

A GREAT COMIC DRAMATIST

CHARLES MORSE

HAZLITT says that "the most spirited era of our comic drama was that which reflected the conversation, tone, and manners of the profligate but witty age of Charles II." It was then that the English comedy of manners came into being; and of its five chief exponents at the beginning—Etheredge, Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Farquhar, commonly known as the "Restoration dramatists"—Congreve is undoubtedly the greatest. True, Farquhar did not begin his work until Charles II had been thirteen years dead, but the spirit of the Restoration still ruled the stage, as Steele found to his cost when he attempted to reform it by his "homilies in dialogue."

In this year of grace, when the literary world is engaged in celebrating the tercentenary of the birth of Molière, it is not out of place to consider the history of the English playwright whose work most nearly approaches in quality that of the great French comic dramatist.

There seems to have been among William Congreve's contemporaries a benign conspiracy to do him honour. Voltaire, who became acquainted with him in London, acclaimed him as one who had "raised the glory of comedy to a greater height than any English writer." Dryden, his devoted friend, bequeathed to him his laurel crown in a most extravagant eulogy:—

Heaven that but once was prodigal before
To Shakespeare gave as much, she could not give *him* more.

Southerne, the intimate friend of both, adjured Congreve to accept Dryden's spacious bequest:—

Then may'st thou finish what he has begun
Heir to his merit, be in fame his son.

In later times Lamb, Hunt, Hazlitt and Macaulay—no mean critics all—were cordial in their praise. In our own day, A. C. Swinburne and Edmund Gosse sum up their appreciation of him in terms of singular concord. "The greatest English comic dramatist," is the tribute of Swinburne, while Mr. Gosse assures us that he is "our greatest comic playwright,." *Principibus placuisse viris non ultima laus est!*

It will be convenient to consider, first, the story of Congreve's life and literary achievement; and, secondly, the spirit of the age which he so faithfully reveals in his comedy of manners.

He was born at Bardsey, near Leeds, in the year 1670. His lineage was a good one. His paternal grandfather, Richard Congreve, had served the royal cause with distinction in the Civil War, and was destined by Charles II for the Order of the Royal Oak when "the King came into his own again." But Charles was not the sort to impugn the justice of the Psalmist's counsel against reposing trust in princes, and the family tree never received the promised graft. It was left to the grandson to thread the *vestigia famae* for himself. It was in the house of his maternal great-uncle, Sir John Lewis, that the dramatist was born. Congreve's father was an army officer, and, during the infancy of William, he removed with his family to Ireland to assume the post of commandant of the garrison at Youghal. In Ireland Congreve spent his youth and received his education, first at the public school in Kilkenny, and afterwards at Trinity College, Dublin. He enjoyed the companionship of Swift at both seats of learning, although Swift was three years his senior. When we think of Ireland as the country that nourished the tender years of Congreve and gave birth to Goldsmith and Sheridan in the eighteenth century, and to Wilde and Shaw in the nineteenth—all of them distinguished playwrights—we must regard her as in no less favour with Thalia than she is with the fairies.

Congreve while at Kilkenny school disclosed a very considerable talent for poetic composition. His tutor there was the scholarly Dr. Hinton, who was prompt to recognize and encourage pupils of promise. He is said to have particularly pleased Dr. Hinton with a pretty copy of verses on the death of his pet magpie—which may have found sad and untimely sepulture in the stomach of one of the famous Kilkenny cats! At the age of fifteen Congreve proceeded to Trinity College, where he was so fortunate as to fall under the influence of another ripe scholar, Dr. Ashe, a life-long intimate of Swift's. Mr. Gosse, in his *Life of Congreve*, says that his college record was probably a better one than Swift's, as he enjoyed a high reputation for scholarship before he left Trinity. Pope, in his preface to the *Iliad*, pays tribute to his learning when he declares that Congreve "led me the way in translating some parts of Homer." It has been maintained with some warrant in fact that he wrote his novel *Incognita: or Love and Duty Reconciled*, at the age of seventeen and before he left college. Be that as it may, it was an immature production, after the manner of Mrs. Aphra Behn's novel of intrigue, but not lacking indications of the dramatic gift its author so strongly

manifested a few years later. It was concerning this early creation of Congreve's genius that Dr. Johnson uttered one of those audacious oracles which he so often made to do duty as genuine criticism: "I would rather praise it than read it." It is fair to add that Macaulay speaks of it as of no great value, and so ardent an apologist as Mr. Gosse lets it go with this modest plaudit: "It would not make a bad little play."

The Revolution of 1688 sent young Congreve to England, as Ireland then became, to quote Mr. Gosse, "no place where a gentleman whose family had served the Stuarts could feel comfortable or hope for promotion." At the age of eighteen we find him in Staffordshire with his relations. He remained there for some two years, and it was during his stay there that his first play, *The Old Bachelor*, was written, probably in the summer of 1690, when the author was barely twenty years of age.

It was the desire of his father that Congreve should go to the Bar, and at the age of twenty-one we find him entered at the Middle Temple. But, like so many illustrious men in English literary history, he soon exchanged a grudging service in the stuffy temple of Astrea for the free air of Helicon and the worship of the muses. Nor do we think he made a mistake in this. He had neither the taste nor the temperament to qualify him as a successful lawyer. Fortunately for Congreve, his father had succeeded to the family estates before the son went to London, and so could afford him a small but regular allowance. Congreve was never really in want, for so early as July 1695 he obtained from Charles Montague (afterwards Lord Halifax) the first of the numerous civil service posts which he held, namely as one of the Commissioners for Licensing Hackney Coaches. It is worthy of mention that, in addition to this post, Congreve held the following public offices, Commissioner of Wine Licenses, a place in the Pipe Office, a post in the Custom House, and Secretary for Jamaica—some of them simultaneously. The aggregate income he received from these offices at one time amounted to £1,200 a year.

When he arrived in London in 1691, James II had fled the realm, and William and Mary were on the throne. His friends were all distinguished people from the moment of his arrival. Dryden, the foremost literary man of the day, having lost his laureateship and its accompanying emoluments, was supporting himself by writing plays and translating the classics. Congreve received an early introduction to Dryden, and appears to have been at once invited to assist him in his versions of Juvenal and Persius, which was ready for the press in 1692 and published late in that year. Dryden

himself translated five of Juvenal's satires, and allotted the remainder to several of the best classical scholars of the day, including Nahum Tate, Creech, and George Stepney. To Congreve had been given the Eleventh Satire, and his translation was a fair performance, although perhaps not quite equal to the work of the others. Dryden added as a sort of appendix to the collection *The Satires of Aulus Persius Flaccus*, done into by English by himself. To this appendix Congreve was permitted to affix a complimentary poem to Dryden—"from the youngest to the oldest singer"—in which he described the discrowned laureate as the "great Revealer of dark Poesie," referring of course to the obscurity of Persius and the difficulty of rendering him into another tongue.

He owed his introduction to Dryden to Captain Thomas Southerne, an Irishman, who had graduated from Trinity College some years before Congreve came up to his alma mater. Southerne had produced some plays in London, but soon abandoned the pen for the sword. After the Revolution, he returned to civil life and resumed theatrical work. He had made a great hit with his *Sir Anthony Love* in 1691, and his *Fatal Marriage* and *Oronooko* (the latter based on Mrs. Aphra Behn's novel of the same name) carried him to the summit of a very spurious reputation. Chambers's *Biographical Dictionary* curtly informs us that "his comedies are thin, but made him fat." At the time of Congreve's advent, Southerne was acting in the capacity of a reader for the London stage. Mr. Gosse thinks that Congreve may have approached him in that capacity with the manuscript of *The Old Bachelor*. Whether Southerne's good opinion of the play was in any wise due to the fact that it was the work of a man who had learned to love the muses in Dublin, history does not disclose; but it so enkindled his enthusiasm that he rushed off to Dryden with it, and secured the assistance of the veteran poet—then over sixty years of age—to revise it for the stage. In this task Dryden and Southerne were aided by two well-known men of talent, Walter Moyle and Arthur Maynwaring. Dryden was so impressed with the wit and power of *The Old Bachelor* that he declared he had never seen such a first play in his life. I mention these facts merely to show how fortunate Congreve was at the start of his career. Not for him were the "ills" that Dr. Johnson predicated as the lot of the scholar's life. Such "toil" as he put forth was productive; "envy and want" visited him not; a "patron" he had in sooth, but the sort of patron that kept him from the gaol and thrust him unmasked into lucrative civil service posts.

The Old Bachelor was offered to the Theatre Royal at a most

opportune time. It was produced in January 1693, and in the preceding month the theatre had lost no fewer than three of its foremost actors. William Mountfort, one of the most accomplished romantic actors in the annals of the English stage, had been done to death in the public streets by the infamous Lord Mohun and his accomplice Captain Hill; Nokes and Leigh, two comedians of the very first rank, had died suddenly. Only the great Betterton, with his magical voice, was left. Promotion for the residue of the staff could not be resisted, and the play-going public was all agog not only to greet the promoted ones but to hear a play by a new author rapturously acclaimed by Dryden as a star of the first magnitude. The première was successful enough to turn the head of a man less modest than Congreve. Betterton played the rôle of the protagonist with his usual success. Mrs. Bracegirdle had the female lead, playing the part of Araminta. As to Mrs. Bracegirdle, Colley Cibber describes her as a woman whose beauty and discreetness made her the darling of the theatre. Congreve himself was so captivated by her acting in *The Old Bachelor* that he immediately established a friendship with her that lasted throughout his life. It was confessedly for her that he wrote the leading female rôles in the four later dramas which, with *The Old Bachelor*, constitute the content of his dramatic work. She was not slow to accept his attentions, but that their intimacy was other than circumspect there is no positive evidence to be had. However, there were quidnuncs on the earth in those days, to whom pure affection between man and woman out of wedlock was unthinkable, and friendship between the sexes was the merest euphemism for intrigue. To them the fact that Congreve left the bulk of his estate to the silly Duchess of Marlborough—who used a part of the bequest in making his memory ridiculous—and a small legacy of £200 to Mrs. Bracegirdle, was indubitable evidence not only that the actress was his mistress but that he had broken with her in his declining days. Putting scandal aside, we repeat that such evidence as we have preserved to us discloses only a pretty romance between the beautiful actress and the dramatist, which moved Congreve to create a type of female character for the stage more excellent than can be found elsewhere in Restoration comedy.

The Old Bachelor shows the influence of Molière indirectly. The leading character, Heartwell, is based on Wycherley's *Manly*, who in turn found his prototype in Alceste of *Le Misanthrope*. The play had a run of fourteen nights, which was a notable test of success for the times. As a result its author at the age of twenty-three became one of the literary lions of London. Had he not been

naturally indolent, and protected from want by his family and friends from the beginning of his career, it is reasonable to think that his work would have bulked much larger on the shelves of our libraries.

Congreve had pleased Dryden so much with his scholarship that the old poet invited him to undertake a complete version of the *Iliad*, but he never entered upon the task. However, the success of his first comedy stimulated him to compose another, and his *Double Dealer* was produced in November, 1693. Although the author claims for it absolute originality, it discloses in places undoubted affinity with Molière's masterpiece, *Le Misanthrope*,—not to mention *Les Femmes Savantes*. It is a biting social satire, designed to scourge the folly and license of the day. As might have been expected, it failed to please the town. Its author being attacked was indiscreet enough to make peevish retorts upon his censors. The following extract from the epistle dedicatory to the Right Honourable Charles Montague, as published in the first edition, indicates his wrath:—

I hear a great many of the fools are angry at me, and I am glad of it, for I writ at them, not to them. This a bold confession, and yet I don't think I shall disoblige one person by it, for nobody can take it to himself, without owning the character.

Congreve was well advised in excising this preposterous passage from the dedication in the second edition of the play. Notwithstanding its presentation at the Theatre Royal by a cast even stronger than that which produced *The Old Bachelor*, the play was unsuccessful for the reason above assigned. But two circumstances conspired to mitigate the author's disappointment. Queen Mary, whose critical taste was really excellent, was captivated by it so much so that she demanded a revival of *The Old Bachelor*, which she had not seen; and Dryden and Swift wrote spirited defences of the play in verse. Concerning Dryden's apology for *The Double Dealer*, Professor Saintsbury calls it "incomparable," and says that "it is and deserves to be one of Dryden's best known works." Dryden's poem is indeed worth reading if only for its revelation of the genius and method of Restoration drama. It is interesting to note that Queen Mary's visit to *The Double Dealer* synchronized with the advancement of Colley Cibber to first-rate importance as an actor. Kynaston, who had been cast for the part of Lord Touchwood, fell ill before the auspicious evening, and Cibber, hitherto untried in a notable rôle, was invited to replace him. He played so well that Congreve generously recommended him to the patentees

of the theatre, and secured a substantial increase in his salary. As a further instance of Congreve's generosity to struggling talent, it might be mentioned that he started Addison on his road to fame by introducing him to the notice of Montague, the true Maecenas of the period. Addison repaid his debt to Congreve by congratulating Dryden on his successor as follows:—

Congreve! whose fancy's unexhaustive store
Has already given much, and promised more.
Congreve shall still preserve thy fame alive,
And Dryden's muse shall in his friend survive.

Congreve's next venture in the drama was the comedy of *Love for Love* (1693) which, by common consent of the critics, is his masterpiece in the way of pure stagecraft. Disregarding the failure of *The Double Dealer*, he had set himself with fine courage to compose a play more in accordance with stage conventions than his earlier efforts. Its production marked an epoch in English theatrical history. While he was composing it, a mimic civil war broke out between the patentees and their staff of players at Drury Lane. The feud centered round the unfair treatment by the patentees of Betterton, the dean of the players, and their grievance was reinforced by the disgust felt by the whole staff at the miserable salaries paid them. The situation becoming at last intolerable, Betterton and his associates asked an interview with the King in order to solicit his license to play elsewhere than in the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. This was graciously conceded, and so William III, who was regarded by his subjects chiefly as "an engine of war," was able to show that he really could be a pacifist upon occasion. In passing, it may be mentioned that the very worst thing Congreve ever wrote was his *Ode to the King*.

As a result of King William's favour, Lincoln's Inn Theatre was founded, and the new play-house opened in 1695 with *Love for Love* on the boards,—Betterton having secured from Congreve the rights of production. "Scarcely any comedy," says Macaulay, "within the memory of the oldest man had been equally successful." The actors were so elated that they gave Congreve a share in their theatre, and he promised in return to furnish them with a play every year, if his health would permit. Congreve's undertaking was indifferently performed. Notwithstanding that he was but twenty-five years of age when he made this engagement, he produced only two more plays. These were *The Mourning Bride*, his one offering to the tragic muse, which had a most prosperous run when first produced by the Lincoln's Inn players in 1697, and—after an interval

of three years—a comedy called *The Way of the World*. The last piece was indifferently received by the public, although its merits have been lavishly extolled by the critics. Here again, we find Congreve responding to the inspiration of Molière, but more indefinitely than in his earlier pieces. The failure of the piece with the public seems to have been anticipated by the author, as will appear from a reading of his dedication of the play to Lord Montague.

When we look into the literary history of the time, we find reason external to the nature of the play for Congreve's anticipation of failure for *The Way of the World*. Even before he came to London rumblings were heard of the storm that was on its way to purify the atmosphere of the English theatre; but it did not really break until the Reverend Jeremy Collier's famous *Short View of the Immorality of the English Stage* was published in 1698, and this was the year before *The Way of the World* was written. Collier's pamphlet was a most damning arraignment of the lubricity of contemporary drama, and Dryden, Congreve, and Vanbrugh were made to dance at the point of a very sharp stick in the hands of their reverend critic. The case against them was admirably sustained by Collier, and Dryden was wise enough to take his chastisement with humility. Congreve and Vanbrugh, on the other hand, made a lame and angry defence, and Collier came back at them with a crushing reply. This had a tremendous effect upon Congreve, who was of a keenly sensitive temperament, and his mortification was augmented by the fact that the fickle public was rather jubilant over the vigorous dusting that his jacket had received. Hence the anticipation of failure which he expressed concerning *The Way of the World*. Added to this, his health was beginning to fail. So we are not surprised that he was content, although only thirty years of age, to forsake the perturbations of dramatic composition and follow the primrose path of fashionable living. True, he found his tastes too extravagant for the tidy income derived from office, from his patrimony and from his successful plays. In 1702 he complained that it was his constant grief that he could not afford to have the few people whom he loved near him.

While as an author he was hotly resentful of adverse criticism, in private life he had an affability and charm of manner that endeared him to all whom he sought to make his friends. We have seen how prompt he was to aid struggling talent. But he was not demonstrative, and did not wear his heart upon his sleeve. He wrote in this very fine strain to one of his friends: "You know me well enough to know that I feel very sensibly and silently for those whom

I love." These observations upon his more intimate qualities serve to recall a famous episode between Congreve and Voltaire. As it is commonly met with, it leaves a very unpleasant stigma upon Congreve's nobility of character and good taste. In fact it makes him a snob at the expense of the dignity of letters. As generally related the story goes that when Voltaire, in the course of a polite visit to the poet, ventured to praise his plays, Congreve begged him not to mention them, as they were trifles produced in idle moments, and said he hoped that Voltaire would consider him only as a gentleman. Thereupon Voltaire told him that he must attribute the visit solely to the distinction his plays had won for him. Now the part that Voltaire played in the episode does not show that he comported himself with the usual French urbanity, but this bald account of it certainly does an injustice to Congreve. When we take the exact story of the interview as given in Voltaire's *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, there is much to support another reading of Congreve's words and to show that he was misunderstood:—

He was infirm, and come to the verge of life when I knew him. Mr. Congreve had one defect, which was his entertaining too mean an idea of his own first profession of a writer, though it was to this he owed his fame and fortune. He spoke of his works as trifles that were beneath him, and hinted to me in our first conversation that I should visit him upon no other foot than that of a gentleman who led a life of plainness and simplicity. I answered that, had he been so unfortunate as to be a mere gentleman, I should never had come to see him; and I was very much disgusted at so unseasonable a piece of vanity.

Now, was it vanity in one who "had come to the verge of life," and so must have realised the fleeting nature of literary distinction, to deprecate the importance of his work, or was it not rather true humility? Surely those who knew the poet best would have espoused the latter view. Even had he been a younger man, with the pride of life strong upon him, I think that the sensitiveness which was one of his salient traits would have recoiled from the bluntness of Voltaire's praise and prompted him to make the very answer that he did.

Congreve's life from 1700, when he ceased to write comic drama, on to its end in 1729 was not an eventful one. It may have been that he was influenced by the saying that "many men of forty are dead poets." At all events his literary talent was sparingly exercised, and beyond his *Discourse on the Pindaric Ode* (1706), in which he makes a strong critical assault upon Cowley's false measures and appeals to the English poets for a renascence of the pure Greek form of the Ode, there is but a small con-

tent of value in his later writings. To readers of our better day his plays are unpleasant by reason of the cynicism and immodesty that interpenetrate them; but he is one of the greatest dramatists that our race has produced, and if we would have an adequate knowledge of the English drama as a whole we cannot afford to ignore his works. Nor should we forget that Congreve's comedy of manners, although faithfully revealing the time-spirit, is never so revolting as were the actual manners of his day. We must not blame him because he made no constructive effort to reform the evil living that so degraded the nation. We have to accept him for what he was—the one tolerable member of a thoroughly sordid group. At least he could say with Rousseau: *Mais si je ne vauz pas mieux, au moins je suis autre.*

As to the external man, Congreve was a fine specimen of what Carlyle calls the "omnivorous biped that wears breeches" when he came to London town in his twenty-first year. A notably handsome face, an athletic frame and a graceful carriage were all his. We get some idea of what he then was like from Sir Godfrey Kneller's portrait of him, although it was done when he was a member of the Kit-Kat Club and somewhat ripened by canary. We can readily believe that his fine presence and ready wit made him a welcome guest in club and drawing-room.

But the primrose path proved too seductive for him, and early middle life found him broken in health. His career exemplifies with peculiar force the truth of Uhland's plaintive saying:—

Des Menschen Leben ist
Ein kurzes Blühen und ein langes Welken.

Yet through all his bodily sufferings he kept his temper sweet; and even in his last days, when gout and blindness held him in thrall, he yearned for the constant company of his friends, his manner to them never lacking its old-time charm. Gay, Pope and Swift were never far away from him then, and the temperamental differences between these friends show how catholic were his affections.

A stage-coach accident in the autumn of 1728 increased his infirmity, and the end came in the following January. His literary fame was still vivid enough to secure a duke and an earl as pall-bearers at his funeral and a tomb for his remains in Westminster Abbey.

¶ In enquiring into the relation of Congreve to the spirit of his age we need not adopt M. Taine's weird resource of putting ethnography, history and environment into the melting-pot and then standing by to see the true genius of some representative man of letters emerge from the mass. That is really an application to

literary criticism of the theory of the philosophic determinists, and to attempt to make such an application is to beguile oneself. Indeed the formula fails conspicuously of success in the very work in which the inventor takes great pains to define it, namely his *History of English Literature*. I cannot elaborate my point here, but I may cite Shelley and Keats as instances where the Tainean melting-pot wholly fails of accomplishment. They were in no real sense typical Englishmen of their day and generation. Both lived their short and fervid lives in the Georgian era; neither of them took his inspiration from his environment. Shelley in his philosophic poems expressed the time-spirit as it existed in France, not in England; and Keats, in his sheer responsiveness to sensuous beauty, was a Greek lyric poet born in too late a day. They were as unlike their contemporaries as they were unlike each other. Indeed, it would seem that Taine himself recognized the break-down of his formula when applied to them. And what of Taine's failure to discover not only the genius but even the name of William Blake? But while I say so much as this concerning delusive theories, I do not disregard what both Sainte-Beuve and Matthew Arnold lay down as axiomatic in criticism, namely, that environment, embracing both national temper and social atmosphere, is a potent factor in determining the character of literary production. Indeed Arnold goes further, and says, substantially, that for the creative literary genius to reach the peak of achievement it must breathe a social atmosphere in the highest degree animating and nourishing to great creative effort. That was the social atmosphere of Greece in the age of Sophocles, and of England in the age of Shakespeare. Let us apply this test to the time of Congreve.

Considering, first, the political conditions which then prevailed, we know that while outwardly it seemed that freedom had succumbed again to autocracy when Charles II entered the palace of Whitehall, yet it is clear that the House of Stuart was restored not because the people of England thought the king had a divine right to rule, but because they felt that a limited monarchy was a safer, saner, and withal a more convenient form of government than a republic. In that belief they were in entire accord with Cicero. The royalists had learned from the puritans the art of chastening tyranny enthroned, and the prospect of a merry monarch becoming an unruly one, was not a disturbing thought. It was enough if they could but use him as a means of chasing the gloomy shadow of religious fanaticism from the realm, and restoring the lightheartedness of the nation. To this view a large number of the less obstinate of the republicans had gradually come round, and the mind of the

people as a whole grew well content with the change. On the other hand, the more religious of the puritans surrendered the hope of erecting a Kingdom of God in a reprobate land, and bethought themselves of emigrating to that new country overseas whither Elder Brewster and his little band of pilgrims had gone in 1620. How those who did emigrate soon realized the unstable foundations of the New Jerusalem in America, is another story. Hence we see that to those who had drunk deep at the fountain of popular freedom in 1641 the so-called Revolution of 1688-9 was in no sense a portentous matter. When the news of Napoleon's death came in 1821, some one exclaimed in Talleyrand's hearing: "What an event!" To which Talleyrand replied: "It is no longer an event, it is only a piece of news." That is how the deposition of James and the election of William and Mary were viewed by Englishmen as a whole.

Congreve was but nineteen years of age when these events occurred, and the English people were not stirred by any greater constitutional derangement during the whole course of his life. Indeed, he was only thirty years old when the nation entered upon what Dr. Arnold of Rugby called "the deep calm of the first seventy years of the eighteenth century." Thus we see that the political atmosphere of his time was not apt to stimulate his creative powers in any grand way.

How different it all was from Shakespeare's day. The Elizabethan drama was born in the noon-day of the national consciousness; it was fed with the intellectual strength of the Renaissance; it was inspired by the vision of English adventure over a new and larger world. The national consciousness, incipient in the thirteenth century, had emerged rounded and complete from the Reformation—which in England was a movement wholly political in its inception. To sixteenth century Englishmen the most notable thing about the Reformation was that it had broken their bondage to an extraterritorial authority which, beginning as a spiritual dictatorship, had been transmuted by the act of a craven king into a feudal overlordship. Regarding, next, the Renaissance, its first jocund note was struck in England when young Henry the Eighth declared that learning was the one thing in life to make it worth the living. That was nine years after Erasmus had come over from the Continent to teach at Oxford. In Erasmus and Colet, More, Grocyn and Linacre, England possessed a group of humanists second to none in Europe. Then, when the compelling winds of adventure were blowing over strange seas, Hawkins and Drake, Frobisher and Raleigh had spread their sails to them and widened the horizons of English dominion. This was the atmosphere into which the Elizabethan drama was

born, and its influence upon creative genius was incalculable. As one writer puts it: "Men embarked in quest of emotional experience as they embarked upon other adventures. Nothing was set, all things were possible. No wonder that imaginations were inflamed, and that the vast drama played in the world without suggested the drama on the stage within."

Now we find nothing in Congreve's time comparable to the stimulus of this wonderful period on literary creativeness. I have already shown that it was a time of comparative calm in matters of high politics. Let us now briefly examine the age on its polite or civil side. Monarchs have ever been the glass of fashion in English life, and Charles II inspired the ruling class in his day quite as much as Elizabeth did in hers—although Elizabeth's example, unlike his, leavened the whole lump of society. But the bachelor queen was as much attracted by scholarship as she was addicted to extraordinary attire. She kept her old tutor Roger Ascham—fine humanist that he was—about her court until he died. On the other hand, we know that Charles, although a keen-witted man, was shockingly illiterate. He never willingly opened a book. True, the foundation of the Royal Society is ascribed to him; but the society was in existence some seventeen years before Charles granted it a royal charter in 1662, and his interest in it was due to a mere dilettante fondness for chemical experiments. Judged by the easy morals of his day, the 'Merry Monarch' was a sad reprobate. He was clothed with profligacy as with a garment. The multitude of his amours shocked even Mr. Pepys, who had an agreeable talent for condoning wickedness in high places. If Charles had consciously espoused any philosophy of life, it might have been summed up in Lady Morgan's cynical aphorism: "Nothing's new, nothing's true, and nothing matters." His pretty wit could be used with "a very bitter sweeting." Recall his reply to the Duke of York when the latter cautioned him against attempts upon his life: "James, they will never kill me to make you king." Nothing is more typical of his character than the way he treated Thomas Ken. Ken was one of the royal chaplains, but when the King visited Winchester in 1683 and desired that Nell Gwynne be permitted to lodge in Ken's house, the permission was not only indignantly refused, but the king's immorality was warmly denounced from the pulpit by his chaplain. However, when the see of Bath and Wells fell vacant two years afterwards, Charles promptly nominated his fearless censor to the bishopric, and then went to hear "little Ken" as he called him, preach.

Charles professed the Roman Catholic religion on his death-bed,

when its profession could do him no harm; but his last thought was for one of his many mistresses. This was the character of the king whose influence moulded social usages when Congreve was young. Those usages prevailed through the brief reign of James II—"the immeasurable ass"—and that of William and Mary. Naturally enough the stage reflected the morals of the time. It was not until the reign of Anne, and long after Congreve had ceased to write plays, that there was any organized attempt to purify the theatre of its Restoration taint, although as we have seen, the Rev. Jeremy Collier had stirred the consciences of play-goers before the close of the seventeenth century. Congreve's first play was not written, it is true, until after the Revolution, but, the influence of the easy morals of Charles II was still strong upon the nation. We find an instance of this in the sermon preached by Dr. Payne at the funeral of Queen Mary, whose death occurred in 1694. Now it is plain from Mary's *Memoirs* that she was the only puritan of all the Stuart line. She was in reality a most devout woman. She writes with her own hand that after her quiet Dutch home she found England "a noisy world, full of vanity." And yet she patronized English comedy when its *ethos* was flagrantly low. That her reverend panegyrist not only saw no inconsistency in this, but on the contrary made it a special ground of commendation in his *elogé*, shows that Collier's clerical brethren as a whole did not share the indignation that inflamed him to write his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*.

If so minded, one can read much of the villainies of the court and the nobility in the pages of Clarendon's *Life* and Pepy's *Diary*. The historian J. R. Greene cites the Duke of Buckingham as a type of Restoration times, and he observes that "the most characteristic event in the Duke's life was a duel in which he consummated his seduction of Lady Shrewsbury by killing her husband, while the Countess in disguise as a page held his horse for him, and looked on at the murder."

What a world to live in, this tainted society of England in the days of the revolt against puritanism—a world so degraded in conduct and so coarse in speech that even the free-thinking and free-living Voltaire recoiled from it! It was a world in which all the cynicism of Machiavelli was translated into action, where prudence was valued before honesty, and the achievements of clever vice were applauded by men and women who had lost even the consciousness of virtue. It was in the eyes of Milton an apostate world, calling forth his indignant but stately rebuke—the *Samson Agonistes*. The wonder is that in such an environment Congreve was as clean a man and as clean a writer as he proved to be.