
Proviso Scene of "The Way of the World"

In the Proviso Scene of the play "The Way of the World", we find Mirabell and Millamant meeting together to arrange an agreement for their marriage. The scene is a pure comedy with brilliant display of wit by both of them, but, above all, provides instructions which have serious dimensions in the context of the society. Here, Congreve seems to come to realise the importance for providing an ideal pair of man and woman, ideal in the sense that the pair could be taken for models in the life-style of the period.

However, the Proviso Scene is one of the most remarkable aspects of Congreve's "The Way of the World" and this scene has been widely and simultaneously admired by the critics and the readers. In fact, it serves as an excellent medium through which Congreve conveys his message to his readers.

The most noteworthy aspect of the Proviso Scene is Millamant's witty style in which she puts her condition before her lover Mirabell. According to her first condition, she wants equal amount of love and affection on the part of her would husband throughout her life. Behind her above mentioned condition we notice the pitiable condition of a wife after marriage. Just before marriage when men and women are lovers they declare full support and love for each other but things take a turn when they marry each other. So Millamant appears anxious because of this reason and that is why she puts this condition. Again, Millamant says that she hates those lovers who do not take proper care of their beloveds. She further wants that her husband must be a loyal and good natured man.

She says to Mirabell that she wants her liberty after her marriage; she informs Mirabell that she can't forgo her independence, she says, "My dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you adieu?... My morning, thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers, all ye douceurs, ... Adieu -- I can't do it, 'tis more than impossible." She also adds that "I will lie a bed in a morning as long as I please"

Millamant on her part makes it clear that a lover's (Mirabell's) appeals and entreaties should not stop with the marriage ceremony. Therefore, she would like to be 'solicited' even after marriage. She next puts that "My dear liberty" should be preserved; "I'll lye abed in a morning as long as I please..." she wants that she will have liberty "to say and receive visits to and from who I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or Wry faces on your part; and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste.....come to dinner who I please, find in my dressing room who I'm out of humour, without giving reason. To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly whenever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in."

Millamant then informs that she would not like to be addressed by such names as “wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweet-heart; and the rest of that nauseous can, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar.” Moreover, they will continue to present a decorous appearance in public, and she will have free communication with others. In other words, after marriage they maintain certain distance and reserve between them.

Mirabell listens to all the conditions of Millamant with patience. Although if was not very happy with some of the conditions, if doesn't raise any objection. Now he informs Millamant about some of his own conditions when we go through his conditions we observe that it is a witty satire on the affectations of women in that society. Mirabell wants that after their marriage Millamant should follow some guidelines. Millamant should not be in company of any woman who has a notorious background or who indulges in scandalous activities. He says that " you admit no sworn confidant or

intimate of your own sex; no she friend to screen her affairs under your countenance, and tempt you to make trial of a mutual secrecy. No decoy-duck to wheedle you a FOP-SCRAMBLING to the play in a mask,"

The next condition is that she should not use the artificial things to cover her real appearance. If says that " I prohibit all masks for the night, made of oiled skins and I know not what--hog's bones, hare's gall, pig water, and the marrow of a roasted cat. "

Mirabell's conditions are quite different: they are frankly sexual in content, directed to his not being cuckolded or to her bedroom manners. “Just as Millamant's are developed femininely” as Norman N. Holland points out, “Mirabell's are developed in a typically masculine way.” Each of Mirabell's provisos begin with its item: first, the general principle, “that your Acquaintance be general”, then specific instructions, “no she-friend to screen her affairs”, no fop to take her to the theatre secretly, and an illustration of the forbidden behaviour, “to wheedle you a fop-scrambling to the play in a mask”. Nevertheless, Mirabell denounces the use of tight dresses during pregnancy by women, and he forbids the use of alcoholic drinks. The conditions are stated by both parties in a spirit of fun and gaiety, but the fact remained that both are striving to arrive at some kind of mutual understanding.

Through this scene appears very funny but it is a serious comment on the degradation of conjugal relations. The conditions as set down by the two lovers, confirm the sincerity of their motives and their wish to live a married life which was different from others. Both of them accept each other's conditions. It is a guideline or memorandum of understanding between a husband and a wife, which would enable them to spend a happy married life. After following these guidelines there will have no possibility of misunderstanding.



