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Plays and Players

*The Way Of The World* Provisio Critique

The Comedy of Manners is a form of theatre in which playwrights satirize the interests and social conventions of the upper aristocratic class. These plays over-exaggerate the mannerisms and affections of the characters. When people came to the theatre, they came to watch a version of themselves on stage. This form of theatre connects audience members to the characters in the production yet can also be used to critique society at its time. On the surface, William Congreve's *The Way Of The World* appears as a lighthearted comedy. Although this turn-of-the-century production pokes fun at the upper-class society's pursuit of status and wealth, the play can be used to critique the themes of gender roles, marriage systems and expectations, and relationship power dynamics. These themes are addressed in a multitude of ways throughout the production but come together in Act 4, Scene 5, during the proviso scene between the play's leading lovers, Millimant and Mirabell.

In 17th century England, marriages were arranged between the men of each family and were financial transactions rather than love matches. Men were deemed as the superior sex, and women were submissive to their husbands. The power dynamics enforced in marriages of this time period disadvantaged women. Wives possessed little freedom outside of their households and were instructed to serve their husbands, who often abused and mistreated their spouses. Millimant, the leading female protagonist in *The Way Of The World*, values her independence and seeks an equal partnership with her eventual husband. In the proviso scene of *The Way Of The World*, Mirabell proposes to Millimant. Their proposal is unconventional by 17th-century normalities, as the two lovers construct very specific terms of agreement regarding how their

marriage should look. For example, in Act 4, Scene 5, Millimant tells Mirabell that she will not marry him unless she may be allowed to “pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or wry faces on your part; to wear what I please, and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation upon me to converse with wits that I don’t like, because they are your acquaintance, or to be intimate with fools, because they may be your relations” (Congreve, Act 4, Scene 5, Lines n.a.). Although what Millimant asks of him may appear incredibly reasonable in modern society today, her conditions are lengthy and rather strict for the time period. Her rules insinuate a partnership rather than an enforced power structure in which Mirabell governs over Millamant. The allocation of personal agency is something that most women were prohibited from, yet Millamant refuses to submit to the patriarchal gender roles expected of her. Millamant’s provisions for this marriage grow in specifics as the scene continues on. More of her rules include that she “come to dinner when I please, dine in my dressing-room when I’m out of humour, without giving a reason. To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea-table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly, wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in” (Congreve, Act 4, Scene 5, Lines n.a.). Mirabell agrees to Millamant’s rules, and the couple agrees to wed. By accepting her regulations and personal boundaries, Mirabell is shifting societal expectations.

Although the play in its entirety can be seen as a comedy, this proviso scene paves the way for a new perspective on marriage. Mirabell’s decision to view Millamant as an equal goes against the grain and challenges the status quo. Despite possessing far fewer proto-feminist themes than Aphra Behn’s *The Lucky Chance*, I believe that this scene in *The Way Of The World* can provide an essential critique of 17th-century high society.

