

LECTURE 4

WAY OF THE WORLD

ACT IV-the act is an important one as it has the proviso scene. It is in this act that Millamant and Mirabell choose to commit to matrimony but with certain pre-conditions. Congreve deliberately tries to grant credibility to Mirabell and Millamant's relationship by depicting it as one based on mutual understanding. The couple, by showing interest in marriage, wants to sustain their relationship and invest in marriage. At the same time, the proviso scene also reminds us that marriage as an institution would work only if the partners involved gave each other space and there was a system of checks and balances through which the husband and the wife would be able to practice fidelity in a culture which had a dominant strain of promiscuity.

Highlights of the scene:

- Lady Wishfort's elaborate attempts to woo Sir Rowland
- Wilfull Witwoud's unsuccessful attempt to woo Millamant-the episode once again plays on the motif of country versus town with Millamant's urbane sophistication contrasting with Wilfull Witwoud's coarse, drunken behaviour.
- Ll.158-289.-This entire section is important. Not only does it reveal Millamant's independent nature. This section also indirectly critiques the Restoration culture and its excessive reliance on certain types of conduct. Millamant's provisos establish her agency as well as her ability to rise above the traditional modes of behaviour expected out of a woman. Mirabell, too, tries to rise above his reputation as a rake and agrees substantially to Millamant's demands.
- Millamant later confides in Mrs Fainall that she loves Mirabell violently. Yet in the proviso scene we see that she holds her own and there is no passionate protestation of love as she lays down her provisos accordingly.
- Witwoud and Petulant carry on carousing-the episode provides situational humour.
- Ll.489-till the end-Sir Wilfull Witwoud and Lady Wishfort's ritualistic wooing-reveals the artificiality of the age-the episode reveals the pretensions of Lady Wishfort-Foible successfully prevents the premature failure of Mirabell's plot by lying most resourcefully-the subplot is well on its way to be resolved, though the opening action of Act V does provide last minute impediments.

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