

## **The Proviso Scene of Congreve's *The Way of the World***

In the Proviso Scene of the play "The Way of the World", we find Mirabell and Millamant meeting together to arrange an agreement for their marriage. The scene is a pure comedy with brilliant display of wit by both of them, but, above all, provides instructions which have serious dimensions in the context of the society. Here, Congreve seems to come to realise the importance for providing an ideal pair of man and woman, ideal in the sense that the pair could be taken for models in the life style of the period.

However, the Proviso Scene is one of the most remarkable aspects of Congreve's "The Way of the World" and this scene has been widely and simultaneously admired by the critics and the readers. In fact, it serves as an excellent medium through which Congreve conveys his message to his readers.

The most noteworthy aspect of the Proviso Scene is Millamant's witty style in which she puts her condition before her lover Mirabell. According to her first condition, she wants equal amount of love and affection on the part of her would husband throughout her life. Behind her above-mentioned condition we notice the pitiable condition of a wife after marriage. Just before marriage when men and women are lovers, they declare full support and love for each other but things take a turn when they marry each other. So Millamant appears anxious because of this reason and that is why she puts this condition. Again, Millamant says that she hates those lovers who do not take proper care of their beloveds. She further wants that her husband must be a loyal and good-natured man.

She says to Mirabell that she wants her liberty after her marriage; she informs Mirabell that she can't forgo her independence, she says, "My dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you adieu?... My morning, thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers, all ye douceurs, ... Adieu -- I can't do it, 'tis more than impossible." She also adds that "I will lie a bed in a morning as long as I please"

Millamant on her part makes it clear that a lover's (Mirabell's) appeals and entreaties should not stop with the marriage ceremony. Therefore, she would like to be 'solicited' even after marriage. She next puts that "My dear liberty" should be preserved.

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“I’ll lye abed in a morning as long as I please...” she wants that she will have liberty "to say andrebeive visits to and from who I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or Wry faces on your part; and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste... come to dinner who I please, find in my dressing room who I'm out of humour, without giving 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 whenever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in.”

Millamant then informs that she would not like to be addressed by such names as “wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweet-heart; and the rest of that nauseous can, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar.” Moreover, they will continue to present a decorous appearance in public, and she will have free communication with others. In other words, after marriage they maintain certain distance and reserve between them.

Mirabell listens to all the conditions of Millamant with patience. Although if was not very happy with some of the conditions, if doesn't raise any objection. Now he informs Millamant about some of his own conditions when we go through his conditions, we observe that it is a witty satire on the affectations of women in that society. Mirabell wants that after their marriage Millamant should follow some guidelines. Millamant should not be in company of any woman who has a notorious background or who indulges in scandalous activities. Mirabell’s conditions are quite different: they are frankly sexual in content, directed to his not being cuckolded or to her bedroom manners. “Just as Millamant’s are developed femininely” as Norman N. Holland points out, “Mirabell’s are developed in a typically masculine way.” Each of Mirabell’s provisos begin with its item: first, the general principle, “that your Acquaintance be general”, then specific instructions, “no she-friend to screen her affairs”, no fop to take her to the theatre secretly, and an illustration of the forbidden behaviour, “to wheedle you a fop-scrambling to the play in a mask”. Nevertheless, Mirabell denounces the use of tight dresses during pregnancy by women, and he forbids the use of alcoholic drinks. The conditions are stated by both parties in a spirit of fun and gaiety, but the fact remained that both are striving to arrive at some kind of mutual understanding.

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Through this scene appears very funny but it is a serious comment on the degradation of conjugal relations. The conditions as set down by the two lovers, confirm the sincerity of their motives and their wish to live a married life which was different from others. Both of them accept each other's conditions. It is a guideline or memorandum of understanding between a husband and a wife, which would enable them to spend a happy married life. After following these guidelines there will have no possibility of misunderstanding.

The proviso scenes in Restoration dramas depict a legal negotiation or “bargain” that takes place between the hero and the heroine of the play. In William Congreve’s comedy, *The Way of the World*, scene V of Act IV plays a significant role but “plays with the Restoration convention of proviso scenes”. According to Richard W.F. Kroll, the scene is symbolic of a social agreement with only “potential” legal force. It cannot be wholly agreed that the scene in the play facilitates a progression towards equality and liberation for women in the modern sense as there are several limiting instances that occur throughout the scene which have repercussions in Act V as well.

The proviso scene appears to have a subversive intent in that it allows for certain prenuptial proceedings to take place between Millamant and Mirabell. Yet, this notion is deconstructed by the fact that it is only the female character who needs to set down certain terms and conditions to safeguard her independence after marriage. Mirabell, being a “patriarch”, does not need to do the same and instead lays down any terms only to regulate and counter those proposed by Millamant. The rights and privileges of the man in a conjugal union is a given and reflects the privilege that Mirabell comes from. This destabilizes the façade of the equality of the sexes.

The scene is better interpreted as a “battle of the sexes” where the power struggles between both parties are quite evident. Kroll notes that it is Millamant who is at the centre of Congreve’s masterpiece as she confronts the reality of losing her “natural power over men”-her beauty, which shall fade away as she “grows old” in a “man’s world” (741). He states that the central significance of the proviso scene lies in the “careful orchestration” of Millamant’s “withdrawal from the monopoly of knowledge” and allowing herself to be “read and obtained” (749). The “chase”, as put by Mirabell, does come to an end as Millamant accepts

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the impending “loss of her power” and agrees to negotiate the terms of marriage. The transgressive stance taken by the character of Millamant in voicing her opinions and dismay is not seen through to an appropriate conclusion by Congreve. She is at first portrayed as an “intense” woman whose “delicate intelligence” peculiarly enables her to deal with her passions as well as the legal realities of marriage. As claimed by Alan Roper, she may “laugh aggravatedly” and use “defensive” language, yet, she does not isolate herself completely from that social reality. Millamant comes to terms with the fact that the “price of even partial social and political freedom is the ability to negotiate according to contracts that maintain the fabric of society”. Kroll also describes the proviso scene as accommodating Mirabell’s obedience to Millamant without compromising the former’s autonomy.

Congreve has fashioned this scene on the basis of the Lockean view of “Conjugal Society”, according to which, marriage is seen as a “voluntary compact” between a man and a woman. According to Locke (1688), a husband and wife can lay claim to each other’s bodies only for “procreational purposes” and must draw on “mutual support”, “assistance” and “communion of interest” to nurture their offspring until maturity is attained. Thus, the “compact” stands for the “forging of all ties” and not just personal gratification. This takes on marriage as a “social contract”, although seen by some critics as liberal, is discarded by others such as Pateman, in favor of interpreting marriage as a “sexual contract”. Mary Wollstonecraft agrees with this idea in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where she explicitly describes marriage as a form of “legal prostitution”.

Vivian Davis believes that the “conventions of the stage are traded in for a round of legal bargaining” in the proviso scene. In other words, the insecurity and anxieties of Mirabell are laid to rest by the “surety of the law” (523). It is through these legal procedures that Mirabell is finally able to “extricate” Millamant from Lady Wishfort’s “vicious circle” and settle the terms of their pending union. Thus, law in the form of the marriage contract, helps reassert control over a “volatile female subject”. Pateman complies with this idea as she interprets the contract as a means through which “modern patriarchy is constituted”. As the negotiations continue in the scene, we notice that Millamant is no longer just the “negotiator” but also that which is “negotiated”. On looking closer, we see that except for a

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claim to her life, the husband has claim to the wife just as the other property, by natural order.

While some critics justify the limitation of Millamant's freedoms, although problematized by voicing her dissent, as a necessary to maintain "emotional authority" and "social/moral order" in the play, Pateman exposes the ploy of the objectification of women through the marriage contract in which the wife is, both, the "subject" as well as the "object". Thus, this scene emphasizes a loss of autonomy and independence for women and blatantly appropriates patriarchy rather than propelling the status of women towards a liberal and progressive state.

his proviso scene is an emblem of the Restoration comic convention at its civilized best. At no time do the characters descend to any obvious display of emotion, let alone pathos. Even though in love, they conduct the scene with complete decorum. In the Restoration convention, in every exchange between a man and a woman, each is trying to build his or her own ego. All encounters are duels, and to be bested in the game of wits is to lose. The proviso scene is the reconciliation of these seeming irreconcilables. Mirabell will be a husband, Millamant will dwindle into a wife, but they have made a victory of their mutual surrender.

The gentlemen, drunk after dinner, who enter immediately afterward, are at once a comic interlude and a wry commentary. We have seen the Restoration ideal; we now see the gentleman as he actually exists.

In the Proviso Scene, Mirabell and Millamant are arguing in a humorous manner about a vision of marriage free from the cant and the hypocrisy that surround them. They are moving towards matrimony but they are making conditions. Mirabell declares: "I'll never marry, unless I am first made sure of my will and pleasure". Millamant explicitly seeks a relationship fully and elegantly comfortable to the manners and ways of the world. However, she additionally requires within that studied conformity an assurance of continued affection and the space for a private existence. Millamant seeks to prevent their being "ashamed of one another for ever after", and she demands the specific and limited independence available to her as a married woman. Mirabell's provisos reflect similar concerns with the working details of a meaningful private relationship. He forbids the eccentricities and excesses that would endanger the genuine commitment required of sexual partners, urging Millamant, in effect, not to trial with their love. He also comments on the

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health and safety of his prospective offspring, for which the audience can already discern a fatherly affection. The lovers negotiate in this scene for a mutual private happiness within the confines of a rigid and demanding social context and they establish their relationship upon the possibility of such a reconciliation. In Congreve's "The Way of the World" the lovers are confronted with a tangle of intrigue but it is their skill in extricating themselves from it that is admired, their integrity is preserved by a tact that resists both the shallowness of affectation and the cruelty of blind passion. They manage to be sincere in a world full of pretense and their love is in any case true love.