

William Congreve

(1670-1729)

- Restoration theatre: private vs public theatre of the Elizabethan period
- Yet: same closeness between actors and audience – projection of the proscenium to the front
- Audience: wits, gallants, hedonists, mainly conceiving theatre as entertainment

- Class drama: mirror of the upper-class ethos
- Influence of
 - Jonson's comedy of humours
 - Moliere's comedy
 - Italian *Commedia dell'arte*

- Master of *comedy of manners*
- Dryden regarded him as great as Shakespeare
- Lively characterisation and witty language
- Satire of contemporary customs (e.g. in *The Double Dealer*, 1693)
- Central theme: marriage as a situation in which private and public issues confront each other

The Way of the World (1700)

- Main plot: a love story ending in marriage but after a series of intrigues depending on endless legal actions and documents, contracts, and testaments
- Marriage is inevitably ruled by social conventions – a social contract

- Marriage is the result of the struggle for power, sex and money
- Commercialisation of love – property as basis of marriage
- Mixed tone: sad and amused – sadness and difficulties of human relationships in a world ruled by hypocrisy and falsity

- Main point of interest: *wit* in dialogues – cunny language and *puns*
- The “way of the world” = self-interest, ability to use one’s cunning to reach one’s ends, allows eventually love to triumph yet allied to wit and clever plotting
- Morale: even in a mercenary society, love can survive into marriage