

Contrasting the roles of women in restoration and early 18th century dramas



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When studying Restoration and early 18th century drama, a predominant theme that appears is the suppression of women. Plays from Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* to Etherege's *The Man of Mode* utilize humor, wit, and satire to criticize the imprudence and vulnerability of women. Furthermore, not only do playwrights cast women figures as weak and insufficient, they also emphasize the dependency women place on men as they cannot rise in a society restricted by legal and social biases. In Congreve's *The Way of the World*, however, the heroine named Millamant seems to rise above the inequality between men and women. Cast in a new light, Millamant differs from other heroines like Etherege's Harriet and Vanbrugh's Amanda. By portraying Millamant as a more feminist heroine, one who has not only wealth and wit but also social grace and intelligence, Congreve shows a transition of the fashionable society at the turn of the 18th century. By examining the love relationships between Amanda and Loveless in Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* and Millamant and Mirabel in Congreve's *The Way of the World*, it becomes transparent that Millamant is more of a feminist heroine than Amanda. The names of the two characters, Amanda and Loveless, is already an indication of unbalanced and unreciprocated love. Amanda's name suggests love (amor), exemplified by her faithfulness to her husband as seen throughout the play as she retains her virtue, despite Berinthia's attempt to arouse her in jealousy so that she would sleep with Worthy. Loveless, as his names reveals, is a man that cannot love; his only quality lies in his ability to lust and woo other women. As their names suggest, Loveless and Amanda's marriage end in failure as Loveless "seizes" Bellinda while Amanda remains faithful. Similarly, Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* establishes an anti-feminist theme as he limits his female

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character's voice. As Amanda confesses that her " fears are founded on [her] love" and pleads for her husband to not leave for London, Loveless guilt trips her by claiming " your love then is not founded as it ought, for if you can believe ' tis possible I should again relapse to my past follies, I must appear to you a thing of such an undigested composition" (I. i. 129-3). Unable to persuade her husband to stay, Amanda reclines in silence, saying " I'll therefore trouble you no longer with [her fears]" (I. i. 139-40). Through this relationship lacking in mutual affection and loyalty, Vanbrugh is able to emphasize the weaknesses of women in power and in voice. By contrast, Mirabel and Millamant seem to share an equal level of power, voice, and faithfulness. Mirabel greatly contrasts Loveless in that he is not a rake figure. Whereas Loveless is a claimed reformed libertine, Mirabel is a claimed lovesick gentleman. From the inception of *The Way of the World* to the very end, Mirabel's love and affection for Millamant is founded on the principles of faithfulness, commitment, and devotion. Millamant differs from Amanda in that first, she has not lost her sex appeal. Although she knows Mirabel is in love with her, Millamant affects a modest and coy demeanor, allowing Mirabel to try even harder to gain affection from her. Amanda, on the other hand, no longer dresses to attract her husband, thereby boring his mind and quenching his passion for her. Furthermore, Millamant does not sink to silence. Upon her marriage negotiations with Mirabel, she states everything that she desires in keeping, from the dressing table to her right to converse with others. More importantly, whereas Amanda seems to suffer all the betrayals of marriage, it is Mirabel in *The Way of the World* that must suffer temporarily for the sake of marrying Millamant by having to first gain Mrs.

Wishfort's approval. Ultimately, the happy ending Congreve designs for <https://assignbuster.com/contrasting-the-roles-of-women-in-restoration-and-early-18th-century-dramas/>

Mirabell and Millamant allows Millamant to be seen in a more feminist light. By analyzing Millamant from Congreve's *The Way of the World* and Harriet in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, one observes a stark contrast in how each playwright delineates their female heroine. Harriet, the heroine in Etherege's play, is depicted as "fine, easy, clean shape" (I. i. 138). She possesses natural beauty and wit, wealth and morals. In fact, unlike the other female characters in *The Man of Mode*, Harriet appears to bring hope for the other women who have fallen as she retains her virtue and disguises her emotions toward Dorimant, the rake. In addition, her decisions are bold and courageous, free from "hoods and modesty, masks and silence, things that shadow and conceal" (III. i. 25-26). Unfortunately, though Etherege contrasts the free-spirited, independent Harriet from all the other female characters in the play, she ultimately falls into the hands of Dorimant and becomes another of his possession. Even when Dorimant renounces "all the joys I have in friendship and in wine" and "sacrifice to [Harriet] all the interest I have in other women" (V. ii. 152-154), Harriet's love for him hinders her from carefully examining the sincerity of his motives. Harriet's final form of surrender lies in her submission to the values of marriage, thus reaffirming the anti-feminist notion that women do not have a place in society apart from men. Congreve's portrayal of Millamant in *The Way of the World* shares both similarities and differences to Etherege's portrayal of Harriet. Like Harriet, Millamant is also young and beautiful, determined and witty. Showing a great disdain for the male race, Millamant refrains from being seen as foolish and desperate as Lady Wishfort and stands in the company of "fops" to not get consumed by the plotting and scheming of other characters like Mrs. Marwood and Foible. In addition, she is deemed wealthy,

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or at least potentially wealthy, because her aunt, Lady Wishfort, is extraordinarily affluent. In this way, both Harriet and Millamant are delineated as seemingly independent, witty, and beautiful. Although Millamant and Mirabell are clearly in love with each other, the inevitability of marriage for a woman still exists. There is, however, a slightly more feminine delineation of Millamant as Congreve allows her to compromise and negotiate within the marriage. Not wanting to sacrifice her full independence, Millamant declares “ I’ll never marry unless I am first made sure of my will and pleasure” (IV. 178-9). She further lists her requirements and demands, from “ I won’t be called names after I’m married” to “ let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while,” Millamant refuses to relinquish her liberty. In addition, seeking independence within her marriage, Millamant states that she will have the freedom “ to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters without interrogatories or wry faces on your part; to wear what I please and choose conversation with regard only to my test...” (IV. 213-7). There is a gender conflict as Mirabel also attempts to reaffirm his masculine control over his intended marriage to Millamant. Through Mirabel and Millamant’s faithfulness to each other as well as their reciprocated teasing and affection apparent in their relationship, Congreve depicts women and men as equally controlling and capable. Therefore, whereas gender behaviors are once often confined to social conventions, Congreve introduces a relationship in which independence and love are intertwined. In the end, Congreve establishes a balance of intimacy and autonomy in their relationship; Millamant refuses to be possessed by her husband, Mirabel, and Mirabel rejects her wife’s vain fashions and female gossip and intrigue. Because Mirabel’s love for

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Millamant is so great, he too relinquishes a part of his role as a masculine figure and submits to Millamant as he calls her “ a Whirlwind.” Therefore, Millamant is more of a feminist heroine than Harriet because her relationship with Mirabel preserves not only the fidelity of marriage, but also the love and affection. Whereas there is a possibility of Dorimant meeting Bellinda again even after his declared loyalty to Harriet, there is a consistency and persistency in Mirabel’s faithfulness to Millamant. Congreve’s 18th century play *The Way of the World* portrays the heroine in a different light than we have seen in other Restoration comedies. Although marriage is still a common thread in the aforementioned plays, Millamant, in *The Way of the World*, is able to find independence and autonomy within her marriage. By comparing the ways female heroines are depicted and how love relationships function in Vanbrugh’s *The Relapse* and Etherege’s *The Man of Mode*, it is clear that Congreve’s Millamant rises above the inequality between men and women, establishing a newfound unity in marriage.