

CONGREVE

Congreve is the greatest of our pure dramatists. He has been dead two hundred years. Yet strangely—only today the first complete edition of his works appeared—in fact the first attempt at such an edition. The five chief plays and some of the poems have often been printed and as often mutilated. One will find here the opera "Semele" the masque "The Judgment of Paris," and the farce "Squire Trelooby" of which Congreve wrote the first act, and which so far had never been included in any edition of his works. Mr. Summers has also reprinted "Incognita"—the reply to Jeremy Collier, the letter on Humour, and some New Correspondence—every word that Congreve is known to have written is here.

Congreve's career was a remarkable one. He was born about 1670 of an old family of Staffordshire. Very soon his father was appointed commander of the garrison at Youghal, and thither the family removed. Congreve went to Kilkenny School and Trinity College, Dublin. At eighteen, Congreve returned to England and at twenty-one was admitted to Middle Temple: at twenty-two he published his first novel, and was not yet twenty-three when "The Old Bachelor" was staged. It had been drafted, we are told, during a convalescence before Congreve put a foot in London, and its success was instantaneous. The town flocked to the theatre, and Dryden, the dictator of the age, saluted Congreve as a brother. Within four years "The Double Dealer," "Love for Love," and "The Mourning Bride" had followed, and the author was scarcely thirty when his last and greatest comedy, "The Way of the World" was produced. Thereafter he wrote little. Like Addison his literary fame brought him political preferment. He was Commissioner of Hackney Coaches, of Wine Licenses, Searcher of Customs and Secretary of Jamaica. Tories and Whigs heaped favours upon him equally, and his gout and semi-blindness never robbed him

of office nor precluded him from the drawing rooms of Society. The consideration in which he was held was amply proved by the fact that he received the dedication of Pope's "Illiad." In his later years he associated much with Mrs. Bracegirdle, visited and received visits but did little else. He died in 1729; Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough, wrote his epitaph. He received a magnificent funeral and was buried among the great at Westminster.

People still wonder why after such a brilliant and profuse burst which Congreve made in his earlier years, he seemed to have lost all taste or inclination for writing. And today opinions are still bandied. Mr. Summers thinks he was nipped in the bud by Collier's rabid attack. It was in 1690 that Collier's "Short View" appeared, in which, with great learning and frenzied vituperation, the immorality, obscenity, and profanity of the stage was anathematized. Congreve was singled out for attack somewhat unjustly, and he felt the necessity of reply. MacAulay underrates his answer in which he explains his aim, and to a large extent, justified the particular passages which Collier had selected. The Puritan age saw evil where none was and Congreve was justified in thinking he had given little offence. No matter now, but as usual in Human History one excess followed another. The People were excited. Public persecution began, and the drama was compelled to "go easy"—even the mildest oath had to be avoided—and some say this was the reason for Congreve's later inactivity. But he was financially independent. As a comic playwright he had produced more than Sheridan or Goldsmith. It may have been that his vein was exhausted. In any event he was not temperamentally inclined to hard labour of any sort. The story is told that when Voltaire wished to visit him, Congreve sent word that he must visit him as a gentleman and not as an author.

Congreve as an author was neither a reformer nor one expressing his own deep feelings. He was "a prince of

artifice" and he knew it. He looked with equal coolness on the world and on the "Way of the World." His conception of his art is stated in one short essay that he did for the Tatler:—

"A gentleman remarked that there was no method in the world of knowing the taste of an age or a period of time so good as by the observations of their persons represented in comedies."

His characters are types, individualized and astonishingly well drawn. By the finest shade does he differentiate his least important servants. One has but to consider Mincing, Foible, and Waitwell to see that there lies something that distinguishes them as well as that which separates Millamant and Lady Wishfort; but it is in his dialogue that his supreme gift is shown. *Someone* has said, "No where else in our drama is such perfection of phrasing to be found. English at once so musical, so economical, so accurate is like the chime of bells—yet every word is in character and the author is never tempted by his great gifts of epigram, image, humour and irony, to put things into the wrong mouths. Here are two contrasted passages where girls of different types are arguing with men. The first is Prue with her lumbering sailor:—

"But I'm sure it's not so, for I'll speak sooner than you should believe that; and I'll speak truth tho' one should always tell a lie to a man; and I don't care, let my father do what he will; I'm too big to be whipped, so I'll tell you plainly, I don't like you nor love you at all, nor never will that's more. So there's yours for you, and don't trouble me no more you ugly thing."

The other is Millamant's answer to Mirabell when he asks if she has any more conditions to make:—

"Trifles—as liberty 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; to choose conversation with regard only to my tastes; to have no obligations on me to converse with wits I don't

like because they are your acquaintance; or to be intimate with fools because they may be your relations. Come to dinner when I please, dine in my dressing room when I am out of humor without giving a 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, wherever I am you shall always knock at the door before you come in. These articles subscribed, if I continue to endure you a little longer I may by degrees dwindle into a wife."

To go on in the words of the aforesaid critic whose words I have copied but whose name I have neglected:—"Congreve's is like that of a Chinese carver of ivory: he carves scenes, paragraphy, sentences with an equal care. His plays are scattered with quotable epigrams; he was the sole author of the epigrammatic manner of Sheridan and Wilde."

This perfection of Congreve's does not extend to his one tragedy, which seems to me to have some looseness of characterization, some bombast and some mishandling of crises; but it is a better play than any in the following century. The verse is good and the reader will probably remember that one scenes always drew forth the enthusiasm of Dr. Johnson.

Altogether, the new edition of Mr. Summers is an admirable one and a worthy addition to the library of the man of the street as well as to that of the student.

