

“Gold and Wit: Congreve, Jonson, and The Evolving Ideal of Women”

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In 1711, Joseph Addison makes a startling claim in his article, “The Aims of The Spectator”: “there are none to whom this paper will be more useful than to the female world” (2646). The article entreats readers to educate themselves by way of his column, to better their conversations with their peers. This especially includes women, who he claims are more interested in their hair and needlepoint. They can make better use of their time, Addison decides, by improving their education and thought. Certainly, what an idea! Women--reading and thinking? What has the 18<sup>th</sup> century come to? Next, you’ll find them offering up their opinions. Though Addison’s inclusion of women was more likely motivated by a simple need to grow his readership, his comments follow a cultural wave: the educated woman was becoming fashionable during the Restoration period, a trend not often seen in the Jacobean period. Between the two eras, there is an observable shift in opinion on women’s social standing, and what makes one the ideal woman. This evolving attitude toward women is shown well in the contrast between Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* and William Congreve’s *The Way of The World*, through their respective lead female characters, the docile Celia and the more-outspoken Millament, both of whom act as representations for shifting interests, particularly with regards to their idealization in male-authored drama.

Published in 1608, *Volpone* is a comedy of humors, favoring a satirical view of social classes and the stereotypes that follow. *Volpone*’s characters are given few

defining traits, reducing them to tropes instead. There are only two women in *Volpone*, though much of the story's focus does lie with Celia. Celia is beautiful, but secluded and innocent to much of the world, due in part to her husband, Corvino, and his restrictive behavior and commonplace abuse. Celia's world is centered around her husband and his strictures: in Act II, scene IV, Corvino grows angry with Celia for so much as being seen at her window. "I should strike / This steel into thee, with as many stabs/As thou wert gaz'd upon with goatish eyes?" he scolds, drawing his sword threateningly (33-36). Corvino's tone throughout the scene is supposed to be read as humorous, but even when he threatens to block out the whole window, his dialogue is charged with violence.

*Volpone*'s other female character, Lady Would-Be Politic, though meant as a comedic figure, also presents a woman who is for the most part controlled. A British woman living in Venice, Lady Would-Be Politics' lines are comedic. She often hassles *Volpone* for afternoon chats—the kind of chats where while venturing out without her husband, she does most of the talking. The worst part, according to *Volpone*, is when she attempts to converse with him about poetry, and incorrectly at that. "The poet / As old in time as Plato, and as knowing / Says that your highest female grace is silence," *Volpone* says, cutting into her chattiness with a subtle reminder of her proper place. "Which of your poets?" Lady Would-Be retorts, "Petrarch, or Tasso, or Dante? / Guarini? Ariosto? Aretine? / Cieco di Hadria? I have read them all" (3.4.79-83). Her lines are obviously played for humor, for Lady Would-Be's above inference jumbles several eras of Italian poetry, a clear error, of which *Volpone* is very much aware. How does one hold a conversation with someone so full of incorrect chatter? The audience is not supposed to find Lady Would-Be's behavior attractive, but laughable and inappropriate.

While Jonson argues that a woman's silence is golden and her beauty a virtue, several decades later, known as the Age of Enlightenment, the ideal woman is one with a mind of her own. Congreve's female characters are perfectly capable of self-expression in *The Way of The World*, published in 1700. The play is an example of the comedy of manners, a style of writing indebted to Jonson's comedy of humors, taking cues from his more famous plays such as *Volpone* and *Bartholomew Fair*. Millamant is the jewel of Congreve's play: intelligent, well-read, and a brilliant wit among her peers. Unlike Celia, she pushes against self-restraint and the stereotypes of female virtue: this behavior makes her the object of affection for the play's male characters. The play opens with Edward Mirabell's espousal of his affection for Millamant: "for I like her with all her faults; nay, like her for her faults. Her follies are so natural, or so artful, that they become her, and those affectations which in another woman would be odious serve but to make her more agreeable" (Act I). Mirabell admires and loves Millamant for all that might horrify *Volpone*, namely, her temperament, which is often difficult and disagreeable: her force of personality, verbal sparring, and poetic virtue. When Millamant and Mirabell are first together, their interactions are as confrontational as they are flirtatious, reminiscent of Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick, rather than Jonson's characters. In Act II, Mirabell claims that women should be beautiful and pleasing in their behavior for their lovers' sake, and teases Millamant over what he calls her cruel nature. Rather than take offence, Millamant finds Mirabell's comment humorous: "Beauty the lover's gift! Lord, what is a lover, that it can give? Why, one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases; and then, if one pleases, one makes more" (Act II). Millamant's dialogue might more adequately suit a rakish libertine

male lead, or the likes of a 17th century Volpone, so to speak. As well, while, Mirabell and Millament's lines are meant to be comical, they are friends, rather than simply lovers. This is a characteristic that Volpone and Celia's relationship lacks: their conversations are cold and clipped. Volpone's desire for Celia, expressed before they have even met, is focused solely on her beauty. "How might I see her?" Volpone asks Mosca when he first learns of Celia (2.1.117). "Oh, not possible," replies Mosca. "She's kept as warily as is your gold" (2.1.119-120). This comparison of a woman to gold is an apt one, as Celia is treated as property for the remainder of the play.

Volpone and Mirabell are complex parallels, given how each values their ideal woman. They are cut from similar cloth, both prone to trickery and sneakiness, yet each, a product of their eras, is shaped by different codes of conduct. Mirabell's attitude toward female characters is representative of the 18<sup>th</sup> century's popular "rake" character, a common figure of Enlightenment era theatre. Mirabell is unique though, in that he can also express an honorable nature that rounds out his character. "Pray then walk by yourselves," Mirabell says when Petulant wants to engage in catcalling. "Let not us be accessory to your putting the ladies out of countenance with your senseless ribaldry... when you have made a handsome woman blush, then you think you have been severe." (Act I). Mirabell objects to Petulant's tendencies to demean women, calling the practice crass. Mirabell also stands out for the respect he shows toward his former lovers, such as Lady Fainall. Their relationship is potentially scandalous, yet Mirabell helps his lover find a suitable husband in Fainall, securing her possessions in case of Fainall's betrayal. The pair maintain a kind of friendship after the affair has ended. No exchanges of jealousy or venom on the part of Lady Fainall are noted when Mirabell pursues

Millament. This behavior might be labeled as rakish and devious by modern standards, but according to the values of the 18<sup>th</sup> century libertine, Mirabell's motives would be considered kind.

Witwoud and Petulant, two would-be sophisticates in *The Way of The World*, express a shallow interest in Millament. Neither is comfortable with Millament's clever personality. Witwoud decides that Millament is intimidating, while Petulant is fonder of jeering at women in Hyde Park than seriously courting one. Petulant ultimately proposes to Millament while drunk, and barely responds to her mocking rejection. Witwoud and Petulant exemplify 18th century figures of affectation that the play routinely mocks: they represent the "false wit," threatened by genuine intelligence or capability. Where Jonson uses Volpone to frame Lady Would-Be as a frivolous fool for attempting intelligent conversation, Congreve deploys Witwoud and Petulant to deride the men who deride Millament's wit as a joke. The contrast between affectation and authenticity seems to fascinate Congreve. In his 1695 essay, "Concerning Humour in Comedy," Congreve writes, "Humour shows us who we are. Habit shows us as we appear under forcible impression. Affectation shows us what we would be under voluntary disguise" (476). These three categories align with *The Way of The World* and its interest in authentic characters. Congreve's play allows deeper, more subtle truths to shine through its range of portraits. The above quote comes from a larger discussion focused on Ben Jonson's writing, in which Congreve expresses admiration for the Jacobean writer, but also offers his own perspective as to how comedy has since advanced.

Of Congreve's characterization, Laura Brown writes, "[Congreve's] characters are finally defined not so much by their social actions and manners as by their inner

motives and meanings of those actions, gradually revealed by reference to the values of Mirabell and Millament's love." We can apply Brown's logic to both plays' love declaration scenes. Volpone's romancing of Celia is one of vanity, in which Volpone offers Celia jewels, lavish treatment, and love outside of her loveless marriage. Volpone also declares that they might costume themselves in historical garb and take on the roles of mythological figures: "Thou, like Europa now, and I like Jove / Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycinid / So, of the rest, till we have quite run through / And wearied all the fables of the gods" (3.8.221-224). Volpone follows the conventional tropes of wooing by mirroring pastoral elements that ornament Renaissance poetry. However, behind the convention of suggesting that the two adopt fictional roles, Volpone raises the topic of "acting," and in so doing reveals that he does not acknowledge Celia as a person. That is to say, for their romance to exist, Celia must *perform* a role and act affectedly, rather than be herself. This is further demonstrated when, following Celia's rejection of Volpone, Volpone opts to take her by force. After all, the notion of Celia as an object is what drew Volpone to her in the first place. In this way, he can project whatever he wants onto her person and treat her body like the gold he does not yet possess.

In contrast, in Act IV of *The Way of The World*, Millament and Mirabell hold a secret exchange while hiding from Millament's suitor, Sir Rowland. Here we are given a glimpse of Millament's inner life as she lays out her demands with regard to marriage: to sleep as late as she wants, eat when she wants, receive visitors when she so desires, and be at liberty to escape conversation from "wits" she does not like. "These articles subscribed, if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a wife," (4.5) Millament says. By declaring her intentions before Mirabell opens his mouth,

Millament again reverses gendered expectations. As well, Millament asks for personal privacy, calling for a room of her own and the freedom to call on Mirabell at will. No longer will he be allowed to barge in whenever he pleases. This demand, though Mirabell admits it will be hard to uphold, offers a more complex look at an 18th century woman's desire for autonomy outside of the marital role. This aspiration is further emphasized by Millament's lengthy discourse on the frivolous nature of pet names: "joy, jewel, love, sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar" (4.5). Millament longs to maintain her sense of self beyond marriage, a state that promises to reduce her to the role of "wife" or "spouse." Millament's ruminations on married life in English society describe a world where marriage amounts to public theatrics, rather than an expression of genuine private feelings. This world is not a place that Millament desires, and her proposal, "let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while, and as well-bred as if we were not married at all" heralds her views. Millament wishes to maintain her "strangeness" in romance over the practiced, overly polished notions of "marriage" that often force couples into loveless boredom. This proposal of Millament takes aim at the social order of "romance," offering a profound contrast between Millament's love declaration and Volpone's lust for Celia. Mirabell and Millament exist under an umbrella of mutual respect: they are not charmed by the *staged* beauty of British marriage; instead, they wish to remain true to themselves. As wife, Millament wishes to remain Millament, to which Mirabell heartily agrees. The husband allows the wife agency in their relationship.

Agency is what Celia altogether lacks, right up through her arrest. Celia, charged with adultery, is seen throughout the trial but does little to defend herself. In *The Way of*

*The World*, Millament's agency appears threatened when Fainall corners Lady Wishfort to take away Millament's fortune. The situation seems out of Millament's hands, but then Millament makes an independent move, expressing her willingness to give up her only goal in order to help others. Thus, in lieu of her romance with Mirabell, she is willing to accept the advances of her potential suitor, Sir Rowland. We might argue over whether or not to call Millament's choice a demonstration of personal agency, given that she is selecting marriage to someone she does not love. Nevertheless, given the play's overall tone with regard to women and marriage, Millament's actions can be read as a rejection of her restrictive situation.

Jonson and Congreve offer evolving views of women, from the Jacobean passive beauty to the Restoration's more dynamic, witty heroine. The docile nature of Celia is central to her character, leaving her no room to resist the dictates of the male characters. Her beauty encompasses her, and she is given little time for character growth. In the final act of *Volpone*, Celia is quietly forgotten, while Millament, through her personality and elective choices, challenges the way of the world, refusing to be a shining gem in need of protection.



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