

2003

Pam in His Pocket: Congreve's "Rake" in *Way of the World*

Steve Hinkson
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hinkson, Steve (2003) "Pam in His Pocket: Congreve's "Rake" in *Way of the World*," *Articulāte*: Vol. 8 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol8/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Pam in His Pocket: Congreve's "Rake" in *Way of the World*

Steve Hinkson '03

William Congreve must have been a fantastic card player. The way he manipulates his audience with deception, appearance, and lots of shuffling about is just as a good card player of his time would have worked a mark – slowly, stealthily, and always, always cheating. In her essay, *Games People Play in Congreve's Way of the World*, Sue Kimball tells us:

[t]he years following the Restoration represented a period when the passion for gambling reached its greatest height, partially in reaction to the relaxation of the severe regulations imposed on gaming by the Commonwealth, and also as a result of the years spent by Charles's courtiers in France, where they had learned about 'more games of hazard and skill than they had before suspected to be in existence;...on their return, they made no scruple of introducing them all to England'... Every gaming book of the period features discussions of methods of cheating, but the social stigma now attached to dishonest play was evidently lacking then...in fact, ... it was regarded almost in the light of an embellishment to skillful play... (191-192).

In order to manipulate the audiences of *The Way of the World* Congreve employs the character of Mirabell – the epitome of Kimball's description of gaming and gamers. Mirabell is a reformed rake (meaning he would have picked up gaming as one of the king's courtiers in France), a master manipulator (as we will examine in this essay), and a cheater. His cheating is not overt, which is Congreve's intention, but as Kimball points out, cheating was seen (short of being caught red-handed) as the sign of a skilled player. Kimball observes that "Mirabell seems at all times to be looking into the hands of his opponents...and he certainly plays with marked and concealed decks" (192). In the very first scene Mirabell is finishing a game of cards with his friend Fainall: "Fainall. 'Have we done?' / Mirabell. 'What you please. I'll play on to entertain you'" (I.i. 2-3). Richard Braverman presents an interesting way to read this exchange of dialogue in his book, *Plots and Counterplots*: "[t]hat Mirabell offers to play on for Fainall's entertainment suggests that the larger game about to be initiated has already been played out before the opening scene. Fainall wins the card-game just concluded, but he will be the loser in the far more important contest for two fortunes" (214). Mirabell does just as Kimball asserts – he looks into Fainall's hand and anticipates his scheme, he plays with the "marked deck" of Waitwell and Sir Willful, and he uses the "concealed deck" of Mrs. Fainall's deed of estate. Mirabell the "reformed rake" uses all of these rakish methods to cheat and beat an established rake, in Fainwell, out of all he had hoped to gain. But why does Mirabell, who is the agent of Congreve, go so far in appearing non-rakish to achieve a goal that is completely rakish in motivation and execution?

The answer to this question lies in the climate of the

times in which *The Way of the World* was written and performed. The time for witty rakes and libertine heroes was on the decline, mostly due to Jeremy Collier's scathing attack on such comedy in his *Short View*. Congreve bore the brunt of the attack in Collier's piece and was forced to change the way he wrote comedies because of the shift in public opinion against him. In his introduction to *Way of the World* (Anthology edition), Richard Kroll asks, "How can Mirabell successfully court Millamant, a vastly rich heiress, yet secure her entire fortune of 12,000 pounds, which depends on her marrying with her aunt and guardian Lady Wishfort's consent?" (760). I think the more interesting and historically significant question (knowing what we do about the public climate surrounding the play's release) is: How does Congreve convince critics and audiences that the play they are seeing, which has all the rakish undertones and elements of a true Restoration comedy, is actually a groundbreaking premiere of strong women, a sentimental hero, and the Collier-esque defeat of the rake? It turns out to be an easy trick for Congreve to take, using deception, misdirection, and manipulation – all in the way of the world.

It is essential to our purpose in this essay to establish how Congreve uses his "sentimental hero." Mirabell acts as Congreve's agent of deception in the play. He manipulates the other characters as though they were pieces on a chessboard or cards in his hand. Congreve's ploy is to present Mirabell to the audience as a sentimental hero who wants nothing more than to defeat the rakish Fainall, save the distressed Wishfort and Mrs. Fainall, and end up with the girl (Millamant). Congreve wants the audience to forget that Mirabell was a rake at all and see him as a true sentimental – the antithesis of Fainall and those like him. This is exemplified in the following scene in which Mirabell castigates Petulant and Witwoud for being rakes: "Petulant. Enough, I'm in a humor to be severe. / Mirabell. Are you? Pray then walk by yourselves. Let us not be accessory to your putting the ladies out of countenance with your senseless ribaldry, which you roar out aloud as often as they pass by you, and when you have made a handsome woman blush, then you think you have been severe" (I.533-539). Congreve makes sure that the comic duo of Petulant and Witwoud are the basest of the base in order to distance his hero from them. However, in a close reading, we notice that Congreve does not really distance Mirabell from Fainall. This is because Mirabell is not a sentimental hero – he is a rake, just like Fainall, only smarter, more manipulative, and more reserved. For example, the "old rake" Mirabell did have a mistress, but Congreve twists the story in such a way as to make the audience believe Mirabell did the right thing by marrying the feared-pregnant Arabella Languish to an unsuspecting Fainall. In his essay, *Comedies of Appetite and Contract*, David Thomas takes Congreve's bait: "[Congreve] clearly sees Mirabell, and wishes his audience to see Mirabell, as a deeply honest man who entered into a frank and mature relationship with

Arabella Languish. Having explored both her character and her body in depth, he found himself in the end unable to respond with the same intensity of emotion to her as she clearly felt for him" (92). Thomas offers nothing but critical apologia and he must reach extremely far to even begin to cover Mirabell's action. Nothing in the text gives us the impression that Mirabell and Arabella's relationship is anything other than a matter of convenience. What we can assume from the text is that a rakish Mirabell got Arabella pregnant and was not moved to marry her. Instead, he employed his slower-witted friend Fainall to hush-up the affair through marriage and then co-opted a deed of estate for future use, which we can safely assume was rakish and self-serving. Yet, Congreve pulls it off – he tricks audiences and critics into thinking Mirabell is a "deeply honest man," someone with nothing but the best of intentions. But, I think we have shown Mirabell and Congreve as sheep in wolves clothing – one pretends a sentimental hero to get the girl/cash/reputation, and the other pretends a Whig to get Collier off his back and paying customers into the theater.

Another way Congreve tries to manipulate his audience is by misdirection, or by calling attention to elements of the play other than the delicately concealed rakish actions of Mirabell. He achieves this, brilliantly, in one scene with Millamant and Mirabell. Kroll tells us that "[s]ome critics have pointed out that this scene – the most famous one in Restoration comedy after the china scene... shows Congreve's approval of the Glorious Revolution because Mirabell's and Millamant's compact echoes the terms of Locke's second Treatise of Government..." (760-761). The idea of Locke-ian equality between Mirabell and Millamant is merely an illusion created by Congreve to distract us from Mirabell's real intentions. This assertion can be proved by comparing a critical reading of the scene, provided by David Thomas, with our own ideas, formed above, of Mirabell as rake. Thomas tells us:

[the] contract scene in Act 4 is a masterpiece that sets out the parameters for an ideal marriage in Congreve's eyes, one in which the actuality of personal commitment is perfectly balanced by the need or personal space and personal freedom. Given the dominant position that men enjoyed in what was still a largely patriarchal society, it is not surprising that Millamant's demands are the most advanced.

(9 8)

What Thomas ignores is certain language of the scene and Mirabell's interest in marrying Millamant. While Thomas (and Congreve) would have us believe that Mirabell's pursuit of Millamant has been virtuous and groundbreaking, Mirabell himself compares the scene in act four to a hunter pursuing a game bird: "*Mirabell*. Do you lock your self up from me to make my search more curious? Or is this pretty artifice contrived to signify that here the chase must end and my pursuit be crowned, for you can fly no further" (792). Here we see Mirabell's true colors – he is more intrigued with the chase of Millamant than with Millamant herself. He wants her because he does not possess her. After all, why does

Mirabell not marry Arabella – someone who he seems to have a connection with – yet jump right into matrimony with Millamant – who can be seen only as a flighty coquette? The answer is in possession. Mirabell, like any good rake, has possessed the body of Arabella. And, like a rake, has moved-on to debauch another woman (who just so happens to possess a lucrative fortune).

At the end of Thomas' passage he points out the advanced nature of Millamant's demands. But, when we actually analyze the text we see that after Millamant gets through the common sense requests that Mirabell not kiss her or call her funny names in public she makes demands that she calls "[t]rifles" (IV.213). As readers, should we not find it strange that a list of groundbreaking and forward thinking requests are "trifling" to the very character who is listing them? Assuming this point, how do we respond to someone like Thomas who would assert that, "Millamant's aim in making these demands is to safeguard her personal liberty within a framework of marital, contractual commitment. She is no longer being frivolous, nor is she attempting simply to score off Mirabell" (99)? Thomas, and many others, fall into the trap of wanting to believe that Millamant is her own woman (no one can be that flighty) and Mirabell is actually reformed. Congreve knows that the audience (especially at the time the play was released) will appreciate and focus on this woman seemingly exerting some control over her own destiny and over that of the sentimental hero. However, as we have seen, Mirabell is not reformed and these women are controlling Mirabell only as much as he allows them. They are pawns that either serve as obstacles or agents, depending on how Mirabell needs to use them. What emerges from this complicated maneuvering of characters and social norms is a situation that appeals to the audience – it is something they admire and swoon over while Congreve quickly slips Mirabell the rake in through the back door. Congreve is merely "throwing off suit," to use our card playing terminology, and by doing so he draws the audience ever closer to where he can take total advantage/control of them.

To add to our understanding of how *The Way of the World* is not a progressive stroke for equality, and to understand how deftly/masterfully Mirabell manipulates the women of the play, we should examine another female character. Marwood is the strongest woman in *Way of the World*. She is presented to us as a man-hater, illustrated by a discussion with Mrs. Fainall: "*Mrs. Fainall*. Is it possible? Dost thou hate those vipers, men? / *Mrs. Marwood*. I have done hating 'em and am now come to despise 'em; the next thing I have to do is eternally to forget 'em. / *Mrs. Fainall*. There spoke the spirit of an Amazon, a Penthesilea" (I.46-51). Congreve would have us believe that Marwood hates men above all else, yet is she not the mistress of Fainall? Further, Marwood is somewhat in love with Mirabell, as she exposes his early false plot to Wishfort out of jealousy. How are we to take these facts into account and then believe that Marwood hates men? Mrs. Fainall's reference to Penthesilea is also interesting in its application to Marwood. Penthesilea was an Amazon queen who came to

help the Trojans fight the Greeks after Hector was killed. Achilles, who did not realize he was fighting a woman, killed her, but before she died they shared a long, loving look. Marwood (Penthesilea) comes to the rescue of/fights for Fainall (Hector). Mirabell (Achilles) eventually thwarts (kills) Fainall and Marwood, but Marwood is defeated still loving Mirabell. Thus, we see that Marwood, just like Penthesilea, is in over her head – fighting a man's battle, for a man, only to be defeated. In the play, Marwood really just serves as an object of manipulation for Fainall, who uses her to gain information about Mirabell's schemes. But, because Mirabell is manipulating Fainall, he also has de-facto control over Marwood. This justification is as complicated as some of the plot points in the play, but Congreve intended it that way in order to keep the audience from suspecting Mirabell as anything other than sentimental and just. While Marwood is a much stronger, smarter, and more grounded character than Millamant, she is also just as susceptible to the manipulation of a rake. Congreve baits the audience into thinking that the "heroic" women in the play are of a new era; in fact, they are nothing of the sort – merely window dressing to the same libertarian/rakish plot that drove most Restoration comedy.

In 1698 Jeremy Collier took a pot shot at contemporary playwrights and the puritanical middle class of England supported him. As public opinion shifted William Congreve was faced with a decision. He could continue producing Restoration era plays to the displeasure of the paying audience, or he could fall into line with Collier, who believed, "the business of plays is to recommend virtue, and discountenance vice; to show the uncertainty of human greatness, the sudden turns of fate, and the unhappy conclusions of violence and injustice..." (Thomas 59). As we have seen, Congreve made an interesting choice. He sat down at a card table, with himself at one end and Jeremy Collier and the puritanical middle class at the other, and he created a character in Mirabell to deceive, manipulate, and misdirect the attentions and emotions of them all. Just as Mirabell and Fainall match each other move for move in the play, Congreve matches Collier's tactics. Collier uses the element of surprise and methods of cheating (by taking lines of plays out of context). Congreve surprises everyone by seemingly producing a sentimental play that falls in line with Collier's didactic guidelines. But, as we have found, Congreve actually cheated them all. He slipped "Pam" from his pocket and deceived audiences into applauding for a "reformed rake" who is not reformed at all. As the applause rolled out, Congreve the card shark must have smiled – he had won the game, and like Mirabell he would play on and on for their entertainment.

WorksCited

- Braverman, Richard. Plots and Counterplots. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993
- Congreve, William. "The Way of the World." Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century Drama. Ed. J.D. Canfield. Canada: Broadview Press, 2001. 760-809.
- Kay, Donald. A Provision of Human Nature. Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977.
- Kroll, Richard. Introduction. Way of the World. By William Congreve. Canada: Broadview Press, 2001. 760.
- Thomas, David. William Congreve. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.