

Explain the relationships between the various main characters.

At the beginning of the play, Fainall and Mirabell appear to be friends having just finished playing cards with each other. It is later suggested that Mirabell has earlier been in a relationship with Mrs Fainall and Mrs Marwood, Fainall's mistress. Mirabell has also plotted and pretended to be in love with Lady Wishfort, the mother of Mrs Fainall, until Mrs Marwood exposed this as untrue, and all because he wants to marry Lady Wishfort's niece, Millamant.

Lady Wishfort is reluctant to give her permission for Mirabell to marry Millamant, and it is suggested that this is because she has also been infatuated with him. She finally gives her consent when Mirabell bargains this point with her in return for him helping to stop Fainall in his attempt to blackmail her.

2. Consider the portrayal of women in this play

Lady Wishfort is the most powerful female character in the play in terms of wealth and status, and is also drawn as a figure of ridicule as when she is mocked for ageing and for being wrinkled. Her femininity and vanity are used as weapons against her, and her appearance is used as a butt for jokes.

Read simply, this characterization may be interpreted as overtly patriarchal in its construction. Conversely, however, this work also critiques patriarchal dominance and invites us to regard sex and adultery as commonplaces rather than amoral activities. Female sexuality in particular is referred to intermittently throughout the play and it is a given that the female characters are as likely to be unfaithful as the male characters. From this perspective, Congreve may be read as endowing his women with a form of sexual liberation as he depicts them as sexual beings rather than victims of male predators.

3. Analyze the power structures at work here and discuss how the balance of power is finally restored.

As previously mentioned, Lady Wishfort is the most powerful character in terms of wealth and social standing, but this play also subverts her position with the use of humor and deception.

The most telling challenge to her position, and to the aristocracy, comes when Waitwell (Mirabell's servant) follows orders and disguises himself as Sir Rowland. This is done as a convoluted means of cheating her into agreeing to give her consent for Millamant to marry Mirabell, but also adds humor to proceedings as she is temporarily fooled by this interloper.

Momentarily, Waitwell upsets the hierarchical order as he fools 'my Lady' and uses her vanity against her. From a widened perspective, his disguise demonstrates a possible fluidity in the power structures, but this is soon frozen when the truth is revealed and Waitwell is reported to the authorities. In this case, then, power is restored by Lady Wishfort when recourse to the law is taken.

#### 4. Outline the context of Restoration comedies.

From 1642 to 1660, English public theatres were closed under Puritan rule. The term Restoration refers to the restoration of the royalty, of Charles II to the throne, and with this came the opening up of the theatres once more. Restoration comedy is often regarded as being of the period from 1660 to the early 1700s and Congreve is seen as a main writer of this genre in the later period.

Restoration comedies are known for the frankness with which they refer to sex and are dependent upon the use of a bawdy wit that acts against the dry morality of their puritanical forebears.

#### 5. Analyze the portrayal of marriage in this play.

As befits a Restoration comedy, this play is infused with a wit that undermines the received morality that marriage is or should be divine. Time and again, the characters reveal their hypocrisy and promiscuity and Fainall's name, for example, exposes immediately that he rarely tells the truth.

The question of whether to marry for love or money is also broached here and it is with Mirabell and Millamant that the concept of marrying for love appears to be established. Saying that, Mirabell's attempt to trick Lady Wishfort is based on his desire to gain her consent and so be a beneficiary of Millamant's inheritance.

Fainall's attempt to blackmail his mother-in-law reveals how his marriage is based on economics. His wife's contract with Mirabell similarly reveals how she too was concerned with this, as she protected her assets before marriage, and so recognized the dangers that a woman of means could potentially lose her wealth once she married.

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