

MIC ENGLISH, SEM-VI

William Congreve's Biography

William Congreve (born January 24, 1670, Bardsey, near Leeds, Yorkshire, England—died January 19, 1729, London) was an English dramatist who shaped the English comedy of manners through his brilliant comic dialogue, his satirical portrayal of the war of the sexes, and his ironic scrutiny of the affectations of his age. His major plays were *The Old Bachelour* (1693), *The Double-Dealer* (1693), *Love for Love* (1695), and *The Way of the World* (1700).

Early life

In 1674 Congreve's father was granted a commission in the army to join the garrison at Youghal, in Ireland. When he was transferred to Carrickfergus, Congreve, in 1681, was sent to school at Kilkenny, the Eton of Ireland. In April 1686 he entered Trinity College, Dublin (where he received his M.A. in 1696). He studied under the distinguished philosopher and mathematician St. George Ashe, who also tutored his elder schoolfellow and ultimate lifelong friend Jonathan Swift. It was probably during the Glorious Revolution (1688–89) that the family moved to the Congreve home at Stretton in Staffordshire, Congreve's father being made estate agent to the earl of Cork in 1690. In 1691 he was entered as a law student at the Middle Temple. Never a serious reader in law, he published in 1692 under the pseudonym Cleophil a light but delightfully skillful near-parody of fashionable romance, possibly drafted when he was 17, *Incognita: or, Love and Duty reconcil'd*. He quickly became known among men of letters, had some verses printed in a miscellany of the same year, and became a protégé of John Dryden. In that year Dryden published his translation of the satires of Juvenal and Persius (dated 1693), in which Congreve collaborated, contributing the complimentary poem "To Mr. Dryden."

Literary career

It was in March 1693 that he achieved sudden fame with the production at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, of *The Old Bachelour*, written, he said, in 1690 to amuse himself during convalescence. Warmly heralded by Dryden, who declared that he had never read so brilliant a first play, though it needed to be given "the fashionable *Cutt of the Town*," it was an

enormous success, running for the then unprecedented length of a fortnight. His next play, *The Double-Dealer*, played in November or December at Drury Lane but did not meet with the same applause (it later became the more critically admired work, however). Its published form contained a panegyric introduction by Dryden. *Love for Love* almost repeated the success of his first play. Performed in April 1695, it was the first production staged for the new theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, which was opened after protracted crises in the old Theatre Royal, complicated by quarrels among the actors. Congreve became one of the managers of the new theatre, promising to provide a new play every year.

In 1695 he began to write his more public occasional verse, such as his pastoral on the death of Queen Mary II and his "Pindarique Ode, Humbly Offer'd to the King on his taking Namure"; and John Dennis, then a young, unsoured critic, collecting his *Letters upon Several Occasions* (published 1696), extracted from Congreve his "Letter Concerning Humour in Comedy." By this time, Congreve's position among men of letters was so well established that he was considered worthy of one of those sinecure posts by which men of power in government rewarded literary merit: he was made one of the five commissioners for licensing hackney coaches, though at a reduced salary of £100 per annum.

Though Congreve signally failed to carry out his promise of writing a play a year for the Lincoln's Inn theatre, he showed his good intentions by letting them stage *The Mourning Bride*. Although it is now his least regarded drama, this tragedy, produced early in 1697, swelled his reputation enormously and became his most popular play. No further dramatic work appeared until March 1700, when Congreve's masterpiece, *The Way of the World*, was produced—with a brilliant cast—at Lincoln's Inn Fields; though it is now his only frequently revived piece, it was a failure with the audience. This was Congreve's last attempt to write a play, though he did not entirely desert the theatre. He wrote librettos for two operas, and in 1704 he collaborated in translating Molière's *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* for Lincoln's Inn Fields. In 1705 he associated himself for a short time with the playwright and architect Sir John Vanbrugh in the Queen's theatre, or Italian Opera house, writing an epilogue to its first production. It is likely that Congreve's retreat from the stage was partly a result of a campaign against the supposed immorality of contemporary comedies. This attack was led most notably by Jeremy Collier, author of the tract *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698), which specifically censured Congreve and Dryden, among others. In reply, Congreve wrote *Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations* (1698).

The rest of his life he passed quietly enough, being in easy circumstances thanks to his private income, the royalties on his plays, and his not very exacting posts in the civil service. In 1705 he was made a commissioner for wines, a post that he retained by virtue of Swift's good offices at the change of government in 1710 but which he relinquished in 1714 when he joined the customs service; his position was improved at the end of 1714 with the addition of the secretaryship of the island of Jamaica. He wrote a considerable number of poems, some of the light social variety, some soundly scholarly translations from Homer, Juvenal, Ovid, and Horace, and some Pindaric odes. The volume containing these odes also comprised his timely "Discourse on the Pindarique Ode" (1706), which brought some order to a form that had become wildly unrestrained since the days of the poet Abraham Cowley. Congreve's friendships were numerous, warm, and constant, as much with insignificant people, such as his early companions in Ireland, as with the literary figures of his time. No quarrels are attributed to him, except for a very brief one with Jacob Tonson, a publisher. Swift, whose friendship with him had begun in early days in Ireland, was unvarying in his affection; for John Gay, poet and author of *The Beggar's Opera*, he was the "unreproachful man"; Alexander Pope dedicated his *Iliad* to him; and Sir Richard Steele his edition of Joseph Addison's *The Drummer*. As to his relations with the other sex, his affection for Mrs. Anne Bracegirdle—who acted most of his female leads—is well known; they were always close friends, but whether the intimacy was of a deeper nature is undetermined. In his later years he was devotedly attached to the second duchess of Marlborough, and it is almost certain that he was the father of her second daughter, Lady Mary Godolphin, later duchess of Leeds. This would account for the large legacy, of almost all his fortune, which he left to the duchess of Marlborough. He died after a carriage accident.

Legacy of William Congreve

Congreve's character was praised in Giles Jacob's *Poetical Register* (1719), where he is described as being "so far from being puff'd up with Vanity...that he abounds with Humility and good Nature. He does not shew so much the Poet as the Gentleman." The last phrase will serve as a comment on the notorious meeting with Voltaire, who in 1726 had come celebrity-seeking in England and wished to extract what he could from the great English writer of comedy. Congreve, failing, fatigued, attacked by gout, and half-blind, did not feel equal to discussing the minutiae of comic writing or a play he had written some 30 years earlier. He told Voltaire that he would be delighted to talk on general subjects, "on the footing of a

gentleman” as he phrased it, but not on subjects of which he would be expected to display expert critical knowledge and affect the pundit.

Congreve is the outstanding writer of the English comedy of manners, markedly different in many respects from others of this period of the drama. Taking as its main theme the manners and behaviour of the class to which it was addressed, that is, the antipuritanical theatre audience drawn largely from the court, it dealt with imitators of French customs, conceited wits, and fantastics of all kinds; but its main theme was the sexual life led by a large number of courtiers, with their philosophy of freedom and experimentation. Restoration comedy was always satirical and sometimes cynical. Congreve rises above other dramatists of his time in both the delicacy of his feeling and the perfection of his phrasing.

The latter is strikingly exhibited in the opening speeches of *The Old Bachelour*, a play that no doubt appealed to the audiences because it handled with a new brilliance themes they were familiar with. Some of the repartee may seem superficial to modern readers, but that was the manner of the time. As Congreve progressed, his speeches became more modulated, more musical, but always sure in their cadence. “Every sentence is replete with sense and satire,” William Hazlitt wrote, “conveyed in the most polished and pointed terms.” As George Meredith stated, “He is at once precise and voluble...in this he is a classic, and is worthy of treading a measure with Molière.” Congreve’s most successful work is his last play, *The Way of the World*. Here he is doing more than holding up to ridicule the assumptions that governed the society of his time. He could not regard love merely as the gratification of lust, a matter of appetite rather than of feeling, but he was equally averse to “rationalizing” love. Congreve goes deeper than any of his contemporaries, has more feeling for the individual, and is far subtler. He was a sensitive craftsman, and nothing came from his hand that was not thoughtfully conceived and expertly contrived. Though not the equal of Molière, he was the nearest English approach to him.

satire, artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to inspire social reform.

Satire is a protean term. Together with its derivatives, it is one of the most heavily worked literary designations and one of the most imprecise. The great English lexicographer Samuel Johnson defined satire as “a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured,” and more

elaborate definitions are rarely more satisfactory. No strict definition can encompass the complexity of a word that signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature—as when one speaks of the satires of the Roman poet Horace or calls the American novelist Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* a satire—and, on the other, a mocking spirit or tone that manifests itself in many literary genres but can also enter into almost any kind of human communication.

Wherever wit is employed to expose something foolish or vicious to criticism, there satire exists, whether it be in song or sermon, in painting or political debate, on television or in the movies. In this sense satire is everywhere.

In literary works, satire can be direct or indirect. With direct satire, the narrator speaks directly to the reader. With indirect satire, the author's intent is realized within the narrative and its story. Although this article deals primarily with satire as a literary phenomenon, it records its manifestations in a number of other areas of human activity as well.