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PROOF PRESUMPTIVE ON THE

MYSTERY OF CONGREVE

(TITLE)

BY

ELIZABETH LAMBIRD

**PLAN B PAPER**

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1963

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS PLAN B PAPER BE ACCEPTED AS  
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## Proof Presumptive on the Mystery of Congreve

William Congreve, that man of mystery whom Dryden ranked with Shakespeare, would surely have been amused could he have but known that some day students and scholars alike would delve feverishly into his life story and his works in order to ferret out evidence as to why he quit the stage at the age of thirty. Perhaps even now he is chuckling sardonically with his friend Dean Swift at these students who frantically try to "extract sunbeams out of cucumbers."<sup>1</sup>

Congreve had been the "boy-wonder" of the theater during the last decade of the seventeenth century. He was blest with the fatherly pride and approval of Dryden; he had written five plays which had been acclaimed by the critics; he had earned a place in the sun in London literary circles; and he had an income which permitted him a modicum of independence. He was, in fact, getting ahead. His carelessly tossing away such golden opportunities as stretched out before him, as if they were of no moment, is inconceivable to the typical twentieth-century mind. There had to be justification for his actions. No less than we seek did the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seek an explanation. Since it is more often easier to explain another's actions than to explain one's own, there is no dearth of opinions as to why, while he was riding the very crest of the wave of popularity, Congreve should suddenly withdraw from the stage.

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels, edited by Robert A. Greenberg (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 152-153.

The most numerous subscribed-to theory is that presented by Louis Cazamian, that Congreve was vexed with the cold reception of his last play, The Way of the World, first acted and published in 1700.<sup>2</sup> Almost all those who have ventured an opinion on the matter have, in part, held this to be true. Since this was Congreve's last play and since it was coldly received, this seems a valid statement.

Another theory which keeps cropping up is that Congreve was galled by the attacks on his plays by Jeremy Collier in his Short View, published in 1698. Collier had singled out Congreve as one of his chief victims in pointing out the immorality of the stage, and Congreve's answer to the attack was somewhat less than successful.

In conjunction with these two ideas is a third, that Congreve's love for social life lured him from the stage and into retirement.

Nettleton says:

Whether the comparative failure of The Way of the World, or an uneasy sense of Collier's superiority in their controversy, or simply Congreve's fondness for the social life which the emoluments of office now permitted him to enjoy, was the dominant factor in the case, Congreve left the stage early.<sup>3</sup>

Sherburn thought that Congreve had devoted himself to uplifting the drama, that he had been praised by the leading writers of his day for his efforts, but that he was aware that his reforms had not caught on with the general public. Sherburn also stated that Congreve

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<sup>2</sup>Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 732.

<sup>3</sup>George Henry Nettleton, English Drama of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), p. 148.

disdained to compete with less worthy, but more popular, writers in order to gain applause of an undiscerning audience. He added that Congreve "felt superior to his audiences."<sup>4</sup>

Dobree, while agreeing in the main with all these theories, added that comedy was to Congreve "not a mere game," but rather his lifeblood.<sup>5</sup> According to Dobree, Congreve had more to say than comedy would permit and he realized this when the general public failed to understand The Way of the World:

If, as he believed, it was the duty of the comic poet to lash the vices and follies of humankind, in view of the nature of man it hardly seemed worth while. And as for the creation of beauty, when, after great travail it was achieved, it went unrecognized, and all that the critics could say of it was to call it 'too keen a satire.' Was it not better to sport in the shade with the Amaryllis of social wit, or -- with the tangles of a Bracegirdle's hair?<sup>6</sup>

Dobree concluded that Congreve had never enjoyed portraying the seamier side of current society, nor had he ever enjoyed the role of a comic writer.<sup>7</sup> Later Dobree supported his theory that Congreve had said all he had to say in the drama, by pointing out that after 1700 he turned to music, his new love, in the forms of masque and opera.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>George Sherburn, The Restoration and Eighteenth Century, 1660-1789, Vol. III of A Literary History of England, ed. Albert C. Baugh (4 vols.; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1948), pp. 771-772.

<sup>5</sup>Bonamy Dobree, Restoration Comedy (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 123.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>8</sup>Bonamy Dobree, English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 175.

Macaulay believed that from the very beginning Congreve was torn between two loves. He wanted to be a great writer and he wanted to be a man of fashion.<sup>9</sup> He could be either but he could not be both. Macaulay suggested that Congreve soon grew weary of bargaining with printers and publishers, quarreling with managers, and being applauded or hissed from the galleries and pit. As a consequence, he turned to his other love, society.

Whibley could not accept the theories that Congreve left the stage either because of the cold reception of The Way of the World or for Jeremy Collier's attack. He said Congreve was above such rebuffs. He insisted that Congreve had simply fallen in love with the society of which he had written and "turned willingly from art to life."<sup>10</sup>

Gosse, Congreve's biographer, stated that Congreve was unwilling to accept criticism with equanimity.<sup>11</sup> He seemed to think that Congreve's petulance at any and all criticism leveled at him caused his retirement. He based these opinions on Congreve's prologue and epilogue to The Way of the World. After having stated unequivocally that Congreve retired in a fit of pique because his audience did not

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<sup>9</sup>Thomas B. Macaulay, "The Comic Dramatists of the Restoration," The Best Plays of the Old Dramatists, ed. A. C. Ewald (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, no date given), pp. xi-xlii.

<sup>10</sup>A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (ed.), Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. VIII: The Age of Dryden (Cambridge, England: University Press, 1912), p. 179. Quoted by Charles Whibley.

<sup>11</sup>Edmund Gosse, Life of William Congreve (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 120.

appreciate his play, Gosse added another theory, that Congreve was too indolent to work at writing plays.<sup>12</sup>

Cibber implied that Congreve was wearied with the struggle to protect his reputation as the leading comedy writer of his time: "The greatest part of the last twenty years of his life was spent in ease and retirement, and he gave himself no trouble about reputation."<sup>13</sup>

Although they be many and varied, none of the foregoing explanations show Congreve in a very attractive light; rather, they make him seem petty, somewhat testy and querulous. Yet there is ample evidence that Congreve was almost universally loved and respected by men who knew him, that his personality was such as to win new friends while maintaining close association and warm relationships with older friends. His circle of friends was wide, including actors, printers, members of the nobility, and co-workers of the Middle Temple, as well as the leading and lesser literary figures of his time. Many of these people left written testimony of Congreve's amiability, his gentleness, his sense of humility, and his charm and general graciousness. Long after his literary output had subsided to a trickle, he was still acclaimed the most distinguished man of letters of his age.

There is not a scrap of evidence that people who lived when

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>13</sup>Charles W. Moulton (ed.), The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, II (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1959), pp. 733-746. Quoting from The Lives of the Poets, Vol. IV, by Theophilus Cibber.

Congreve lived and counted him as their friend ever questioned his withdrawal from active participation in comedy writing. Certainly most people were no more polite in those days, and possibly their silence indicated that the reason was common knowledge and that it was accepted as ample justification for Congreve's actions. And apparently, too, the reason was not one which in any way dimmed the luster of their brightest star.

What one simple bit of information could Congreve's world have had which would have led it to accept, without question or discussion, his almost complete retirement from the field of writing at the very moment he had reached the crest? There can be only one answer: his health must have been so impaired as to make it obviously mandatory that he go into retirement.

Congreve's friends had, in letters to mutual friends, commented on his serious health problem, and Congreve himself frequently gave out information on his condition. Gosse and others have collected these health bulletins -- they may be found sandwiched among other interesting bits of information in almost all accounts of Congreve's life -- but no one ever seems to have attached any particular significance to them. Sorted out and grouped together, the reports are quite appalling.

It was no secret to his friends, nor to his biographers of later years, that Congreve had gout. While he has never admitted that this



had any bearing on Congreve's retirement in 1700, Gosse has agreed that five years later Congreve's health was in such a state that he had to sever all connections with theatrical management and production. In discussing a performance of Love for Love, in June, 1705, Gosse said:

But about this time Congreve's eyesight began to be troublesome; it was a symptom of the general gout which ran through his system. This, there is no question, was the final cause of his retirement from theatrical enterprise. A man crippled by obesity, and threatened with blindness, could undertake no stage-management with any hope of success.<sup>14</sup>

But Gosse has erred in the nature of the disease of gout, and, almost certainly, he has erred by five or more years in calculating the time when Congreve was incapacitated by the gout and general debility. Gout is now known to be the result of a metabolic disorder which prevents the patient from converting nitrogen waste into urea which is disposed of through the kidneys. Instead, the nitrogen waste becomes uric acid, which deposits itself around joints and produces the swelling and arthritic condition signifying gout. Liquor may precipitate an attack, but it does not cause the disease. Coffee, tea, and chocolate are equally guilty of producing attacks. One other fact, probably not known in Congreve's time, is that the initial attack of gout may occur as early as the fifteenth year of life. Until recent years gout had been considered an old man's disease, associated with wealth, rich foods, and obesity, and attributed to "high living." It is true that most gout victims are obese, but in all likelihood, the obesity is, like gout

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<sup>14</sup>Edmund Gosse, Life of William Congreve (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 140.

itself, just another symptom of the disturbance in body metabolism. Congreve's friends, and perhaps Gosse, too, may be forgiven for accusing Congreve of having "the misfortune to squander away a very good constitution in his younger days," as Gosse quotes Swift as saying in February, 1729.<sup>15</sup> He did not have a good constitution to start with, even though he appeared to have one, but, until more was learned about the disease, the assumption that it was caused by "high living" was quite natural. No doubt Congreve's frequent visits to the coffee-houses and his drinking of wines brought him a great deal of severe pain that he could have avoided, but the crippling arthritic condition would have come anyway. Congreve's indolence, of which Gosse makes so much, can now be understood as a result of body processes, a knowledge Gosse did not possess when he first undertook to explain Congreve's actions.

Unforgivable, though, is Gosse's overlooking of the fact that Congreve was really ill by 1700. Actually Gosse quoted Congreve's own report of a seemingly serious illness contracted when he was about twenty years old, but Gosse was using the report to prove the date of composition of The Old Bachelor, which he set at 1690, and he made nothing of the mention of illness: "When I wrote it I had little thoughts of the stage, but did it to amuse myself in a slow recovery from a fit of sickness."<sup>16</sup> There is no way of knowing whether this was an

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10.

initial attack of gout, whether it was a later attack in the progression of the disease, or whether it had no connection at all with gout. The initial attack is sudden and severe, but it is usually followed by a lapse of several years before a second attack, and during that period the patient seems perfectly well. As the disease progresses, the attacks become more frequent, with fewer and fewer free periods between attacks, until finally there are no free periods at all.

Congreve's slowed productivity four years later was noted by Gosse, who perhaps rightly attributed the lack of production to poor health, although much later he was still berating Congreve for his indolence and slow work. Gosse quotes from Gildon's Chorus Poetarum of 1694:

One fatal day a sympathetic fire  
Seized him that wrote and her that did inspire,  
Mohun, the Muses' theme, their master Congreve,  
Beauty and wit, had like to have lain in one grave.<sup>17</sup>

The lines suggest that Congreve nearly died. Again, this may have been the first acute attack of gout or it may have been something entirely different, but it does indicate that Congreve's physical condition at the age of twenty-four was such that his very life was in danger when illness struck.

Congreve's next recorded illness occurred in June, 1695, according to Gosse, and this illness required several months for recuperation. On May 30, 1695, Congreve had been appointed commissioner of hackney-

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

coaches, and Gosse jocosely commented:

Congreve reminds us of the legendary Civil Servant who asked for a week's holiday on the day he received his appointment, in order to get used to the office, since he immediately proceeded to Tunbridge Wells to drink steel for an attack of the spleen. Though still in his twenty-sixth year, he seems to have already sapped his constitution.<sup>18</sup>

Congreve was known to have remained at Tunbridge Wells at least through August of that year, and his lassitude indicates that the attack left him physically and emotionally exhausted. Gosse said that after his friends, Moyle and Dennis, had "upbraided him for his silence, at last, on the 11th of August, he writes to them from the Wells."<sup>19</sup>

There follows a period of silence on Congreve's physical condition. But in March, 1698, Jeremy Collier's famous Short View burst into print, jarring the peace of dramatists and theater-goers. The next few months were hectic with charges and countercharges filling the journals. Everyone, it seemed, wanted in on the act, -- everyone, that is, except Congreve, who did not participate in the controversy until July 12, at which time his Amendments of Mr. Collier's False and Imperfect Citations was published. According to Gosse: "Congreve says that he has 'been taxed of laziness, and too much security' in so long neglecting to vindicate himself."<sup>20</sup> Congreve was known as a peace-loving man who "thought twice" before making statements which might reflect a show of temper, and he often reworded remarks in order to eliminate

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

any possibility of giving offense. Perhaps in this instance his apparent tardiness in replying to Collier's attack was only his loathing to engage in controversy; or it could mean that his general health was at such a low ebb that work on his last and greatest play, The Way of the World, taxed his strength to such an extent that he had little left for fighting back against attack. Certain it is that some of his friends were concerned with his laxness, and critics, who believed him capable of much clearer thinking, were dismayed at the lack of logic in his answers in Amendments.

In regard to Congreve's now marked slow-down in productivity, Gosse said:

Congreve had undertaken, if his health permitted, to give Betterton's company a play every year, but three full years divided his Mourning Bride from The Way of the World. His health, although he was not yet thirty, was very unsatisfactory.<sup>21</sup>

Surely the clause "if his health permitted" would never have been written in a contract if there were not the distinct possibility that his health might prevent his fulfilling the contract. As early as 1697 Congreve must have been concerned as to whether or not he could continue writing. Gosse goes on to relate: "Dryden tells Mrs. Steward, on the 7th of November, 1699, that Congreve is ill of the gout at Barnet Wells."<sup>22</sup>

Although he has said that Congreve's eyesight began to fail him in 1705, fully five years after his retirement, Gosse actually had

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

available for study Congreve's own assessment of his fading eyesight as early as August, 1700. Had he not been so blinded by his notion that Congreve quit the stage because of indolence, coupled with a fit of petulance over criticism of The Way of the World, surely he could not have missed the implications in one sentence of a letter Congreve wrote to Edward Porter in August, 1700. Gosse quoted the letter in its entirety, but he overlooked that one revealing sentence: "I am now writing to you from before a black mountain nodding over me, and a whole river in cascade, falling so near me that even I can distinctly see it."<sup>23</sup> The emphasis is on the nearness and the bigness of the cascade, so huge and so close that "even I can distinctly see it." Congreve does not mention that he is nearly blind; he does not need to, for his friend clearly shares that knowledge with him.

It was his lifelong friend, Dean Swift, who added the final brush strokes to the completed picture of Congreve at age thirty, the year of his retirement. Gosse quotes ten lines from a poem by Swift:

Thus Congreve spent in writing plays,  
 And one poor office, half his days;  
 While Montague, who claimed the station  
 To be Maecenas to the nation,  
 For poets open table kept,  
 But ne'er considered where they slept;  
 Himself as rich as fifty Jews,  
 Was easy, though they wanted shoes,  
 And crazy Congreve scarce could spare  
 A shilling to discharge his chair.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 127-128.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

Gosse explained that "crazy" meant feeble and invalided, and he deduced that "half his days" placed Congreve at approximately thirty years of age, making the reference date about 1700. But, as usual, Gosse was engrossed in his own thoughts, bent upon proving that Montague had not provided Congreve with a civil-service commission in 1693, as others had inferred, so that the picture of a feeble and invalided Congreve made not the slightest dent in his own preconceived idea. Thus, with all sincerity, he could say of Congreve immediately after the production of his last play, in March, 1700:

When this play was acted, Congreve had but just completed his thirtieth year, and it was therefore at a very early age indeed that he voluntarily took leave of "the loathed stage." At the same age Terence had only produced the Andria, and Moliere had done nothing. The work of these great masters of comic character was the result of ripened study of life; Congreve, rushing in on the wave of his wonderful intellectual vivacity, fell back into indolence and languor at the very moment when he should have been preparing himself for the greatest triumphs.<sup>25</sup>

In view of all this evidence of Congreve's almost total physical incapacitation by 1700, surely no close friend nor thoughtful person would expect him to rush right in to creating another masterpiece, nor should one take it amiss that he went shortly thereafter to the continent for a prolonged rest. Perhaps at that time he did not mean to retire, but his health continued to worsen, so that even Gosse finally had to admit that after 1705 he could no longer work in the theater in any capacity.<sup>26</sup> Congreve's friends had the advantage

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

over present-day "second-guessers" and could see the steady decline in his health. This could account for the fact that up to the present time there have been found no letters from an alarmed friend, pleading to be told why Congreve was not busy writing a new and better comedy.

Poor physical health might satisfy Congreve's friends, might even bring them to urge him to retire that he might live. His friends never neglected him during his remaining twenty-nine years, when he was almost a complete invalid. They worried about him, they wrote to him and called upon him, and they kept mutual friends informed about him. Such loyal companions must have suffered with him through each painful attack, and as his eyesight dimmed, their concern must have grown. If they did not urge him to retire, they must at least have been relieved to learn that he was going to the continent for a long rest. And they recognized the symptoms of gout, so they probably realized that Congreve would never again be able to do lengthy and concentrated work.

But one disturbing factor remains to be explained. How could a man who could write so well that his contemporaries ranked him with Shakespeare be so contented in retirement unless he really did prefer social life to art? It seems reasonable to say that Congreve was not the man to quit the kind of writing which had brought him such acclaim simply because of pique at an audience which did not appreciate him, or because of embarrassment over Jeremy Collier's attack and his own inadequate rebuttal. Such reactions do not fit the picture of the man



as his contemporaries saw him. He did not retire in high dudgeon; on the contrary, he was more content after retirement than before, and he remained happy and cheerful in spite of his suffering. One needs the qualities of a saint to accept cheerfully and without complaint the knowledge that he is compelled to abandon something he loves, unless one has a substitute which he esteems on an equal level. Congreve was no saint, so was that substitute the "social life," which Macaulay, Whibley, and others suggested? Could a man with his keen insight into human nature, and his ability to re-create what he saw, actually be happy merely hovering about, or even participating in, that society he had once delineated so sharply for his world? Would not such a life only serve to point out more poignantly that first great loss, his physical well-being, and make him impatient with his retirement?

Something more than a craving for "social life," some deep-seated emotional problem, must have accompanied the physiological problem, so that Congreve, who could not have helped but gain some pleasure and satisfaction from that which he did so well, would willingly and with apparent relief turn to a life of idleness and freedom from regulated activity. This problem would have been one which had been building up over the years, one of which Congreve was aware, but one about which he could do nothing until the time came when he could resolve it without betraying family and friends. Is it not possible that Congreve's problem was that he had been worn out

mentally, as well as physically, in his efforts to live up to the expectations of his family, friends, and admirers, and that his enforced idleness brought a release from this emotional strain under which he had worked for years, such a release as he could welcome and enjoy without any sense of shame that he had betrayed those who respected his creativity? If so, this would account for his pushing himself almost beyond his physical strength to complete The Way of the World under "great travail,"<sup>27</sup> for his efforts to polish his play even while he was in the throes of a painful attack of gout, and then when it was obvious to his friends that he could no longer work, for his throwing off all responsibility by choosing a life without pressures. In this case, it was not the social life which drew him; it was an escape from being "pushed" constantly from childhood on.

If Congreve did not like his work in the Middle Temple, it is probable that he engaged in it in the first place because he was doing what his father expected of him. It is probable, too, that his continuation of comedy writing beyond the limits of his physical endurance was just one more example of his need to produce up to expectations. And it is not at all improbable that Dryden's death in 1700 brought him some release from the need to live up to Dryden's expectations of him. Before he was twenty-five, Congreve had already been recognized as Dryden's rightful successor. Addison, in Account of the Greatest English Poets, in 1694, said to Dryden:

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<sup>27</sup> Bonamy Dobree, Restoration Comedy (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 150.

How might we fear our English poetry,  
 That long had flourished, should decay with thee,  
 Did not the Muses' other hope appear,  
 Harmonious Congreve, and forbid our fear;  
 CONGREVE! whose fancy's unexhausted store  
 Has given already much, and promised more.  
 Congreve shall still preserve thy fame alive, <sup>28</sup>  
 And Dryden's Muse shall in his friend survive.

Dryden himself heaped words of praise upon his youthful protege in a long poem addressed to Congreve and included in the publication of The Double Dealer in late 1693:

And this I prophecy, -- thou shalt be seen  
 (Though this with some short parenthesis between)  
 High on the throne of wit, and, seated there,  
 Not mine (that's little), but thy laurel wear.  
 Thy first attempt an early promise made,  
 That early promise this has more than paid;  
 So bold, yet so judiciously you dare,  
 That your least praise is to be regular;  
 Time, place and action may with pains be wrought,  
 But genius must be born, and never can be taught:  
 This is your portion, this your native store;  
 Heaven that but once was prodigal before, <sup>29</sup>  
 To Shakespeare gave as much, she could not give him more.

How very much was being asked of a young man not yet twenty-five years of age, a young man who conscientiously strove to please his friends and live up to their expectations of him, a young man whose days of good health were already a part of his past!

On August 11, 1695, Congreve wrote to Moyle and Dennis from Tunbridge Wells, where he had been recuperating from an illness of several months:

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<sup>28</sup>Edmund Gosse, Life of William Congreve (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 49.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

I wish for you very often, that I might recommend you to some new acquaintance that I have made here, and think very well worth the keeping, I mean idleness and a good stomach. You would not think how people eat here, everybody has the appetite of an ostrich, and as they drink steel in the morning, so I believe at noon they could digest iron. But sure you will laugh at me for calling idleness a new acquaintance, when, to your knowledge, the greater part of my business is no better. Ay, but hear the comfort of the change; I am idle now, without taking pains to be so, or to make other people so, for poetry is neither in my head nor in my heart. . . . <sup>30</sup>

Underlying his jocular remarks is a vein of seriousness and an awareness that he is free from tensions, and thus able to feel truly rested, only when he is free from obligations, real or imaginary, to others. Implied in the wording is that only "doctor's orders" or enforced idleness can bring him this feeling of being rested. Already he sounds drained emotionally, as if he had been pushed so far beyond endurance by his well-meaning friends who expected him to rise ever higher, that the effort to please no longer seemed a valid reason for going on.

In contrast, Gosse has said of Congreve:

His person was singularly beautiful, he was an athlete until fast living consumed his constitution, and although indolent, he was so gracious and so sympathetic that he pleased without effort, and conquered the esteem of those who might have envied a popularity less indifferently borne. <sup>31</sup>

What seemed to Gosse pleasing "without effort" was to Congreve pleasing with more effort than his strength would sustain.

The "fast living" to which Gosse referred, and also the indolence, must have been in evidence for several years before Congreve's twenty-

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 70-71.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

fifth birthday. Yet by that time Congreve had written and published a novel, had written and produced three plays, and had begun work on a fourth play. Along with these major works he had completed at least fifteen minor works, including odes, translations, essays, and prologues for the plays of friends. With the help of Dryden and Southerne, he had reconstructed The Old Bachelor. He had remained in residence as a Templar of the Middle Temple until July, 1695, and whether or not he applied himself here with diligence, at least he must have given "lip-service" to the job. During the same period he had had three serious illnesses which required lengthy recuperation. These attacks and periods of convalescence from them did not leave much time for so-called high living, for during this period he was gainfully employed in law while following a second career in writing during his off hours. In fact, he sounds very like the typical modern-day "moonlighter." Even though Congreve may have been far fonder of drinking wine and participating in witty conversation with his friends than he was in applying himself diligently to the work of the moment, surely he cannot rightly be called indolent when one catalogs his output over that span of years.

Congreve, having so early achieved the pinnacle of fame, must have known many days in the next few years when he longed to give up the constant jockeying for position, when his body and mind rebelled, that his only alternative was to withdraw completely from the field. Such an alternative could not have been other than distasteful to him,

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and he would never have taken it as long as he could force himself to go on. Had fame arrived to him at a later period in his life, Congreve might have been able to take it in stride without constant worrying about living up to expectations. He might then have had the emotional stamina to continue his writing during those rare and intermittent periods when he was free from pain, and posterity would have been the richer for a comedy written in his maturity.

But as Witwoud says, "Upon proof positive it must; but upon proof presumptive it only may."<sup>32</sup> Since there can be no proof positive, the many proofs presumptive will forever remain only qualified guesses, each as valid as the other.

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<sup>32</sup>William Congreve, The Way of the World, III, xiii, Everyman's Library, Restoration Plays (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1953), p. 201.

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