

Courtship and Struggle over Marriage in Two Eighteenth Century Plays

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ABSTRACT

The revolution of 1688 involving the overthrowing of James II ushered in new sociocultural codes particularly in the upper classes of the society. It brought in a growing emphasis and awareness among individuals on matters of property and inheritance. This influenced even the most intimate of human relationships, i.e., the system of marriage where alliances in late seventeenth and eighteenth century English society began to be formalised based on economic considerations and prenuptial marital contracts. Two plays of the restoration period, William Congreve's *The Way of The World* and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* referred to as the Comedy of Manners present an interesting social commentary on the prevailing and changing aspects of the old and new forms of marriage system at work. The paper will dwell on the changing trend of marriage in the eighteenth century where premarital courtship and struggle are evident before the man and woman can be united in wedlock.

KEYWORDS

Marriage; courtship; love; struggle; economic consideration.

Introduction

The word 'courtship' according to the Oxford online dictionary connotes a period during which a prospective couple intending marriage develop a romantic relationship, 'struggle' on the other hand involves a conflict or a "fight in which somebody tries to do or get something when it is difficult" (Dhongde 1390). Pre-marital courtship and marriage were two prevalent themes in eighteenth-century plays, popularly referred to as Comedy of Manners. The genre was a useful literary tool to dwell on the manners and affectations of the eighteenth-century upper-class, English society. There is a struggle in marriage and it has been justified with particular reference to the struggle in the marriage of the characters like Mirabell - Millamant, Marlow - Kate

and Hastings - Constance in the eighteenth-century select plays of *The Way of the World* (1700) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), written by the British Playwright, William Congreve and the Irish dramatist, Oliver Goldsmith respectively.

Objective

The paper aims to discuss the theme of courtship and marriage as reflected in two popular plays of the eighteenth century. It will discuss how these two playwrights capture the gradual social change in eighteenth-century English society when marriage was no longer seen as a means to elevate one's social status or financial position (McCloskey 70), as love started to be considered as the basis for forging an

alliance, particularly in the upper classes of the society.

Scope and Limitations

The study limits itself to a discussion of factors such as economic considerations, courtship, seeking approval of family or guardian's consent, fulfilling mutually laid down conditions by the prospective partners, concerns of infidelity, meeting expectations of family members/guardians, overcoming impediments to love, dispelling misunderstanding, clandestine dealings, etc., which influence the characters in the two select plays of the eighteenth century, as they weigh their prospects of marriage. This study is limited merely to the presentation of the courtship followed by the struggles to get married by Mirabell and Millamant in Congreve's play *The Way of the World* and the struggle for marriage that the characters, Marlow and Kate, and Hastings and Constance undergo in the Goldsmith's play *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Literature Review

Some of the literature reviewed for this paper on the question of marriage and other allied themes are: "Marriage in Seventeenth-Century England: The Woman's Story" by Brabcová, Alice; "Marriage Calculations in the Eighteenth Century: Deconstructing the Love vs. Duty Binary" by Goodman, Dena; "The Role of Kate in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*: An Analytical Approach" by Hasan, Mariwan and Sh, Nahawand; "Marital Discord in English Comedy from Dryden to Fielding" by Hume, Robert D.; "Knowing One's Relations in Congreve's *The Way of the World*" by McCloskey, Susan; "Marriage in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*" by Mohammed, A. A.; "A Witty Stratagem for Love and Marriage: Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, or the Mistakes of a Night" by Özbey, Kübra; "Materialism as Seen through Fainall in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*: A Satire

on Social Condition in the Restoration Era" by Paruang, Yenny; "Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*" by Richard, W. F. Kroll.

Overcoming all Struggle to Seek Consent for Marriage

Mirabell is the central character of the play. He loves Millamant, the ward and niece of Lady Wishfort and his former mistress Arabella's cousin. He says:

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. (Congreve 1.3.)

These lines indicate his love for his beloved Millamant, whom he is eager to marry. For this to materialise, he has to first seek the consent of Millamant's aunt Lady Wishfort who is her chief guardian and in the custody of her inheritance of 6000 pounds. Millamant will receive her fortune only if she were to marry with her aunt's approval. It is Mirabell's ill-luck that Lady Wishfort intends her niece, Millamant to marry one of her nephews, the forty-year-old Sir Wilfull. Therefore, Mirabell's struggle ensues. The factors contributing to the struggle in the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant, are: winning the consent of family members/guardians, fulfilling specific laid down conditions and satisfying the desires of family members/guardians.

Lady Wishfort, Fainall (Lady Wishfort's son-in-law) and Mrs. Marwood (Lady Wishfort's friend and Fainall's mistress) are the main hindrances for achieving his goal of marrying Millamant. To overcome the impediments and achieve his goal of marriage with her, he enlists the support of people like Waitwell (his servant), Foible (Lady Wishfort's

servant), Mrs. Arabella Fainall (Lady Wishfort's daughter, Fainall's wife and his former mistress) and Sir Wilfull (Lady Wishfort's nephew) who all set out to help him.

Lady Wishfort, a fifty-five year old widow desires to remarry. She cries out, "Let me see the glass. Cracks, say'st thou? Why, I am arrantly flayed: I look like an old peeled wall. Thou must repair me, Foible" (Congreve 3.5.). These words hint at her wish to look young in order to impress men. To win her heart and earn her consent for his marriage with Millamant, Mirabell attempts at flattering her. She misinterprets it, for ardour and loves him. However, her friend, Mrs. Marwood who secretly loves Mirabell, and is frustrated that her wish could not be fulfilled, out of spite, interferes and poisons Lady Wishfort's mind against Mirabell. Now with Lady Wishfort's love turning to hate Mirabell, it becomes troublesome for him to get her consent for marrying Millamant. When he goes to her house, Lady Wishfort dismisses him in front of all, declaring that she despised him.

It becomes evident that Mirabell could not marry Millamant without Lady Wishfort's consent. Hence, he hatches a plan to coerce her into accepting his proposal of marriage with Millamant. As a part of his plan, he first arranges a marriage between his servant Waitwell and Lady Wishfort's servant Foible, to take their help for his plan to marry Millamant. Later, he disguises his servant Waitwell, to pass off as his uncle, a gentleman named Sir Rowland who would woo Lady Wishfort. He plans to, thus entangle Lady Wishfort and get her embarrassed when she understands the social disgrace, she would suffer in marrying a servant. Belonging to the aristocratic class, she would be scandalised on realising that she was setting herself to marry an already married man, one who was not only legally wedded to another woman but also

belonged to a socially inferior class. Mirabell provisions in this plan that he alone could rescue her out of this predicament, under the condition that she consents for his marriage with Millamant.

Lady Wishfort hates Mirabell. She says:

I cannot admit that traitor, - I fear I cannot fortify myself to support his appearance. He is as terrible to me as a Gorgon: if I see him I swear I shall turn to stone, petrify incessantly (Congreve 5.8.).

Her hate for Mirabell goes to such an extent that she plans to marry his uncle, Sir Rowland to disinherit him from his property. This comical situation of a love triangle, Lady Wishfort's spite for Mirabell and the plan hatched to ensnare the Lady contribute to the struggle in the marriage of Mirabell and Millamant.

On one hand, Lady Wishfort is creating problems for his marriage with Millamant and on the other hand, Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are creating problems for him. They bring an unexpected twist to his plan. Fainall, the spoiled son-in-law of Lady Wishfort is the second husband of her daughter, Arabella. Mrs. Marwood is a friend of Lady Wishfort and Arabella, and also the mistress of Fainall. We understand from the play that Fainall and Arabella's union is a loveless one. He marries her purely for the sake of her property which she inherits from her first husband, Languish. Fainall is a corrupt man, who hates his wife, and maintains an illicit relationship with Mrs. Marwood. He is full of vices and harbours a secret plan to deceive Lady Wishfort, Mrs. Arabella Fainall and Millamant and seize their property. He plans to collect the fortune and elope with Mrs. Marwood. He compels Mirabell to marry Millamant so that he incurs Lady Wishfort's wrath, and Millamant's fortune continues to remain with her which he could then make a claim to acquire.

Mirabell's plan is foiled when Mrs. Marwood overhears the conversation between Mrs. Arabella Fainall and Foible, where they were discussing an earlier love affair of Mirabell with Arabella Fainall and some insulting remarks about herself. She discloses this to Fainall. Both of them, then decide to blackmail Lady Wishfort. They disclose to her Foible's betrayal and reveal the true identity of Sir Rowland to her. Fainall blackmails Lady Wishfort threatening to bring her disgrace by disclosing her daughter, Arabella Fainall's affair with Mirabell. He demands that she should give him Millamant's share of inheritance. He says:

I will be endowed, in right of my wife, with that six thousand pounds, which is the moiety of Mrs. Millamant's fortune in your possession, and which she has forfeited (as will appear by the last will and testament of your deceased husband, Sir Jonathan Wishfort) by her disobedience in contracting herself against your consent or knowledge, and by refusing the offered match with Sir Wilfull Witwoud. (Congreve)

He claims Mrs. Arabella Fainall's property and demands of Lady Wishfort that she should not marry so that her daughter, Arabella will be the sole heir and ultimately, he could become the owner of it. This imbroglio ensuing over property/inheritance, illicit relations, bad qualities, love affairs, disclosure of a scandal and blackmail all stand in the way of Mirabell and Millamant's marriage.

Lady Wishfort hates her son-in-law, Fainall and in this complicated situation where she was faced with the prospect of losing everything, seeks out Mirabell for help. She agrees to consent to his marriage with Millamant, if he rescued her from this predicament. Mirabell helps her by disclosing first Fainall's relation with Mrs. Marwood and later neutralizing his claim by proving Sir Wilfull's (Lady

Wishfort's chosen groom for Millamant) engagement with Millamant which is secretly planned by Mirabell to save her fortune. Here, Sir Wilfull helps Mirabell by pretending to marry Millamant. Further, Mirabell shows the contract of having Mrs. Arabella Fainall's property in his name which she had assigned to him as a trustee before her marriage with Fainall, assuming in advance that Fainall will cheat her for the property, which Mirabell later honestly returns it to her possession. Moreover, Mrs. Arabella Fainall tells her husband that, "I despise you and defy your malice" (Congreve). All the happenings make Fainall angry but he becomes helpless and leaves. Sir Wilfull also makes way for Millamant to marry Mirabell. Lady Wishfort finally consents to the marriage.

Thus, Congreve dwells on the aspects of love, courtship, marriage, adultery and infidelity by comparing and contrasting the relationships of different couples in the play. The relationship between the spouses of the Fainall couple which is founded on purely commercial interests, (as was the case with most marriages in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century English society) is contrasted with that of the transparent and honest relationship between Mirabell and Millamant, which is based on love and genuine affection. *The Way of the World* is a play that captures this gradually changing trend in solemnising marriage not out of economic interests but for the sake of love, especially in the upper sections of the society.

Also, the factors, contributing to the struggle in marriage, are not merely external factors but also internal ones. The factors from the internal sources like asserting one's independence, nonchalant attitude, indecisiveness, and stirring jealousy, all contribute to the struggle in marriage. To fulfil his wish of marriage with Millamant, Mirabell, struggles intensely to court her. He struggles to woo Millamant who is an independent and

fashionable lady. Millamant seems nonchalant towards Mirabell, though she too loves him. She teases him for his state of uncertainty. She seeks pleasure in keeping him on his toes. She spends time with Witwoud (Sir Wilfull's half-brother) and Petulant (Witwoud's best friend), though she is interested in neither, but does so only with the intention of making Mirabell jealous. She says:

I think I must resolve after all not to have you:-we shan't agree.....I shan't endure to be reprimanded nor instructed; 'tis so dull to act always by advice, and so tedious to be told of one's faults, I can't bear it. Well, I won't have you, Mirabell-I'm resolved-I think-you may go-ha, ha, ha! (Congreve)

When she becomes ready to marry Mirabell, she lays out many conditions which he accepts. He says, "Have you any more conditions to offer? Hitherto, your demands are pretty reasonable" (Congreve). This shows his true love and honour for her. He devises many plans to achieve his goal of marriage to her. In this manner, he triumphs against all odds to finally overcome the struggle and succeeds in marrying Millamant.

Courtship and Marriage as Reflected in *She Stoops to Conquer*

In the play, *She Stoops to Conquer*, struggle in marriage is reflected in Marlow and Kate's marriage, and Hastings and Constance.

Marlow is the central character of the play. His chief shortcoming is that he feels awkward and embarrassed in the company of upper-class women and feels at home when he is in the company of women who are below his social rank. He is the son of Sir Charles Marlow, whose friend is Mr. Hardcastle. Kate is the daughter of Mr. Hardcastle. Following his father's suggestion, Marlow sets out to court Kate accompanied by his friend

Hastings, but they get lost on the way. They go into a pub, enquiring for Mr. Hardcastle's address, and also ask for a room. Tony whom they meet in the pub misguides them, saying that they can get a lodging in an inn located down the road which is actually Mr. Hardcastle's home. Marlow this becomes a victim of Tony's prank and enters Mr. Hardcastle's home, assuming it to be an inn. He thinks Mr. Hardcastle was the innkeeper and Kate is a servant and behaves rudely to her. This shocks Mr. Hardcastle. He says:

I tell you, sir, I'm serious! and now that my passions are roused, I say this house is mine, sir; this house is mine, and I command you to leave it directly" (Goldsmith).

The misunderstanding deepens. Mr. Hardcastle, who had initially been supportive of the marriage between Marlow and Kate, is unhappy with Marlow. Kate, who had heard her father's appreciation of Marlow had intended to make a good impression on him. After witnessing his rude behaviour, she vows never to marry him. The environment for Marlow's marriage with Kate had been favourable, but he himself had created complications, by getting fooled by Tony. Hastings learns of the incident of being fooled by Tony from his beloved Constance but he keeps it secret from Marlow, thinking that Marlow will get embarrassed on knowing the truth.

Here, factors like misguidance, becoming a victim of pranks, exposure to rude and inappropriate behaviour, guarding secrets and social inhibitions all contribute to the struggle in the marriage of Marlow and Kate.

Kate later learns of Tony's prank from her maid Pimple and of Marlow's shy nature around upper-class ladies from her cousin Constance. She decides to take the initiative and impersonates herself as a maid, to understand his actual personality and woo him to make him fall in love with

her. She speaks to him in a lower-class woman's dialect. Considering Kate to be a maid, Marlow forgets his reticence and converses freely with her. He tries to flirt and kiss her. Mr. Hardcastle witnesses it and wishes to angrily throw him out of his house but Kate restrains him. Later, Mr. Hardcastle speaks to him in a harsh tone. Kate discloses to Marlow his confusion and tells him that he is at Mr. Hardcastle's home and not in an inn, as he believed himself to be. On it, he says:

O, confound my stupid head, I shall be laughed at over the whole town.....To mistake this house of all others for an inn, and my father's old friend for an innkeeper! What a swaggering puppy must he take me for! What a silly puppy do I find myself! There again, may I be hanged, my dear, but I mistook you for the bar-maid. (Goldsmith)

Kate does not yet disclose her true identity. Marlow is horrified to learn the facts and decides to depart. On his decision to leave, Kate weeps. Marlow realises her love for him. He yells at Tony and Hastings for deceiving him for not disclosing about where he was. Later, Mr. Hardcastle realises the cause of Marlow's misunderstanding. He and Marlow's father think that Marlow will marry Kate, but Marlow apologises for his mistake and refuses to marry Kate, saying that he had no feelings for her. Kate assures both, her father and Marlow's that there was love between her and Marlow. She convinces both of them not to disclose the truth.

Kate speaks to Marlow in her normal voice. She tries to convince him for marriage but he refuses, not wishing to disappoint his family by marrying a woman of lower birth. Then, Kate reveals her true identity and he kneels down in front of her and feeling once again embarrassed for having been deceived. Both the fathers are overjoyed. Mr. Hardcastle says, "I see it was all a mistake,

and I am rejoiced to find it" (Goldsmith). The marriage between both Marlow and Kate is thus solemnised.

To woo Marlow and make this marriage a reality, Kate struggles a great deal. She disguises herself to court him and wins his heart. Though she appears aggressive, her strategy finally becomes successful. Owing to her plan, they are able to get enough time and the right atmosphere to know and understand each other. Kate thus stoops to conquer him.

Hastings is a friend of Marlow. He accompanies Marlow to Mr. Hardcastle's home. He loves Constance. He thinks of eloping with her to France. Constance reciprocates his love and wants to elope with him. Though, both are willing they cannot act on their wish because Constance's inheritance of jewels is in the custody of Mrs. Hardcastle. Constance cannot marry without Mrs. Hardcastle's permission, lest she has to forgo her inheritance. Mrs. Hardcastle, an aunt becomes Constance's guardian after her parent's death. She is the second wife of Mr. Hardcastle. She appears to be corrupt and greedy and intends to arrange a marriage between Tony, her son from her first marriage, and Constance so that she can avail Constance's inheritance and retain her social standing. Mrs. Hardcastle chooses to ignore the fact that her son, Tony and Constance dislike each other. Constance is a cultured young lady and Tony is spoiled. Constance is lucky that Tony himself does not want to marry her as he wishes to marry Bet Bouncer, a rustic woman.

Constance pretends at loving Tony so that Mrs. Hardcastle does not suspect her love for Hastings. She tries several ways to deceive her aunt and overcome her guardian's control and get hold of her jewels but to no avail. Constance and Hastings devise a plan to get her jewels by deceiving Mrs. Hardcastle, for which they seek Tony's help. Tony becomes ready to help them because he wants to defy his

mother's wish to marry Constance. He steals the jewels and hands them over to Hastings. He tells Hastings:

Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no fibs. I procured them by the rule of thumb. If I had not a key to every drawer in mother's bureau, how could I go to the alehouse so often as I do (Goldsmith).

Hastings gives it to Marlow for safekeeping. Unluckily, Marlow gives it to Mrs. Hardcastle for safekeeping. When he tells the same to Hastings, Hastings gets disappointed. Both Hastings and Constance give up their hope of getting the jewels and plan to elope without them. Hastings writes a letter to Tony saying that he is waiting for him in the garden. Tony receives a letter. He says:

It's very odd, I can read the outside of my letters, where my own name is, well enough; but when I come to open it, it's all-buzz. That's hard, very hard; for the inside of the letter is always the cream of the correspondence. (Goldsmith)

As he is unable to read it, Mrs. Hardcastle reads it out for him. She becomes furious on learning about the elopement plan and decides to send away Constance to the house of Aunt Pedigree. Hastings yells at Tony for disclosing their plan. Constance gets hurt and tries to convince Hastings to remain faithful if their marriage takes some more years to materialise. Here, the factors such as property/inheritance, corrupt and greedy nature, mistakes, etc., contribute to the struggles in the marriage of Hastings and Constance.

Tony helps them by driving Constance and Mrs. Hardcastle in a circle in the garden instead of taking them to the house of Aunt Pedigree. Mrs. Hardcastle gets terrified thinking they were lost somewhere. He makes her afraid saying, "Ah, it's a highwayman with pistols as long

as my arm. A damned ill-looking fellow" (Goldsmith).

For this Tony's help, Hastings says, "Ha! ha! ha! I understand: you took them in a round, while they supposed themselves going forward, and so you have at last brought them home again" (Goldsmith). Constance gets exhausted at Tony's trick. Hastings insists on her for elopement but she prefers to convince Mr. Hardcastle who can influence Mrs. Hardcastle for their marriage. She says:

Prudence once more comes to my relief, and I will obey its dictates. In the moment of passion fortune may be despised, but it ever produces a lasting repentance. I'm resolved to apply to Mr. Hardcastle's compassion and justice for redress. (Goldsmith)

Marlow's father appreciates Hastings in front of Mr. Hardcastle. Mr. Hardcastle first confirms from Tony whether he has emotions for Constance. After understanding his lack of interest in Constance, he grants permission for the marriage between Hastings and Constance, presenting to her, the fortune of jewels. At this, Mrs. Hardcastle becomes upset but can do nothing. Both Hastings and Constance engage themselves to get married, but only after going through a lot of struggle.

Conclusion

It is evident that there seem to be different kinds of marriage that characters are found entering into in these two plays. Marriage for love and real affection, and another through hoodwinking, purely for economic gain, i.e., mercenary marriage which was very much prevalent in late seventeenth and eighteenth-century upper-class English society. Both the playwrights, Congreve and Goldsmith adopting the Comedy of Manners satirise this practice of marriage but also depict the gradual change that was discernible in

eighteenth-century England, where people began to realise that the foundation of marriage rests not on wealth or economic status but on genuine love and affection.

The plays thus serve as a social commentary on the changing perception over the question of marriage. However, there is some kind of struggle involved in both kinds of marriage. The marriage between Mirabell - Millamant, Marlow - Kate and Hastings - Constance is a marriage for love which is obviously full of struggle. Mirabell's plan to disguise his servant Waitwell, as his uncle, into a gentleman named Sir Rowland to woo and marry Lady Wishfort is a part of trick marriage, as he wants to defame her and also seek her consent for his marriage with Millamant. Lady Wishfort's plan to marry Sir Rowland is also part of a deception, devoid of love, as she intends to disinherit Mirabell from his property and spite him. The show of marriage between Sir Wilfull and Millamant is a part of trick marriage, which is planned by Mirabell as he desires to save Millamant's fortune. The mercenary marriage is evident between Fainall and Mrs. Arabella Fainall as their union seems to be loveless and it is obvious that he marries her only for the sake of money/property. Lady Wishfort's attempt to arrange a marriage between

her nephew Sir Wilfull and Millamant is a part of mercenary marriage as she has possession of her 6000 pounds and rights for her marriage decision. Mrs. Hardcastle's attempt to arrange the marriage between her son Tony and Constance is also for monetary reasons, as she plans to do it out of her greed for utilising Constance's inheritance of jewels which is already in her custody. Both the marriage for love and marriage through deception and trickery have the aspect of struggle.

This study makes a good presentation of the two select plays where the characters Mirabell - Millamant, Marlow - Kate and Hastings - Constance, all undergo struggle in realising their aspiration of entering wedlock.

It seems that the intention of the dramatists in these select plays is to highlight the struggles involved in courtship and marriage, before the characters can be united as a happy couple. It is interesting that the playwrights belong to two different regions of the British Isles and there is a gap of almost seventy years in the production of the two plays. Nevertheless, the common theme of courtship and struggle in marriage runs through both these plays.

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