another couplet:

‘Thus Congreve spent in writing plays,
And one poor office, half his days:’

probably expresses the truth. With his plays and his hackney coaches he doubtless got through his twenties and thirties with no very hardly grinding poverty, and at forty or so was comfortably secure. But another fact, which the dates bring out very sharply, has a different interest. At an age when Swift was beginning to try his powers, Congreve’s work was done. A few odes, a few letters he was still to write, but no more comedies. Was it ill-health? or because the town had all but damned his greatest play? or because he cared more for life than for art?

III.

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The question brings one to an attempted appreciation of the man. Mr. Gosse, for whose *Life* I would express my gratitude, confesses that ‘it is not very easy to construct a definite portrait of Congreve.’ But that it baffled that very new journalist, Mrs. Manley, in his own day, and Mr. Gosse, with his information, in ours, to give ‘salient points’ to Congreve’s character, proves in itself an essential characteristic, which need be negatively stated only by choice. That no amusing eccentricities are recorded, no ludicrous adventures, no persistent quarrels, implies, taken with other facts we know, that he was a well-bred man of the world, with the habit of society: that in itself is a definite personal quality. One supposes him an ease-loving man, not inclined to clown for the amusement of his world. He was