

1 | *Regime change theatre*

A little before one o'clock in the afternoon two men play cards over that relatively novel luxury, hot chocolate. A servant hovers. The game finishes, they get up, and the loser ventures a comment:

You are a fortunate man, Mr Fainall.

Until the name, it could be a routine quip (*lucky!*). But it's hard to feign all and be thought entirely honest, even at cards. Perhaps used to such banter, Fainall only expresses surprise that the game is done, with a dose of frustration that his companion has been playing 'negligently'. A walkover, it seems, is unsatisfying; he wants to play hard.

By normal standards this Fainall, though competitive, looks the more engaging of the two; the other man is evidently 'reserved', 'out of humour', needing to be coaxed into companionship. What's troubling him, it turns out, is an affair of the heart: a quarrel with the heiress he's in love with, Millamant (her name says she has a thousand other options), and her meddling aunt, Lady Wishfort (hers needs no explanation). The discovery underlines the emerging difference between the two card players: one skims across the surface of conversation, the other broods on what lies beneath. Audiences may be surprised to find, nearly a hundred lines in, that the moody man's own name shimmers with success. He may lose to a fortunate Mr Fainall, but 'Mirabell' assures him of his ultimate reward.

Fast-forward three hours, and he gets it. An endgame is in motion, with a different deck and the ultimate trump card. A servant brings in a black box. Out of it emerges a legal deed to prove that Fainall's estranged wife has left all her money in trust to her former lover, none other than Mirabell. Defeated by law, Fainall resorts to cruder weaponry. He draws a sword on Mrs Fainall, but is disarmed before leaving with a remark as ambiguous as the one that had introduced him over cards and chocolate. Is it to be an action at court or swords at dawn when he growls 'Mirabell, you shall hear of this, sir'? We never find out.

Like many fictions before and since, from Terence's *Brothers* (160 BC) to Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers* (1983), William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700) employs rival heroes to explore rival values. Usually the rivalries are hard to mistake: nurture against nature, class against class. What makes *The Way of the World* distinctive are the obstacles Congreve puts in the way of telling just how different the rival heroes and their values really are. For all their contrasting cheerfulness at cards, Mirabell and Fainall are of a type. Their pasts are not so much intertwined as intertwin'd. They have shared the same woman; they exhibit the same sharp tongue and the same contempt for the same people. In conniving they are all but equal. When they unfold their common network of social relations they understand each other better than anyone else could hope to understand *them*. Mirabell describes Lady Wishfort to Fainall as 'your Wife's Mother, my evil Genius', while country cousin Sir Wilful Witwoud is introduced by Fainall as though to establish the man's claim to some unnamed bequest: '[H]e is half Brother to this Witwoud by a former Wife, who was sister to my Lady Wishfort, my Wife's Mother.'

Still, inch by inch, confidence grows that these men's names – star versus cheat – really mean what they say. Listen to how they talk about themselves. Increasingly, Fainall brings chilly, forensic certainty to his cuckold's situation, as if preparing a legal brief:

I am married already; so that's over. My wife has played the jade with me – well, that's over too. I never loved her, or if I had, why that would have been over too by this time. Jealous of her I cannot be, for I am certain; so there's an end of jealousy. Weary of her, I am, and shall be. No, there's no end of that; no, that were too much to hope. Thus far concerning my repose; now for my reputation. As to my own, I married not for it; so that's out of the question. And as to my part in my wife's – why she had parted with hers before; so bringing none to me, she can take none from me...¹

Using reason to cheer himself up, he merely demonstrates how darkly unhappy he really is. Mirabell, by contrast, speaks a language of what has been described as 'enlightened ruthlessness', allowing room for self-interest in the pursuit of greater good.² Justifying his cynicism in marrying off a former lover to a man neither he nor she could trust, he sounds as much novelist as lawyer, arranging the pieces in a narrative to give each person their just deserts:

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

David Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Regime change theatre*

3

Why do we daily commit disagreeable and dangerous actions? To save that idol, reputation. If the familiarities of our loves had produced that consequence, of which you were apprehensive, where could you have fixed a father's name with credit, but on a husband? I knew Fainall to be a Man lavish of his Morals, an interested and professing friend, a false and designing Lover; yet one whose wit and outward fair behaviour have gained a reputation with the town, enough to make that woman stand excused, who has suffered herself to be won by his addresses. A better man ought not to have been sacrificed to the occasion; a worse had not answered to the purpose. When you are weary of him, you know your remedy.³

It is hardly edifying. Content to dump his unhappy ex onto a 'false and designing Lover', Mirabell thinks nothing of the prospect of his own (imagined) child growing up with 'a Man lavish of his Morals' for a father. But it is what he offers for her future that really distinguishes him: a remedy for marital misery and security against the financial threat of her husband's recklessness, in prose that envelops past and future options as though there were no others. Out of the terminal black box pops more than a piece of paper. It's the fine difference between the rival heroes: Fainall talks like a lawyer; Mirabell acts like one.

In some ways *The Way of the World* confirms popular stereotypes of Restoration Drama: clever young man, GSOH, colourful past, foppish acquaintances, seeks beautiful heiress for sizzling conversation and lifetime freedom from debt. But the games Congreve plays with audiences and readers are as complex as the games the heroes play with each other. This is a 'late' work for its author, its genre and for the period usually thought of as the 'Restoration': a work that stands at the horizons of individual and collective achievement. A minority contribution to a co-authored farce aside, Congreve did not write another comedy.⁴ The technical refinement of this one could not be matched nor its transformations of comic conventions repeated. Its enigmatic plotting asks serious questions. Does Mirabell really step out, bright and distinct as his name, from Fainall's shadow? Was Congreve entirely in command of the games he played with his audience? He was himself both lawyer and, by virtue of his 1692 *Incognita*, novelist. It might be speculated that the rival heroes of *The Way of the World* play out a struggle for writerly self-definition. Peter Brooks deploys Freudian terms to express the bipolar nature of life writing:

How we narrate a life... is at least a double process, the attempt to incorporate within an orderly narrative the more devious, persistent and powerful plot whose logic is dictated by desire.⁵

Karl Miller's 1987 study of Victorian fiction, *Doubles*, examines narratives in which heroes try fruitlessly to escape from others they can't help resembling.⁶ No matter how hard we try to distinguish Mirabell from Fainall, their outlines blur. If Mirabell succeeds, it is largely because he is a 'more devious, persistent and powerful' plotter than the rival whose sordid values he endeavours to suppress.

Congreve's 'double process' gives voice to more than a hypothesized inner struggle. It refracts its historical moment. The carefree young men of Restoration Comedy are often likened to that brilliant conversationalist and bed hopper King Charles II. But Charles had died in 1685, fifteen years before *The Way of the World*. Succeeding him, his Catholic brother, James, lasted only three years before being ousted by parliamentary action in favour of his son-in-law, the Protestant Prince William of Orange, who duly became King William III. The shadow cast by Fainall is that of a dynasty, the Stuarts, recently departed and little mourned. Mirabell's way with the world seems to embody a new outlook on human nature: naturally resistant to tyranny, guided by law and, in its pragmatic regard for the greater good, fundamentally sociable.

Two philosophers gave formal definition to this outlook. In 1690 John Locke defined freedom as 'not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man'. '[I]f we consider the nature of mankind,' wrote James Tyrrell two years later,

in the whole course of their lives, it ought to be considered as one entire system of bodies, consisting of several particular parts; so that nothing can be done in relation to any man's life, family, or fortune, which does not in some way or other, either benefit or prejudice those things which are most dear to others also...⁷

It is a benign sentiment sitting at the top of a slippery slope. Conspicuously virtuous conduct might accidentally 'prejudice' someone else, so surely it is important to perform actions that are not somehow good in themselves but likely to have the least bad effects. There is the catch. Might it not be better to act badly if better consequences follow than from always acting well? In 1714 Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* argued that arrant selfishness might be the best route to public good:

It is not only the desire of company, good nature, pity, affability and other graces of a fair outside which make a man sociable... [H]is vilest and most

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

David Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Regime change theatre*

5

hateful qualities are the most necessary accomplishments to fit him for the largest and...the happiest and most flourishing societies.⁸

Mandeville might have been describing Congreve's *Mirabell*.

Political, ethical and stylistic complexity may explain why *The Way of the World* was not a runaway success in the theatre. Five performances are recorded for March 1700. Congreve claimed he never thought of the play as a crowd-pleaser. Like the plays of the Roman Terence ('the most correct writer in the world'), this was intended to advance 'Beauties which the greater part of [the] Audience were incapable of tasting'.⁹ But, if Congreve looked to the past for justification, the complex form of *The Way of the World* ushered in the future. Congreve had written that his novel *Incognita* was designed to capture in a prose tale the 'design, contexture and result' of a drama; in his last comedy, he explored a theatrical language that seems more at home in the novel.¹⁰ Peter Conrad argues that *The Way of the World* rewards behaviour 'which is of necessity untheatrical'; the good nature that Congreve asks audiences to accept fails to show itself in the form he is using. It would take a novel, Conrad proposes, to show how the more devious, persistent and powerful *Mirabell* might be vouched for 'from within'.¹¹

How much good nature is manifest in the most memorable passage of the play is seriously open to question. *Mirabell* and *Millamant* agree terms for their marriage in the so-called 'proviso scene'. She demands a life free from early mornings, pet names and overfamiliarity, and insists on control of her social circle. As long as he knocks at her door before coming in, she will be content. Those conditions agreed, she admits that she may, perhaps with teeth clenched in prescience, by degrees dwindle into a wife. But, where she sets out to protect her narrowing sphere, he envisages himself already in the room, shaping her conduct and person. She is to have no best friend, no make-up, no gossip and no alcohol. On no account must she over-coddle the child of their marriage, who will, of course, be a son. It is a change of regime contemplated in the most polite terms, but no less assertively for that; not for nothing is Congreve sometimes thought of as the least feminist of the major Restoration dramatists. In marriage as in law, *Mirabell* is simply more devious, persistent and powerful.

Standing at multiple thresholds, *The Way of the World* is therefore a many-sided response to regime changes that were personal and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

David Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

political, stylistic and generic; it begins this book because it crystallizes like no other work the preoccupations of Restoration Drama. Defining the previously undefined genre of regime change *fiction*, the novelist Patrick McGuinness writes of its tendency to record the cusp of history from the slipstream rather than on the wave of events:

[Y]ou can have the weight of history crushing the characters, but you can also have the characters' daily travails trumping the world-changing events around them.¹²

From Stendhal to the contemporary Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, regime change fiction sees events through the Rosencranzes and Guildensterns of the world rather than its Hamlets and Claudiuses. Drama has traditionally favoured the heroic figures who help create and then ride the waves of history. Restoration Drama has its share of those, but its most nuanced responses are often found in 'daily travails' or, more often, daily leisure: in a man rising from cards, for example, and wondering when the secrets of a black box might finally allow him to prevail over his uncanny double, the *unfortunate* Mr Fainall.

The year of *The Way of the World*, 1700, is often taken to mark the end of the period called 'the Restoration'. In fact, this year is only one of any number of possible endings, depending on one's discipline and choice of death. Literary histories often cite 1700 because that is when the period's most prolific writer, John Dryden, died; theatre scholars may prefer 1710, when the most prominent Restoration actor and his friend, Thomas Betterton, followed him. Political historians usually opt either for 1688, the year James II's escape to France made way for William III, or 1714, when James's daughter (and William's sister-in-law), Queen Anne, succumbed to the toll taken by seventeen pregnancies.

When the period began is less controversial. There is little argument, either, over which monarch best embodies its excitements and failures. On 25 May 1660 he stepped from a barge at Dover to reclaim an inheritance lost eleven years before with his father's head. Four days later John Evelyn was in the huge crowd that saw him process through London. Evelyn was a man of unwavering royalist principles at a time when many found it prudent to waver. In the restoration of the thirty-year-old Charles II he saw a grand mythical homecoming that inspired this, the last word in street theatre:

[A] triumph of above 20,000 horse and foot, brandishing their swords and shouting with inexpressible joy; the ways strewd with flowers, the bells ringing, the streets hung with tapestry, fountains running with wine; the Mayor, Aldermen, and all the Companies in their liveries, chains of gold, and banners; Lords and Nobles clad in cloth of silver, gold, and velvet; the windows and balconies well set with ladies; trumpets, music, and myriads of people flocking, even so far as from Rochester, so as they were seven hours in passing the City, even from 2 in the afternoon till 9 at night.

I stood in the Strand and beheld it, and blessed God. And all this was done without one drop of blood, and by that very army which rebelled against him; but it was the Lord's doing, for such a Restoration was never mentioned in any history ancient or modern, since the return of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity...¹³

It was not all adulation. Amid the spectacle, even Evelyn felt bound to ask an awkward question. Whose work was this, exactly? That 'very army' that had sent Charles I to the executioner's block? Or 'the Lord's doing'? Miraculous or natural? The same question would be asked between 1660 and 1714 of a host of phenomena, not least the plague that would empty the Strand five years later. Evelyn, confident that the answer was 'both', still needed to remind himself. Seldom has the word 'but' been made to work harder ('but it was the Lord's doing'), quelling the suspicion that the biblical epic might be only a U-turn by armed men. Over the succeeding decades many others would reawaken the suspicion in pamphlets, poems and, especially, plays. Few were able to suppress their doubts as swiftly as Evelyn.

So, while the reach of the term 'Restoration' may vary among academic disciplines, Restoration Drama is steeped in the discipline of political history: specifically, in that of the Stuart dynasty, its principal sponsor, patron, regulator and, obliquely, even in its exile or death throes, subject. No country – and no theatre – survives on ceremony. Triumph it may have been, but Evelyn's day in the Strand was also a bandage on old wounds. As Ronald Hutton puts it,

In the period 1638–42, the tensions between executive and legislature, Church and dissenter, and court and country, had developed to the point of bloodshed. They were to remain a cause of this during every decade until 1690. In this sense, whatever had ended in 1660–2, it was not the English Civil War.¹⁴

The plays of Restoration London might be described as attempts at defusing, resolving, aggravating and skating over these tensions, sometimes all in the space of three hours.

Foreign wars performed a not dissimilar function. Periods of alliance with Catholic France led to aggression against the Protestant Dutch; when diplomacy with Paris wobbled, The Hague became the partner of choice. Restoration politics up to 1688 was in part a heated argument over who the country's more natural ally was, and Restoration plays and players maintained the temperature with stereotypes that progressively helped define what it meant to be English. Flouncing Francophone fops and boorish Dutch burghers supplied measures of indigenous manliness; frightening images of state repression, whether of Dutch merchants inflicting atrocities overseas or torture chambers reminiscent of the Inquisition, argued equally for the rule of English law.¹⁵ Both the fear and the glamour of royal dictatorship found expression in a succession of stage potentates from the Near East, and there was no more vivid ghost of civil war than the fearless outsider who, acting upon will rather than birthright, encapsulated the alluring danger of the Cromwellian revolutionary.

Erasing the past was a prime directive for the most enduring, protean type of all, whose contours can be traced with only a little more definition in Fainall than in Mirabell. The libertine: a young man of healthy appetites, smart patter and little cash. He drew confidence and danger from many sources: from Irish rogues held to represent either royalists or republicans during the civil war, depending on the allegiance of the reporter; from free-thinking pamphleteers of the 1640s and 1650s (even John Milton was described as a libertine); and from aristocrats such as Sir Charles Sedley, whose exploits included standing naked on the balcony of a tavern while 'acting all the postures of lust and buggery that could be imagined, and abusing of scripture'.¹⁶ Sedley's final gesture that day shows where he thought the ultimate sanction for his behaviour lay: washing his penis in a tumbler, he toasted the king.

When the Earl of Halifax wrote a 'Character' of Charles II, he might have had in mind any number of libertine heroes in his chapters on 'Dissimulation', 'Wit and Conversation' and 'Amours and Mistresses' ('[H]e lived with his Ministers as he did with his Mistresses,' Halifax drily observed; 'he used them, but he was not in love with them').¹⁷ Portraits of the king, such as the one by John Michael Wright presented

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

David Roberts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Regime change theatre*

9



Figure 1.1 King Charles II, by John Michael Wright

as Figure 1.1, suggest a charming languor that concealed, as for many a stage libertine, boundless reserves of cunning and deceit.

Dramatic stereotypes necessarily moved with changing times, and it is useful at this point to establish in a little more detail what these changes were. For the sake of convenient introduction, the period from 1660 to 1714 is divided into three phases of regime change. Broadly, the eighteen years until 1678 saw a slow wearing down of the optimism that had greeted Charles II's homecoming. For the next nine years the fear and reality of Catholic succession dominated political debate. Then, from 1688, the country began to establish itself as a newly reformed, Protestant nation, a nascent imperial power and an unequivocal enemy of France. Taken together, these phases of political life constituted a revolution more profound – and certainly

more lasting – than the one symbolized by the beheading of Charles I. Indeed, it is often said that 1688 saw the revolution that was attempted but squandered in 1649.

Political revolutions

1660–1678

It was in matters of royal succession and religious faith that anxiety about the nation's past and future found vital sustenance. Charles II and his Portuguese wife, Catherine of Braganza, produced no heir. Second in line was Charles's brother, James, Duke of York, who evoked memories of an older national trauma, reaching back beyond the English Civil War to the 1550s, when English Protestants were burned at the stake in the reign of Mary Tudor. Suspected of Catholic inclinations soon after the Restoration, ten years on James made a public conversion to the old faith at the very time when a treaty was being negotiated with France. It was not just music, drama and cash that set France apart; the country was a standing exhibition of how absolute power could be wielded by a charismatic Catholic monarch.

Charles II ruled in the deep shadow cast by his cousin, Louis XIV, the 'Sun King', craving a French style of monarchy without the means to achieve it. Accordingly, he also ruled in Louis's pocket. Through a highly efficient diplomatic network, the French king ensured that selected parliamentarians and courtiers were, in the parlance of the day, 'pensioners of France'. The arrangement helped smooth the passage to occasional war with the Dutch, and Louis's generosity extended to the English throne. In 1670 Charles II committed one of the most treasonous acts ever devised by an English monarch, emulating even his own father's intention to deploy Irish mercenaries against the forces of Parliament in 1641. Signing the secret Treaty of Dover in May 1670, he accepted a huge subsidy from Louis on the promise of converting to Catholicism himself and then persuading his people to follow suit. In the event of resistance, French troops would come to his aid.

Yet he pulled back. His motives were obscure: was it weakness, fear of conflict or an acknowledgement that his ambition to rule like his cousin was futile? By 1672 Charles was passing anti-Catholic legislation to appease Parliament, so excluding his own heir and brother from public office (James had been head of the navy), though not from the