

Mirabell: A Lockean Gentleman¹

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Abstract: The aristocratic gentleman in Shakespearean romantic comedy and the witty trickster in Jonsonian satirical comedy represent the dual traditions of English Renaissance comedy, yet both are flawed: the former lacks agency in resolving conflicts, while the latter exhibits uncivility. In *The Way of the World*, William Congreve transcends these models by creating Mirabell as a Lockean gentleman—a synthesis of the aristocratic protagonist’s grace and the trickster’s resourcefulness. Inspired by John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Mirabell embodies rational self-governance, moral discipline, and contractual pragmatism. His victory over the antagonist through legal ingenuity (rather than violence) symbolizes the triumph of Lockean social order over Hobbesian absolutism, reflecting the play’s innovative engagement with post-1688 political philosophy.

Keywords: dual traditions of English Renaissance comedy, *The Way of the World*, Mirabell, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Lockean gentleman

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New Lights on Mirabell

Due to their frivolous behavior and loose morality, protagonists in Restoration comedy are seriously condemned by scholars. Jeremy Collier in his pamphlet *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* hysterically accused William Congreve of his failures to create exemplary protagonists and impart moral instructions. This vehemence was still echoed into the 20th century. Even though scholars like John Palmer, Thomas Fujimura, and Norman Holland made great contributions to justify Restoration comedy—its writers and misunderstood characters—their views on Mirabell were not as penetrating as those relating to other characters. It was not until the latter part of the 20th century that scholars breathed new life into the interpretations of *The Way of the World* and Mirabell. Jean Gagen’s “Congreve’s Mirabell and the Ideal of the Gentleman” elucidates Mirabell’s uniqueness by using standards of courtesy books of that time and reasonably argues that Mirabell is an ideal gentleman based on the criteria therein.

Alvin Snider regards Mirabell as a transitive figure and holds that “Congreve’s play straddles the movement from vestigial feudalism to a new economic order, and Mirabell has one foot planted in both worlds” (389). Kevin J. Gardner thinks “Congreve unmasks the exigencies and solitudes that betrayed the precarious certainty of social and sexual authority, while allowing Mirabell to triumph as the representative man of a new patrician social order” (54).

Compared with the previous views, these opinions shed new light on how to understand Mirabell. There are, however, still some misunderstandings. For example, Gagen’s argument relies strongly on the correspondence between Mirabell’s exterior accomplishments and the manners of that sophisticated society, while ignoring his inner qualities that are also in accordance with a man of virtue of the day. Actually, the determining facts for deciding whether he is an ideal gentleman depend on whether Mirabell combines polite behavior and graceful conversation with the possession of an ideal gentleman’s thinking and capacities. For their part, Snider and Gardner take Mirabell as a new man without pinning down Mirabell’s newness precisely. Diverging from prior scholarship, this paper contextualizes Mirabell within the tradition of English comic characterization while integrating John Locke’s pedagogical principles from *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), ultimately positing that Mirabell epitomizes the ideal gentleman precisely through his embodiment of the emergent zeitgeist.

Dramatic Presentation of the Lockean Gentleman

The aristocratic gentleman in the Shakespearean romantic comedies and the witty trickster in Jonsonian satirical comedies are the main characters in Renaissance comedy traditions. The aristocratic gentleman in Shakespeare’s comedies remains noble and elegant, but he is unable to solve dramatic conflicts, whereas the witty trickster is resourceful and good at solving problems but he is a little bit coarse and uncivil. Mirabell, however, not only displays his gentleness and nobleness but also shows his new characteristics like pragmatic foresight and manipulative abilities, which not only signify the successful mixture of the personalities of two important protagonists in Renaissance comedy but also show the influence of Locke’s definition of a gentleman.

After the Glorious Revolution, Whig statesmen held a stable position in English politics. In order to propel their enterprise to the next stage, Whig leaders like Lord Shaftesbury attached great importance to education. Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* rose in response to this need for a new stage. The book was considered “the representative masterpiece on the education of gentlemen” (Zhu 90), and echoed the puritanism prevalent in wider society at the time. Hence we see an important critic claiming that “the Puritan spirit found expression once again in the last decade of the century, in a notable educational work, through which much that was essential in its philosophy of education could be carried on into the new age just ahead” (Boyd 273).

At the beginning of the work, Locke refutes the traditional ideas of judging people based on birth and blood. In his opinion, when children are born, their mind is a “blank slate” and “that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education” (*Some Thoughts* 2). This stress on education ideally aims at a general state of society capable of producing “virtuous, useful and able men in their distinct callings” (3). In other words, Locke wants his education to breed a gentleman who is socially capable, morally dependable, and rationally thinking.

With a view to achieving the goals, Locke divides his work into three parts: Health Education,

Moral Education and Knowledge, and Skill Education, among which Locke emphasizes “virtue,” “wisdom,” “breeding,” and “learning” as the indispensable qualities of a gentleman. As Jason D. Solinger points out, “A masculine trope for polite learning, knowledge of the world first came to prominence in the latter half of the 17th century, at a time when learning and politeness were regarded as uneasily reconciled pursuits” (11). Moreover, this Lockean gentleman turns out to be a beacon for Congreve. If readers put Mirabell with the Lockean gentleman in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* side by side, they will find the two have lots in common.

Whether before or after the Restoration, English social thinkers emphasize the social significance of courtesy. The manners of speaking, the gesture of walking, and the ability to please females, all are admirable qualities of a gentleman. Unlike the Elizabethan Age, which speaks highly of honor and regards it as the prerequisite quality of a gentleman, the English in the late 17th century were influenced by the court culture of the French and turned to more physically expressive traits like “that decency and gracefulness of looks, voice, words, motions, gestures, and of all the whole outward demeanor, which takes in company, and makes those with whom we may converse, easy and well pleased” (Locke, *Some Thoughts* 205). Embedded in this culture, Congreve himself was proud of being a gentleman² and his Mirabell intoxicated ladies from Mrs. Wishfort to Millamant.

In order to highlight Mirabell’s good manners, Congreve not only presents Mirabell’s decency and gracefulness in conversation with others but also uses Sir Wilfull as a foil to display Mirabell’s charisma. Sir Wilfull is ordered by Mrs. Wishfort to pay court to Millamant, but as he comes from the country, he does not know how to behave like people in town. When Sir Wilfull walks into Millamant’s room, he is so nervous and perplexed that he does not know what to say. He even wants to retire. Later, he speaks to himself completely ignorant of Millamant’s attention or interest. As Millamant is reciting Suckling’s lyrics, she cannot help eulogizing, “natural, easy Suckling!” However, the innocent and naive Sir Wilfull replies, “Anan? Suckling? No such suckling neither, cousin, nor stripling: I thank heaven I’m no minor” (Congreve 377). After a sequence of irrelevant dialogue, Millamant cannot bear him anymore and shows him the door. When Millamant feels bored again, she recites Waller’s lyrics, “Like Phoebus sung the no less am’rous boy” (378), after which Mirabell appears and recites the next line, “Like Daphne she, as lovely and as coy” (378). Compared with tongue-tied Sir Wilfull, the decency and gracefulness of Mirabell needs no emphasizing. It achieves a huge success in portraying Mirabell, by these methods, as possessing qualities similar to those of a Lockean gentleman.

However, there are many scholars like John Wain who disagree with this view. They believe that the way that Mirabell treats Arabella (Mrs. Fainall’s maiden name) does not reflect the behavior of a gentleman because they think that Mirabell pushing his secret love Arabella to marry Fainall is immoral. Their judgment can be seen as anachronistic. As He Qixin points out, “morality is not the only standard by which to judge drama: we should avoid mechanically using modern standards to judge a play which belongs to a certain period” (147). If readers judge Mirabell by the written rules and regulations of any other society, he might have some flaws. But by the customs of the Restoration period, the way Mirabell treats Arabella is irreproachable. In that period, it was not significant for a gentleman to have love affairs. Francis Osborne, author of a popular book titled *Advice to a Son*, advised his son not to boast of his love affairs instead of not having ones, because “it being more shame for a Man to be leakie and incontinent at the Mouth, than for a Woman to scatter her Favours” (38). Mirabell’s behavior obeys this unwritten rule. If it were not

for Mrs. Marwood, who incidentally eavesdrops on the conversation between Mrs. Fainall and Foible, none would know the love affair between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall. Even though Mrs. Fainall attributes her unhappy married life to Mirabell, because she thinks Mirabell married her to the wrong man, Mirabell gives a reasonable excuse. In his opinion, why he does so is “to save that idol, reputation” (Congreve 346). If Mrs. Fainall had a husband, she would not be ruined by being pregnant. Second, Fainall is the only option because “A better man ought not to have been sacrificed to the occasion; a worse had not answered to the purpose” (346). Based on the frivolous personality of Fainall, Mirabell thinks he is the right one. In the matter of choosing a proper husband, Mirabell shows his morality too because he does not select an innocent man randomly. Last but not least, he foretells Fainall’s greediness in advance, so he keeps Mrs. Fainall’s property in trust, which proves to be the right move later.

In fact, the love affair between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall is not due to some flaws in his moral being. On the contrary, it makes his image more in accordance with the Lockean gentleman and more morally influential. For Locke thinks, “the great principle and foundation of all virtue and worth is placed in this, that a man is able to deny himself his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best, though the appetite lean the other way” (*Some Thoughts* 35). Even though Mirabell yielded to appetite and had love affairs with Arabella, his behavior in the course of the play is controlled by reason instead of appetite and shows nothing indecent. Moreover, Congreve does not depict Mirabell as an infallible protagonist but an ordinary man who wins sympathy and empathy from audiences easier than those unconquerable heroes in the early literary works. Lastly, the focus of Congreve’s *The Way of the World*—unlike John Dryden’s, George Etherege’s, and William Wycherley’s comedies—does not rely on love wars between protagonists or abandoned loves but on the transformation of Mirabell. From a rake to a man faithful to love, the transformation of Mirabell implies significant moral power. Since his love affair with Mrs. Fainall happened before the start of the play, taking the form of a historical anecdote, while in the process of the play Mirabell is a devoted lover who is crazy for Millamant.

At the very beginning of the play, Millamant does not dare to answer Mirabell’s profusions of love because she is not sure whether Mirabell takes her seriously or not. What is worse, Millamant would rather deal with fools like Witwood courteously than hear Mirabell unbosom his heart. The furious Mirabell cannot help complaining to Fainall:

And for a discerning man, somewhat too passionate a lover; 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. I’ll tell thee, Fainall, she once used me with that insolence, that in revenge I took her to pieces, sifted her, and separated her failings: I studied ’em and got ’em by rote. The catalogue was so large that I was not without hopes one day or other to hate her heartily: to which end I so used myself to think of ’em that at length, contrary to my design and expectation, they gave me every hour less and less disturbance, till in a few days it became habitual to me to remember ’em without being displeased. They are now grown as familiar to me as my own frailties; and in all probability, in a little time longer I shall like ’em as well. (328)

The profession reaches the depth of heart which is beyond the early Restoration comedy protagonists’ reach, because the latter only treat love as a game. Different from them, Mirabell is

a devoted lover similar to protagonists in Shakespeare's comedies. Mirabell loves for love's sake instead of calculating other interests. Furthermore, compared with those men who love because of a woman's merits, Mirabell's love is more profound. His acceptance of Millamant's faults shows that Congreve has a deeper understanding of love and marriage than those dramatists who attach importance to appearance and wealth. Mirabell has exceeded all early protagonists within Restoration theater and become a distinctive new hero.

A Contract as Theatrical and Ideological Battleground

With the development of commercialism, a marriage contract was widely accepted by the upper class in the latter period of the 17th century as a means of settling their children's financial situation. However, the content of the marriage contract was often made by parents more concerned with financial gain than the nature of the persons involved. Their luxurious lifestyles depended on this additional income. In this context the proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant offers a completely fresh experience. First of all, the two parties of the settlement are Mirabell and Millamant instead of their parents. Second, the content of the settlement is brand new too. Rose A. Zimbardo thinks, "the proviso scene [...] is what we would call in the 1990s a prenuptial agreement" (111). What they are discussing is not the lands, properties, and portions but their duties and rights after marriage, with an aim to build an ideal form of marriage which ensures that they live independently and happily. According to Zimbardo, "the conditions laid down in this passage design the power structure, space, and function of the newly formulated bourgeois marriage" (112–113).

The kind of contract not only shows the new content but also displays the new consciousness of the two parties. Among her proposals, Millamant said she dislikes being called "names" and displaying affection in public but wanting to have love affairs in secret. Readers who are familiar with Restoration comedy know what Millamant dislikes frequently appears in the comedies of Dryden, Etherege, and Wycherley. The husbands in their comedies never call their wives without saying "my dear," "sweetheart," and "love," and the couples are very mushy in public but secretly they all seek for another love affair. Millamant's objection to this superficial courtesy demonstrates her abandonment of the old-fashioned hypocrisy. Besides, Millamant demands that she has total control over her closet, tea-table, and room. Without her permission, Mirabell is not entitled to walk in. The conditions of Millamant show that she is not a passive heroine like previous heroines in Restoration comedy. Millamant is smarter and a deeper thinker. She would not be blinded by the surface of reality and knows how to protect her own rights. We infer from her conditions that she does not put forward the conditions on a whim but as a result of circumspect thinking.

In the face of such a shrewd heroine, if Congreve's Mirabell were as weak as heroes in romantic comedy, the artistic attraction of *The Way of the World* would be reduced. Fortunately, Mirabell not only has a decent and graceful appearance but is also very insightful in his thinking. Even though in the first acts of the play, Mirabell is completely manipulated and laughed at by Millamant, in the proviso scene Mirabell turns out to be a different person, a qualified counterpart. This can be proved by their linguistic styles when they respectively propose their conditions.

When Millamant raises conditions, she often uses the phrases "I won't be called names after I'm married," "... when I please," or "... what I please" (Congreve 379). However, when Mirabell presents his conditions, he uses a strong tone and imperative sentences like "I covenant

that your acquaintance be general,” “I article that you continue to like your own face, as long as I shall,” and “I prohibit all masks for the night” (380). Based on their linguistic styles, we know that although Millamant is proposing conditions, she is actually expressing a kind of wish. “I won’t be...” and “I please...”: these sentences beginning with “I” are pointing us to the “I.” Though they are expressing the ideas of the subject “I,” the tone of the sentences is weak and the restriction low. In terms of Mirabell’s statements “I covenant that your...,” “I article that you...,” and “I forbid...,” the tone of the sentences is very strong and the object points to “you” (Millamant), so they have a powerful restriction. That is why at last Millamant says if Mirabell agrees to her conditions, she will “dwindle into a wife” (380), while Mirabell says he would be “enlarged into a husband” (380). Apart from the comic effects of dwindling and enlarging, the two words imply that the status of the two characters turns upside down. Mirabell becomes a “powerful” husband and Millamant a “weak” wife. Of course, Mirabell’s power does not amount to male chauvinism because his restrictions on Millamant as Robert Markley said, “are less Millamant’s pleasures than her feminine susceptibility to the tyranny of social decorums that turn Lady Wishfort, for example, into a foolish and pathetic creature” (246). As a result, Mirabell’s restrictions on Millamant are a kind of protection rather than actual restrictions. With the aid of his performances in the proviso scene, Mirabell at last gets rid of Millamant’s oppression and becomes a male protagonist standing on his feet.

However, it is not enough to prove Mirabell is a Lockean gentleman on the condition of his mastery of social decencies and his masculinity. Even though Mirabell is different from those innocent aristocratic heroes in the romantic comedy, he does not walk out of their shadows. Luckily, Congreve knows how to innovate. The flaw of aristocratic heroes like the King of Navarre, Bassanio, and Orlando in Shakespearean comedies is that they are unable to solve dramatic conflicts. The incompetent heroes like Bassanio obviously cannot be the new heroes in the Restoration comedy because the later heroes are demanded to punish evils and dispense justice. Compared with heroes in Shakespearean comedies, Mirabell’s unique charms lie not in him being as gallant as them but in him being shrewd enough to solve dramatic conflicts like heroes in Jonsonian comedies. It is because Mirabell is as competent as Mosca, that he is able to defeat the evil character with his strategies, which provides *The Way of the World* with a reasonable “virtues rewarded and evils punished” structure.

Most readers hold that the failure of *The Double Dealer* is because Congreve makes Mellefont defeat Maskwell not by the natural development of plots but by his artificial interference to make Maskwell lose; the success of *The Way of the World*, on the other hand, owes to Mirabell’s mastery of Fainall by the natural development of plots and his abilities. Due to this difference, the two comedies enjoy different reputations. Congreve in *The Way of the World* continues to adopt the way of characterization used in *The Double Dealer*: the comparison between virtuous and evil character(s) in order to reward virtue and punish evil. Fainall is as evil as Maskwell while Mirabell is as gentle as Mellefont. However, in terms of decency and gallantry, Fainall’s is the same as Mirabell. Only by their behavior and language will readers find that they are opposites of each other. As Harriet Hawkins said, “since they are equally matched so far as the outward signs of ‘wit’ are concerned, the ultimate distinction between them becomes a moral distinction based on their motives” (122). Truly, the morality of their motives is the only standard to judge them. According to the standard, if Mirabell is qualified to be called a Lockean gentleman, Fainall is just an old Hobbesian rake. In most of the play, Congreve makes the best use of opportunities to depict

Fainall's addiction to pleasure and superiority. When Fainall plays cards with Mirabell, he laughs at Mirabell's inability to win. When he marries Arabella, he aims to grab her wealth. When he has a love affair with Mrs. Marwood, he just wants to satisfy his appetite. What is worse, his treaty with Mrs. Wishfort is the direct expression of his aggressive spirit.

Scholars generally pay attention to the proviso scene between Mirabell and Millamant, while less attention has been given to the significant "proviso scene" between Fainall and Mrs. Wishfort. If the former represents the equality and freedom of the two parties emphasized by the Lockean spirit, the latter represents the absolute power emphasized by Hobbes's absolutism. When Fainall knows he is the fig leaf of the love affair between Mirabell and Arabella, he feels humiliated but he also takes it as a golden opportunity to intimidate Mrs. Wishfort. He threatens her that if she does not transfer all her wealth to his control, he will reveal Arabella's love affair and ruin her name. In order to avoid Mrs. Wishfort eating her words, Fainall wants her to sign an agreement. Among his conditions, he stipulates that firstly Mrs. Wishfort cannot marry again; secondly, if she wants to marry, it is he who arranges a husband for her; thirdly, he takes over the remainder of his wife's fortune and he decides how to maintain her; and lastly, six thousand pounds of Millamant's should be endowed to him. After hearing his conditions, Mrs. Wishfort cannot help shouting, "this is most inhumanly savage, exceeding the barbarity of a Muscovite husband" (Congreve 399). Apart from the conditions of the agreement, the status of the two parties is unequal as well. When Mrs. Wishfort intends to object, Fainall roars that "I come to make demands—I'll hear no objections" (399). What Fainall considers is to usurp more power and to be a tyrant. He is what Locke defines in this statement:

As conquest may be called a foreign usurpation, so usurpation is a kind of domestic conquest, with this difference, that an usurper can never have right on his side, it being no usurpation, but where one is got into the possession of what another has a right to. This, so far as it is usurpation, is a change only of persons, but not of the forms and rules of the government: for if the usurper extend his power beyond what of right belonged to the lawful princes, or governors of the commonwealth, it is tyranny added to usurpation. (*Two Treatises of Government* 358–359)

With the aid of marrying Arabella, Fainall gets a fortune which does not belong to him. What is worse, he is not satisfied. He even wants to replace Mrs. Wishfort and become the master of her family.

Faced with such a competent but immoral Fainall, all the characters in the play are unable to put up effective resistance. Mrs. Wishfort is cornered by Fainall; she can only ask him for mercy. Sir Wilfull wants to tear up the agreement by force but he is laughed at by Fainall. Although Millamant is very smart in testing Mirabell, she is useless in protecting her fortune when she learns what Fainall has accomplished. How to make Mirabell defeat Fainall by artistic means is the most difficult problem for Congreve. Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* argued that writers must wrestle against their predecessors to acquire their original "strangeness." The predecessors Congreve is fighting against are not only the early playwrights but also himself. Congreve has to rack his brains to make Mirabell become a new kind of protagonist. Fortunately, Congreve lives "in the new world of Whig consensual government with civil and personal contracts at the heart of all civilized conduct" (Thomas 102). When Fainall brings his contract to force Mrs. Wishfort to

sign it, Mirabell also takes out a contract which says Arabella before her marriage delivered all her wealth to Mirabell in trust. This dramatic reversal is opposed to readers' horizon of expectation because it does not—like the traditional heroes—use a bloody duel to defeat an enemy. Instead, it abides by the spirit of the age. The Restoration unlike the Elizabethan period does not think highly of displaying masculinity by force: its priority is social decorum. As a result, the place of the duel is transferred from spaces outside to rooms inside, such as the coffee houses and people's homes.

The alteration of space leads to a series of deep changes. The bloody duel is satirized as a savage way of solution while battles of wits and repartees are regarded as necessary forms of a civilized society. Mirabell taking out the signed contract between himself and Arabella frustrates Fainall's usurpation by the superiority of wisdom. This artistic reverse not only destroys Fainall's ambition but also obeys the development of the plot, since Mirabell knows what kind of person Fainall is before marrying Arabella to him. That is why the transfer of Arabella's fortune to Mirabell is not an artificial interference but a stroke of genius: because it highlights Mirabell's prudence and foresight, which are two of the most important characteristics of a Lockean gentleman.

The victory of Mirabell over Fainall not only shows that Congreve knows how to defeat the evil man by clever artistic means but also imparts moral instructions more significant than all his previous comedies. With the comparison between Mirabell and Fainall, Congreve actually compared two political systems and two personal worldviews—the Hobbesian and the Lockean. As is mentioned above, the contract plays a vital role in Restoration society. Both Mirabell and Fainall want to use a contract to protect their interests. Although the form of the contract is the same, the essence is totally different. First, when Mirabell and Millamant signed their contract, their status was equal and independent. When Fainall and Mrs. Wishfort signed their contract, their status was unequal and Fainall wanted to force Mrs. Wishfort to concede. Second, whoever signed the contract with Mirabell, their interests are also maintained. For example, with the aid of the contract between Arabella and Mirabell, Mrs. Wishfort needs not to yield to Fainall's control, and Millamant and Sir Wilfull need not to succumb to Mrs. Wishfort's arranged marriage. In fact, they are all rid of slavery because of Mirabell's contract. On the contrary, Fainall aims to be the most powerful man by using a contract to place others under his control. Moreover, the title words ("the Way of the World") appear three times in the play. The first time occurs when Fainall knows his is the fig leaf of Mirabell and Arabella's love affair, he roars "I it seems am a husband, a rank husband; and my wife a very arrant, rank wife,—all in the way of the world" (Congreve 371). The second time occurs when Foible is about to reveal the love affair of Fainall and Mrs. Marwood, Fainall scorns "If it must all come out, why let 'em know it, 'tis but the way of the world" (404). The last time occurs when Mirabell exposes his contract with Mrs. Fainall. He says to Fainall "Even so, sir: 'tis the way of the world, sir, of the widows of the world" (406).

Even though "the Way of the World" occurs three times, its meaning changes in the end. In Fainall's world, infidelity between couples and extramarital affairs is so common that it creates no surprise. This kind of rakish view prevailed in the early stages of the Restoration period but it becomes dregs which should be discarded in the world represented by Mirabell, when he utters the titular words. In the new world after the Glorious Revolution, the new "Whig" state, led by commercial and landed elites, needed to consolidate its power and promote social stability. As a result, the constitutional monarchy was established in politics and the Society for the Reformation of Manners was founded in 1691. That is why Norman Holland said "the fundamental conflict in

The Way of the World is vitalist—between Mirabell who looks forward to a posterity and Fainall who wants to keep a rigid, restrictive status quo” (197). In fact, there is something debatable in Holland’s statement. Fainall does not want to keep “a rigid, restrictive status quo.” He is a nostalgic who wants to go back to the past. In this aspect, Braverman’s words are more correct: “Fainall is the heir of the rakish tradition, Mirabell the honnête homme of the postrevolutionary period” (160). In a paper with strong political colors, Richard Braverman even holds that Fainall represents the absolutism of the Stuarts while Mirabell represents the constitutional government based on negotiation and neutral trust. It seems precise even though it is political.

Mirabell, in the matter of upbringing, fidelity, and social decorum, demonstrates qualities of a Lockean gentleman while Fainall is a Hobbesian rake whose appetite is endless. If we follow this train of thought, the moral instruction imparted by Congreve through the conflicts between Mirabell and Fainall is not as platitudinous as virtues rewarded or evils punished. Congreve compares two opposite political systems, philosophical ideas, and values in the comedy and embodies them with distinctive characters. In the end, the victory of Mirabell and the failure of Fainall are the instruction of Congreve to his audiences about what is the right way. This is the morality implied in the text. If we are familiar with Congreve, we would know that in his early comedies the Hobbesian rakes are the most charming people who laugh last. But Congreve reforms and changes his faults with the passing of time. In his last two comedies, the ludicrous protagonists end up reforming themselves. He sets up a moral example of learning and corrects his own mistakes.

Conclusion

If we go beyond the comedy itself and comb the development of comic protagonists from Renaissance comedy, we might be surprised at Congreve originality in combining two different kinds of protagonists in Renaissance comedy. Mirabell in *The Way of the World* not only enjoys the appearance and behavior of aristocratic gentlemen in Shakespearean comedies but also has the wit and ability of tricksters in Jonsonian comedies. He is the renovation of exemplary character, witty slave, and parasite in the Restoration period. In fact, Mirabell, the Lockean gentleman, is a new comic protagonist who owns the gracefulness of aristocrats and the capability of middle class entrepreneurs. This new protagonist not only shows Congreve’s integration of two opposite protagonists but also reflects his sensibility to the zeitgeist. Though the comedy adopts the traditional wedding-dance as its ending, it symbolizes the motif of a new king replacing the old one. With the dance of all characters, a new kind of civilization respecting reason and contract is forming and a new protagonist represented by Mirabell starts to shine. From then, the Lockean gentlemen walks into English literary history and becomes the major characters in novels of the 18th century.

Notes

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2. “He spoke of his Works as of 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.” See D. F. McKenzie, “Mea Culpa: Voltaire’s Retraction of His Comments Critical of Congreve,” *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 49, no. 196, 1998, p. 461.

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