

William Congreve

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¹ "William Congreve", Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:William_Congreve_by_Sir_Godfrey_Kneller,_Bt.jpg

Biography

William Congreve was born on January 24, 1670, in Bardsey near Leeds, Yorkshire, England. He studied under the distinguished philosopher and mathematician St. George Ashe, who also tutored his elder schoolfellow and ultimate lifelong friend Jonathan Swift. It was probably during the Glorious Revolution (1688-89) that the family moved to the Congreve home at Stretton in Staffordshire.

It was in March 1693 that William Congreve achieved sudden fame with the production at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, of *The Old Bachelour*, written, he said, in 1660 to amuse himself during convalescence. Warmly heralded by Dryden, who declared that he had never read so brilliant a first play, though it needed to be given "the fashionable Cutt of the Town," it was an enormous success, running for the then unprecedented length of a fortnight. His next play, *The Double-Dealer*, played in November or December at Drury Lane but did not meet with the same applause (it later became the more critically admired work, however). Its published form contained a panegyric introduction by Dryden. *Love for Love* almost repeated the success of his first play. Performed in April 1695, it was the first production staged for the new theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Congreve became one of the managers of the new theatre, promising to provide a new play every year. Though Congreve signally failed to carry out his promise of writing a play a year for the Lincoln's Inn theatre, he showed his good intentions by letting them stage *The Mourning Bride*. Although it is now his least regarded drama, this tragedy, produced early in 1697, swelled his reputation enormously and became his most popular play. No further dramatic work appeared until March 1700, when Congreve's masterpiece, *The Way of the World*, was produced. Congreve shaped the English comedy of manners through his brilliant comic dialogue, his satirical portrayal of the war of the sexes, and his ironic scrutiny of the affectations of his age.

Congreve also wrote a considerable number of poems, some of the light social variety, some soundly scholarly translations from Homer, Juvenal, Ovid, and Horace, and some Pindaric odes. The volume containing these odes also comprised his timely "Discourse on the Pindarique Ode" (1706).

Congreve lived the rest of his life quietly, being in easy circumstances thanks to the royalties on his plays. In his later years, he was devotedly attached to the second duchess of Marlborough, and it is almost certain that he was the father of her second daughter, Lady Mary Godolphin, later duchess of Leeds. This would account for the large legacy, of almost all his fortune, which he left to the duchess of Marlborough.

Congreve died in London on January 19, 1729, after a carriage accident.¹

¹ "William Congreve", **Encyclopedia Britannica Online**, academic ed., www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/132646/William-Congreve [accessed 12 Jan 2011]

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