of liaisons exposed, for instance, William Wycherley's (1640-1716) savagely satiric The Country Wife.

The dark side of Wycherley's work was matched by the portrayal in Vanbrugh's The Provoked Wife (1697) of an ill-assorted couple; the plays written by Sir George Etherge (?1634-?1691) on the other hand have a frothy touch of fantasy and farce about them, even the names of his characters — Sir Frederick Frolick, Sir Justin Jolly — suggesting this, though we can see in the names of Courtall and Freeman in his play She Would if She Could (1668) the kind of men who are apt to find life dull without the pursuit of women. John Dryden's (1631-1700) plays were a mixture of farce and wit, but they varied in achievement: the diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), whose comments on the plays of his day are so illuminating, thought one play of Dryden's 'very smutty' whereas he praised another as the 'most entire piece of mirth that was ever writ'.

These comedies of manners held the stage for a relatively long time. There was, however, a shift in the sensibility of the audience — to which the Rev. Jeremy Collier's pamphlet bears witness — away from the convention that a fine gentleman was, in Collier's words, a 'fine whoring, swearing, smutty, atheistical man'. This change can be seen in the comedies which were written and were successful after the turn of the century. The work of the Irish dramatist George Farquhar (1678-1707) illustrates this: his plays The Recruiting Officer (1706) and The Beaux Stratagem (1707) move the action out of metropolitan London, 'the Town', into the countryside. Country people, for long the objects of the often contemptuous wit of the Town, now appear as the subjects of the plays — and they often prove kinder than urban characters. Farquhar's characters are easier people, perhaps more real than the fine witty people of earlier comedies, and in The Beaux Stratagem he even sympathises so much with his character Mrs Sullen, married off by her father to a brutish sot of a husband, that he argues a case for the dissolution of the marriage, echoing John Milton's earlier tracts on divorce as he does so. After Farquhar we can see comedy moving into a sentimental vein in the work of Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729) who gives the merchants, the 'cits' so often ridiculed or deceived by the Restoration gallants, a new dignity and self-confidence in The Conscious Lovers (1722). The audience had changed indeed. It was now middle class rather than aristocratic, and sentimentality held sway, with cynical wit giving way to worthy wisdom.

The Way of the World

Congreve's dedication of the play explains something of his aims in writing it. He thought that the fools being ridiculed in contemporary comedies were too gross: they seemed to be objects created for the audience's charity rather than contempt; instead of amusing the audience they were likely to excite its compassion. Congreve decided to invent characters who were not so much ridiculous because they were natural fools (and therefore incurable) as people who were absurd because they affected to be witty. His aims were not immediately clear: even the clever poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744) asked if Congreve's fools were fools indeed:

Observe how seldom ev'n the best succeed:
Tell me if Congreve's Fools are Fools indeed?

(Imitations of Horace, Ep. II. i, 287-8)

Congreve commented in the dedication that the play had been acted two or three days before the hasty judges in the audience could find the leisure to distinguish 'between the character of a Witwoud and a Truewit'. In Witwoud, in The Way of the World, Congreve drew a character who is absurd because of his affectation, his pretensions (like those of the other fools in the play) to both intelligence and judgement. Truewit, a character in Ben Jonson's The Silent Woman, exposed the false values and behaviour of the misanthropic character Morose in this play. Truewit was an intelligent, and well-educated gentleman, though Congreve's friend Dryden thought Jonson's character was less courtly in behaviour than might be expected of a Restoration gentleman. It seems curious that Congreve's mockery of the would-be wits wasn't immediately clear to the early audiences of his play, for Witwoud and Petulant are obviously absurd in their inane affectation. Perhaps it was indeed too refined a play for the taste of the audience in 1700.

There are, however, other difficulties than those aroused by the nature of Witwoud and Petulant. The fullest meanings of the play are not likely to be grasped immediately by a reader or an audience, for it is a play in which appearances are deceptive, some characters change, and the plot at first seems unduly complex.
The best way to sort out the names of the characters and to resolve some of the complexities of their relationships with each other is to draw a family tree of the Wishfort family, which looks like this:

```
  Sir Jonathan Wishfort (d) m Lady Wishfort
       |           |           |           |
       Sister (d) Sister (d) m Sir Witwoud m 2nd wife
       |
       |
Arabella (Mrs Fainall) m i) Languish (d) Millamant Sir Wilfull Witwoud Anthony Witwoud
     |           |           |           |
     ii) Fainall
```

This tree shows us how closely linked all the characters are, for Mirabell wants to marry Millamant, to whom Sir Wilfull Witwoud also pays his addresses, while Fainall is married to Millamant's cousin Arabella.

If we grant that the affectation of Witwoud and Petulant and the more buffoon-like foolishness of Sir Wilfull Witwoud are fairly obvious, what is the play really about? To this question an answer can be marriage and money. There is an unhappy marriage, that of the Fainalls, there is Lady Wishfort, Mrs Fainall's mother, who would, despite her age and apparent unattractiveness, like to be married again, there are the servants Waitwell and Foible who seem to enjoy being married and there are Mirabell and Millamant — he is in love with her and she, who loves him, is still hesitant about committing herself to marriage. Money matters greatly in the fashionable world that Congreve depicts, and a good deal of the plot, as becomes apparent, revolves around it, for money gives power, and it makes marriage possible for the lovers or tolerable for the disappointed.

The play's plot is complicated by intrigues; the characters manipulate each other or are manipulated. Thus Mirabell has (sightedly) pretended to be in love with Lady Wishfort in order to conceal his love for her niece Millamant, who can only inherit half of her fortune unless Lady Wishfort, her guardian, approves of her marrying. Mirabell also plots against Lady Wishfort by disguising his servant Waitwell as Sir Rowland, Mirabell's supposed uncle, and gets him to pay court to the widow. (He has taken the precaution of marrying Waitwell to Lady Wishfort's servant Foible beforehand, so that Waitwell will not be tempted to marry Lady Wishfort). Fainall is having an affair with Mrs Marwood who, to complicate things, loves Mirabell. It is she who, out of jealousy, told Lady Wishfort that he was deceiving her in his feigned advances. Mrs Marwood's lover, Fainall, accuses her of jealousy; he tells her that if she had not hindered Mirabell's plans to marry Millamant then Lady Wishfort would have been so incensed by their marriage that she would have refused to allow her niece Millamant to have more than half of her fortune — which would then have come to his wife, Lady Wishfort's daughter. Fainall is plotting, in fact, to acquire, through his wife, half of Millamant's fortune.

Other complications are revealed. Mrs Fainall has had an affair with Mirabell; he has told her of his plan to get Waitwell to pay court to Lady Wishfort. Once there is a marriage contract drawn up, Mirabell can threaten Lady Wishfort (by producing Waitwell's marriage certificate) and thus force her into agreeing to his marrying Millamant.

Lady Wishfort, however, has her own plans of marrying Millamant to Sir Wilfull Witwoud. Admittedly, Foible has, on Mirabell's orders, suggested this to her, and Mrs Marwood also suggests it. After Sir Wilfull's awkward meeting with Millamant, there comes the great scene in which she agrees to marry Mirabell, succeeded by the drunkenness of Sir Wilfull. Then there follows the comedy of Lady Wishfort's falling for the supposed Sir Rowland.

Mrs Marwood's jealousy leads her to tell Fainall that his wife has had an affair with Mirabell; she suggests that she should tell Lady Wishfort of her daughter's conduct, and threaten to part with her. She assures him that Lady Wishfort loves her daughter and will reach any arrangement to save her reputation. Mrs Marwood then regrets having suggested the marriage between Sir Wilfull and Millamant, but Fainall argues that he can undo that by getting Sir Wilfull drunk. Mrs Marwood then says she will expose Sir Rowland as a fraud. Fainall tells her that he has a deed of settlement of the best part of his
wife’s estate in which, if their plot does not work and he does not get
hold of half of Millamant’s fortune, Mrs Marwood will share.

The interaction of servants with their masters and mistresses complicates the plot still further. Once Lady Wishfort discovers that Foible has been aiding Mirabell’s plans, and that the supposed Sir Rowland was Foible’s husband, her rage overflows; Waitwell has been arrested at Fainall’s instigation and Lady Wishfort wants Foible arrested too. But Foible then tells Mrs Fainall how she and Millamant’s servant, Mrs Mincing, know of Fainall’s adultery with Mrs Marwood and are ready to disclose this. Fainall, we hear from Mincing, is now threatening to divorce his wife if he is not given half of Millamant’s fortune. Mrs Marwood hypocritically tells Lady Wishfort that she wants to patch up matters, and Fainall states his terms: he will allow Lady Wishfort to enjoy her estate during her lifetime provided that if she remarries he will have the power to chose
her husband; his wife is to settle the remainder of her fortune on him and he will obtain half Millamant’s fortune — on the grounds that
she has refused Sir Wilfull Witwoud’s proposal of marriage which was approved of by her aunt.

Then follows the counter-plot. Millamant agrees — as a ruse —
to marry Sir Wilfull Witwoud and Mirabell tells Lady Wishfort that he is to withdraw from his contract to marry Millamant. When Fainall seeks to force Lady Wishfort to sign her agreement to his terms, she gives her consent to Mirabell’s marrying Millamant if he can save her from Fainall’s demands. The women servants expose Fainall’s affair with Mrs Marwood. Waitwell brings in the black box which contains a deed previously witnessed by Petulant and Witwoud, who were unaware of its contents. This was a deed of conveyance of Mrs Fainall’s estate in trust to Mirabell, dated before the deed in which she had signed over her estate to her husband. All Fainall’s plans have now failed and Mirabell wins Millamant with
Lady Wishfort’s approval. Mirabell gives Mrs Fainall back the deed and hopes this will let her control her husband.

The young lovers, Mirabell and Millamant, have won their battle
to marry despite the oppositions of the older character Lady Wishfort. The marriage will be based upon Millamant’s having all her fortune. Mrs Fainall has gained independent control over her fortune and thus may yet make something of her marriage. Lady Wishfort has saved her daughter’s reputation and her own. Mrs Marwood — and Fainall — are the losers. Sir Wilfull retains his freedom and Witwoud and Petulant remain affected fools.