

B.A.
English part 2 Hons

Character Analysis Millamant

Millamant is generally conceded to be the most charming heroine in Restoration comedy. She is a fitting partner-antagonist to Mirabell. She maintains the same self-control to the very end of the proviso scene. She too loves but shows no sentiment. She is airy, teasing, light, beautiful, tantalizing, and infuriating. Mirabell is aware of her faults — and comes to love them. The reader is aware of her faults and comes to love them too. She is affected, coy, and arch, and we would have her no other way. She can be sweet and charming, but there can be acid and irony in her wit.

Millamant appears significantly in five scenes: her first appearance, her dialogue with Mrs. Marwood, her scene with Sir Wilfull, the proviso scene with Mirabell, and the drunken scene immediately following. The first and fourth are the most important for revealing her character.

Millamant's first appearance is prepared for carefully. When she arrives, trailing her court, Mincing and young Witwoud, she automatically takes the center of the stage as if it is her right, as indeed it is. Her character is outlined in the passage about putting up one's hair: Prose would never do, only poetry, a piece of flippancy in which Mincing immediately abets her. Here she is revealed as the complete belle. She is affectation that is fully conscious of itself, and flippancy that delights in its own irreverence. She is completely sure of her feminine power, and Congreve has given her the lines to justify her assurance. The lines concerning suitors — one makes them, one destroys them, and one makes others — are all flippant. She knows her power and can laugh at herself, just as she can tease Mirabell.

Within the limited world where she operates, she is intelligent. She sees through the forced false wit of young Witwoud's humor and handles him gracefully and efficiently. "Truce with your similitudes" and "Mincing stand between me and

his wit" are deft lines which give Witwoud precisely the attention he merits; incidentally, they gracefully dispose of the small deer, for Millamant stalks more worthy game. She is shrewd enough to see through Mrs. Marwood:

Above all, Millamant's character is Millamant in love. She and Mirabell are worthy partners. She, too, will not admit her love to him, for to do so would be to give up one's position of vantage in the game. It is the control of the skillful Restoration wit, which overlays her love, and through which it must operate, that makes the proviso scene so completely successful.

Historical context

In 1700, the world of London theatre-going had changed significantly from the days of, for example, *The Country Wife*. Charles II was no longer on the throne, and the jubilant court that revelled in its licentiousness and opulence had been replaced by the far more dour and utilitarian Dutch-inspired court of William of Orange. His wife, Mary II, was, long before her death, a retiring person who did not appear much in public. William himself was a military king who was reported to be hostile to drama. The political instabilities that had been beneath the surface of many Restoration comedies were still present, but with a different side seeming victorious.

One of the features of a Restoration comedy is the opposition of the witty and courtly (and Cavalier) rake and the dull-witted man of business or the country bumpkin, who is understood to be not only unsophisticated but often (as, for instance, in the very popular plays of Aphra Behn in the 1670s) either Puritan or another form of dissenter. In 1685, the courtly and Cavalier side was in power, and Restoration comedies belittled the bland and foolish losers of the Restoration. However, by 1700, the other side was ascendant. Therefore, *The Way of the World's* recreation of the older Restoration comedy's patterns is only one of the things that made the play unusual.

The 1688 revolution concerning the overthrow of James II created a new set of social codes primarily amongst the bourgeoisie. The new capitalist system meant an increasing emphasis on property and property law. Thus, the play is

packed with legal jargon and financial and marital contracts. These new legal aspects allow characters like Mrs. Fainall to secure her freedom through an equitable trust and for Mirabell and Millamant's marriage to be equal through a prenuptial agreement.

This shift in social perspectives is perhaps best shown in the characters of Fainall and Mirabell, who represent respectively the old form and new form of marital relations: sexual power at first and then developing into material power.

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Jonathan Swift:

His life and Period: - (1667-1745) By far the most powerful and original genius of his age. His life was one of the most tragic in ~~some~~ literary annals. Born of English parents in Ireland he became in 1689 confidential secretary to Sir William Temple at Moor Park, Surrey. He had for many years suffered from recurrent attack of a mysterious brain disease which made him the victim of fearful agony and even more fearful melancholia. Little by little he lost his memory completely; but he lingered on in almost unbroken misery for some years, till death at last brought him a merciful release.

Swift is one of the greatest of English prose writers. As a master of, simple, direct, colloquial style - a style as far as possible removed from ornate and the rhetorical - he has few rivals and no superior. His special field was satire and his favourite instrument irony, which is the art of saying one thing in order to convey another. The skill with which, normally adopting a position entirely alien from his own, he

proceeds gravely and without once dropping the mask to pour ridicule upon the very cause he is apparently supporting is simply amazing. An excellent illustration will be found in his Argument to prove that the Abolishing of Christianity in England may be attended with some Inconveniences, in which, writing ostensibly as one who admits that the system of the gospel... is generally antiquated and exploded, he makes a scathing attack both upon the free thinkers and upon the incense professors of the current religion.

On a larger scale The Battle of the Books and A Tale of a Tub take rank among the finest prose satires in the language. The former grew out of a controversy, in which Sir William Temple had taken a prominent part concerning the respective merits of ancient and modern literatures, and is chiefly occupied, not with the substantial issues involved, but with the discomfitures of Temple's personal opponents.

The Tale of a Tub: - beyond all other books of the writers contains the essence of his thought and style. It was designed to champion the Protestant Church against the pretensions of the Church of Rome and the extravagances of the dissenting sects and to exhibit the corruptions of modern Christianity. The purpose is carried out under the form of an allegorical story, the principal figures in which are the brothers Peter, Martin and Jack, standing respectively for the Roman Church, the English Church and Calvinists or dissenters. Scarcely half the work, however is connected with this central theme, the rest being composed of apologies, introductions, dictations and digressions. But these subsidiary sections, dealing with the abuses of learning and other kindred subjects, contain some of Swift's most trenchant and characteristic writing. He himself said that the aim of the book was to reconcile divinity with wit, but the wit is so pungent and the satire so terrific that the general impression left is that of utter irreverence in the handling of sacred things.

The Tale of a Tub like the rest

of Swift's work, reveal him as essentially a man of his time in the want of spiritual quality, in his distrust of the visionary and the extravagant, and in his thoroughly materialistic view of life. At one most important point, however, he stands out as an exception. His age was an age of flippant and shallow optimism. Swift, on the contrary, was a profound pessimist.
