

Wycherley the Libertine and the Civilizing Influence of Women

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Abstract

Unlike the libertines of Dryden, Wycherley's rakish characters are essentially conventional men who are misbehaving. In all four plays men are prevented from staying on a misbehaving path by the sacrifice of well-bred, moral women. The plays celebrate the civilizing influence of women over male unruliness and scandal.

In the seventeenth century one finds a few outstanding men called «libertines,» men who enjoyed life, loved extravagantly and thought freely, men like Sir William Temple, Monsieur St. Evremond and King Charles II himself. From such men literary critics have generalized the concept of the «libertine» and applied it to the leading male comic characters of Dryden, Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve. This attribution is most appropriate in dealing with Dryden's rakish characters. This present essay will argue that the term «libertine» is not really appropriate for Wycherley's rakes, who are largely conventional men and who are simply misbehaving rather than doing anything justified by free-thinking libertine philosophy. One can call them libertine **poseurs**. Most of Wycherley's leading characters are prevented from taking the true libertine path by the sacrifice and good will of well-bred, moral women. One can see the libertine-**poseur** in the career of John Wilmot, Lord Rochester who lived a full life of riotousness, wrote an inane libertine poem called **A Satyr against Mankind**, but at the end of his life reverted to the Christian religion. His was no conversion, but a reversion to a simple reassuring faith from which he had never strayed far.

Wycherley's background is not greatly different from Rochester's. He could have become a libertine. He came from a refined Cavalier family that sent him at age fifteen to study in France, where he acquired more polish than Puritan England could bestow. He was even converted to Roman Catholicism, probably to mingle more happily with his friends. Back in England he turned Anglican to enter Oxford, though he took no degree. Later he studied law haphazardly. He clearly preferred a life of pleasure that featured the theater. His first play **Love in a Wood** (1671) caught the interest of Barbara, Duchess of Cleveland, a royal mistress who promoted the fine-mannered, fashionably dissolute Wycherley before King Charles II. Wycherley lost royal favor and tutorship of the royal son, only when he displeased the king by marrying the Puritan Countess of Drogheda, one noble woman in his life. She soon died and left Wycherley to run up debts, which placed him in prison for seven years. When James II became king, he paid most of Wycherley's debts and gave him a small pension. He spent his remaining years in refined idleness, enjoying the pose of a literary gentleman in retirement. He became rather awkward in these years of genteel poverty. Dryden and Congreve acknowledged his greatness in drama, but the surest insight comes from Pope, whom Wycherley sought to patronize as a new poet of promise. Often Pope's letters described him as tedious, complaining of his memory and bad poetry. For his verses were frequently if unconsciously plagiarized from such genteel, semi-philosophic authors as Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Seneca and Gratian (Spence, 1966, I, 37). Like the other libertine-poseur Rochester, Wycherley received the last rites of the church in his own Christian reversion.

The Wycherley critical tradition addresses itself primarily to explaining the conflict between libertinism and the deep-seated puritanism that informs three of his four plays. In **Love in a Wood**, **The Country Wife** (1675), and **The Plain-Dealer** (1676), it is said that «he exposes the absurdities of mere pretenders to wit and lashes the hypocrisies of mankind» (Sherburn, 1967: 768). Critics see his men and women pictured darkly and see him as vehement in his scorn. His plays suggest that Wycherley did not respect the courtly class in which he moved, though the characters include as many ordinary citizens as gentlemen. In **Love in a Wood** he sets hypocrites, fops and men of fashion to be each other's dupes and dupes of low women. **The Country Wife** celebrates promiscuous gulling of cuckolds and Wycherley «makes his spectators partisans in condemning selfish, pretentious, or hypocritic-

al persons» (Sherburn, 1967: 768). The country wife of the title often interrupts the social pretenses of London life with her frankness in preferring her lover to her unsuitable husband (Novak, 1977 : 1—23). The plays are an uneasy mix of Wycherley's scorn and his ardent physical nature. According to all critics, Puritanism becomes dominant in his third-written but last-performed play, **The Plain-Dealer**, in which Manly, the plain-dealer has been tricked and robbed by the schemes of his mistress and his best friend. Though he is aided by the virtuous Fidelia, every critic has read the play as sardonic and misanthropic, recalling the malcontents of Elizabethan drama, and so conjuring the play as Wycherley's darkest picture. In fact, it is said that Wycherley did not respect certain aspects of his own character and had no qualms about portraying other men bleakly. The only moral relief ever noticed in the three cynical plays is the ideal or sentimental female figures, such as Christina, Alithea and Fidelia.

Thus, the critical tradition has discussed Wycherley primarily in terms of his erotic scandal and his stern disapproval of selfishness, pretention and hypocrisy. One can make a new beginning in Wycherley studies by taking up the question of the positive norms set up for admiration by Wycherley. His most important positive themes are civility and the nobility of women. Civility is readily visible in the admired cast of characters as a kind of lesser **sprezzatura** synonymous with good breeding. Civility includes the notion of an external propriety, obtainable by refined, sophisticated people. Civility is proper, passive and moralizing, unlike more genuine **sprezzatura**, and in these respects different from the strange chivalry of Etherege's heroic characters. Civility partly accounts for the decline of laughter in the plays. His second positive theme, the nobility of women, is always visible in one character. Wycherley's other women who are not noble may even be hypocritical, but they are always more intelligent than male counterparts. In this preference, Wycherley is out of step with the increasing cynicism toward women in the drama of the 1670's. Wycherley seems just to have liked women, as he seemed also to like sober civility. Yet he had the unsophisticated ethical position of believing that misbehaviour according to his rules of good breeding was quite all right, so long as one remembered and acknowledged the standard of religious purity enshrined in noble women. Wycherley's drama is not a sophisticated moral form. Probably his unsystematic ideas and feelings, like everyone else's, took shape when he was fairly young, before a date for which records remain. What is available, however, are his plays.

Wycherley's first play, **Love in a Wood**, imitates the elaborate intrigues of contemporary comedy, such as Etherege's **Comical Revenge**, with traces of Jonsonian humor-characters and of Calderonian honor. The full cast includes several town gallants: Valentine, Ranger, and Vincent, and a fop, Dapperwit; also several ladies: Christina, love of Valentine, Lydia, mistress to Ranger, Lady Flippant, who seeks a new husband, and Lucy, a prostitute, who will marry the old Puritan Gripe. For minor intrigue Dapperwit eventually marries Gripe's daughter, but misses her fortune, since his own cast-off mistress, Lucy, will give more heirs to Gripe. The plot develops its principal complication when Ranger, on the prowl, mistakes Christina for his mistress, and then imagines that she desires him. Ranger is accustomed to casual women, but Christina (her name means christian lady) is faithful to Valentine and is indignant at Ranger's advances. The play closes with announcement of marriages for rightfully matched couples, with everyone happy except Gripe and the unlucky hypocrite, Lady Flippant. At the engagement party, although Christina's character appears different from Ranger's and Lydia's and some others', there is nothing to suggest that she spurns them as peers in her society.

The tone of the play is not philosophically libertine so much as «boys will be boys». The imposters of Jonson's humoral tradition are here, but their potential destructiveness and degree of rascality are not themes in the play. The play exists, of course, to entertain, and its organizing theme is here specified as the acceptability of several kinds of love within polite society. Some modern criticism has tended to read the play as a realistic social satire (Holland, 1959, : 38-44), in which deceit and libertine naturalism are compared to each other and to the idyllic love of Valentine and Christina. This critical approach then sees this idyllic love being out of place in a realistic play (Holland, 1959, : 44). Wycherley really has two value systems at work in the play. In one system he arranges the characters according to their degree of gentility and polish. Ranger is a genteel, if misbehaving character who makes advances towards Christina, and who leaves unchanged, still a genteel rioter. According to this scheme of characterization, the degree of civil courtliness divides the characters into separate casts. In the other value system in the plays, one beholds Christina as the finest kind of human love, as if she had a role in a separate high plot of morality. It is this combination of two value systems, uncomfortable with each other, which renders the dramatic plot of **Love in a Wood** illogical and incoherent thematically.

It was a very human failing of insight in the author. Wycherley had seen several kinds of love in polite society and saw no special contradiction in putting them all into one play. Readers of Dryden's comedies should remember many plays that offer more than one kind of entertainment at one time, both heroics and farce. Compounding this dramatic folly, Wycherley fails to see any harm in approving of characters like the libertine-poseur Ranger, whom one could believe to be not unlike Wycherley himself.

Thus one sees that a coherent moral system, one that acknowledges Christianity and ranks the vices, failed to interest Wycherley: not because such systems smacked of puritan fanaticism, but because dramas were trifling diversions and needed little philosophy. Nor was eroticism anything mystical to Wycherley who, unlike Hobbes, did not feel compelled to award the subject a special place in a world view. What drama merited was simply the standards of civility and pose of libertinism. Wycherley would be puzzled by the key words of his modern criticism — wit, virtue, appearance and nature — because the inconsistencies these words imply were of no more moment than those between the Roman or Anglican religions, which he freely professed, or than his involvement with the «Royal Whore» Barbara, to whom he dedicated **Love in a Wood**.

Wycherley's second play is **The Gentleman Dancing Master** (1672), the gentlest and most conventionally moral of the early comedies of manners which are still read. The young gentleman, Gerrard, comes to love Hippolita, the pure but sprightly daughter of Don Diego, an Englishman obsessed with Spanish fashion. The father's choice for her is Monsieur de Paris, another Englishman rather taken with things French. No one can doubt that Gerrard will marry Hippolita, and at the end the father appropriately pretends that he had always tolerated Monsieur just out of a sense of politeness.

None of these admirable characters praises anything bawdy. In Act I Monsieur must go to a brothel alone, and in Act V, after Gerrard and Hippolita have eloped, Monsieur must become support of his mistress, Flirt. No one is harmed. The most indecent comment comes from Gerrard, with his taunt that if Hippolita married Monsieur, she would make him a cuckold. The lady denies such behaviour or its thought as the author celebrates innocence and civility. The chief matter of interest in this pleasant little play is that the women — aunts, maids, jilts and the four-

teen-year-old Hippolita — are all more intelligent than any of the men. Holland makes this point (Holland, 1959:67), but does not interpret it. In Hippolita one sees intelligence applied constructively, even in deceiving other characters in order to make a good match. Since intelligence and good sense cause our admiration for the characters Wycherley chooses to admire, he gives more of both to women, whom he assumed to be better than men, wiser and more religiously pure. He portrays Christina, Hippolita and later Alithea and Fidelia as anchors of salvation to save blundering, sometimes misbehaving men. Etherege and Dryden lacked this simple Victorian trust in women, suggesting Wycherley to be far more sentimental and vulgar in his prejudice than the vestigially puritan elements often ascribed to him. This naive woman-on-a-pedestal attitude well befits the moral simplicity of one who has standards, but who misbehaves — exactly as one would expect it from the writing desk of a **poseur** of the libertine mode, who versified La Rochefoucauld when he could write plays no longer.

Most of the numerous claims for Wycherley's libertinism center on his third-performed play, **The Country Wife** (1675). Certainly the action is the bawdiest. A certain Master Horner returns from France to London. His name indicates a maker of cuckolds, but he feigns gonorrheal impotence, in order to gain consent from husbands to draw near their wives. The principal bait is Marjory, the new country wife married to a city rake, Pinchwife, who must conceal her from rakes like himself. His transparent disguise of her as a boy just encourages Horner, who himself attracts Marjory. Pinchwife then uses his sister, Alithea, to bribe Horner. This woman is engaged to an inferior wit, Sparkish, but is developing a love for another man, Harcourt, a truthful, decent fellow, much like Alithea, yet a companion of Horner. When rendezvous time comes, the country wife Marjory disguises herself as Alithea and is delivered by Pinchwife to Horner, where she replaces the hypocritical women of the play, who have been his mistresses. Then Alithea and Harcourt can plan to marry, and Pinchwife is fully humiliated by his wife's disdain and his inferiority to Horner.

Understandably this had excited much disgust among prudish audiences, especially by Horner's character. **Encyclopaedia Britannica** speaks of «the intercourse of the beasts of the field» (Watts-Dunton, 11th ed. XXVIII, 866). The device of gonorrheal impotence is truly rather crude. Yet there are apologetic critical interpretations to excuse Horner and Wycherley, which are quite distinct from the simpler one of this paper. The commonest are the naturalistic, the moral and the literary-satiric.

First one can defend him by saying that his witty style of life is true to his natural desires, desires which society restricts (Fujimura, 1952,: 141-142). One can apply more casuistry and argue that «libertinism was consistent with nature and therefore good; the only sin was sexual hypocrisy. He lived according to his convictions» (Wilson, 1959:2). Despite the continued renewal of the fiction of the naturalistic libertine, no one has ever found anything «natural» about Horner, nothing basically humane. The Don Juan fares badly under analysis. A second moral defense in to suggest that Horner is being natural, but is mistaken to disguise it under the appearance of impotence. According to this second defense, disguise emphasizes the proper values of naturalness upheld by people like Alithea, who disguises nothing (Holland, 1959 : 76). This defense still requires one to believe that something about him is natural, when nothing is. A third defense is to argue that he is a humor figure, or specifically a malcontent-satirist, a relic of the Jonsonian stage (Zimbar-do, 1965, Chap. III). This third defense fails to convince because Horner is clearly an attractive character, generally enjoyed by everyone in the play except the boorish husbands.

It is more likely that Horner is simply a misbehaving man who offers vicarious wish-fulfilment to the audience, whose cast of mind could not have been much different from Wycherley's comfortable mood. What evil Horner does is matched by the attractiveness of his virility, by his jaunty air of cynicism, by his intelligence which is greater than the intelligence of any of Wycherley's other men, and by his decorousness which keeps all situations under the control of civility.¹ His foils are the absurd Sparkish, who lacks but brags of his wit, and Harcourt, the fashionable man who takes life too seriously. Since the audience cannot take the cuckolding of Fidget and Pinchwife as great crimes, Horner becomes a pardonable rake.

Despite the approval Horner gains, the decency of women in the play does not suffer much. The hypocrites among them, of course, remain unchanged. There can be no confusion of their characters with the devotion due to the ideal woman. Marjory is there to remind Horner that some women are carefree, and also to awaken in him a respect for their reputations. Yet the play has its ideal noble woman, Alithea, whose name in Greek means truth. She even awes Horner. Since Wycherley's women are portrayed as better and wiser than men, Sparkish's attribute of wit to Alithea changes the meaning of the word significantly from verbal eloquence to intelligence (Wycherley, 1966, : 278). Pinchwife thinks

wit in women is good only for cuckolding husbands, but Pinchwife is a dull man. Alithea is civil as well as intelligent. This intelligent lady of quality is like Hippolita in her good breeding and she used the word «civil» to describe herself before her sneering brother (Wycherley, 1966,: 274). Harcourt calls her a «Divine, Heavenly Creature» (Wycherley, 1966 :315). When she comes to unravel the plots of the others, as Truth she follows a torch like a Roman goddess. Unmistakably she is the noble descendent of Christina and Hippolita. Such a woman could marry only Harcourt, that tender, blundering man.

So Alithea and Harcourt, whom she converts from the path of misbehaviour, are the standards of civility in the play. Yet they disapprove of Horner only when Alithea's reputation is at stake: a temporary disapproval, for Marjory comes to divulge that she and not Alithea has lain with Horner. Horner's stardom is further enhanced, we may suspect, because polite London society that came to the playhouse contained many people enough like him, who wished to be flattered. **The Country Wife** offers this misbehaving audience a light-hearted spectacle of vice. The standards of civility and nobility in Alithea and Harcourt allow the same audience to feel uplifted and even smug.

Wycherley's last-performed play, **The Plain-Dealer** (1676), usually swings the critical estimate towards Wycherley as a serious moralist. The plot is inferior to all the previous ones: it involves a sea captain, Manly, who returns to London from the Dutch wars to marry the woman he loves and to whom he has given his fortune. Manly trusts her and his one unnamed friend, and he berates his lieutenant Freeman for being attentive to the manners of the civil, artificial world. When he finds that his Olivia dislikes him and has taken on foppish admirers, he must find some adequate revenge. He uses his cabin-boy to seduce Olivia, unaware that the boy is really a girl in love with him. When Olivia succumbs to the charms of the boy-girl, Manly supplants this person's role in bed with Olivia, taking revenge, and purging himself of his distracting love. At the finale Manly discovers that Olivia has married a character named Vernish, whom Manly had thought his only friend, while denying a better friend, his lieutenant Freeman. Then the cabin-boy can reveal herself as a female of rank and fortune, and she and Manly can promise to marry.

This main plot sounds rather clumsy. A sub-plot involves the litigious Widow Blackacre, who drags other characters into her lawsuits. This sub-plot is quite detachable from the play, though some critics have read it as

commentary on the hypocrisy of the major imposters. It is more likely that Wycherley produced the Blackacre sub-plot because he needed materials for a comedy, and was in a great hurry. He explained to Alexander Pope much later that he wrote the play in three weeks. While his words sound like a boast of genius, or precocity, they could equally be an apology for the slipshod story (Spence, 1966, I, 377).

Manly is the character many critics have admired for his outrage at social pretenses of the civil, which in his indignation he carries to a misanthropic rejection of his lieutenant. The ease of believing in this depiction of hypocrisy led to the nickname «Manly Wycherley» in the author's own lifetime. Yet Wycherley was subtler than his audience, and probably intended Manly to be more interesting than admirable, like Moliere's misanthrope, a hypocrite-hater, a malcontent-satirist who goes too far. In Act III he even realizes some degree of his absurdity and is shown reciting verses about his irrationality towards Olivia: «The common frailty, Love, become my shame» (Wycherley, 1966: 440).

Some recent criticism has seen **The Plain-Dealer** as a very serious play, with Manly more as dupe than naive hero, especially in connection with Olivia, who has robbed him blind (Holland, 1966 : 98). But the play should be read as a comic piece, again celebrating misbehaviour and civility, with Manly understood as less intelligent, and less religiously pure than women counterparts. His so-called Puritan emphasis on truth and morality make him a little different from Wycherley's other rakes, but he never repudiates misbehaviour. For instance, to Freeman the lieutenant Manly describes how he is resented «for giving sincere Advice to a handsome, well-dressed young Fellow(who ask'd it too)not to marry a Wench he lov'd and I had lay'n with (Wycherley, 1966 : 456). His name indicates that he is direct, rather than tactful; his experience with women is a routine matter, unlike heroic seducers such as Dorimant in **The Man of Mode** by Etherege. Only a man without mystical notions of sex could lie with Olivia in a general spirit of revenge. If Manly's indignation and misbehaving nature prevent him from being a noble mentor, one must look elsewhere for the play's moral.

The plot includes three civil characters, Freeman, Eliza and Fidelity: a friend, a cousin, and a sweetheart. Manly must change to their civil standards, and the agent of change is the cabin-girl, Fidelity, who will improve Manly with her breeding and love. Fidelity is the truly noble woman that forgives and softens male vice and unruliness. Her amazing non-

Puritan almost Victorian virtue has puzzled many critics, such as Holland, who believes that she demonstrates the nonmimetic «playness of the play» (Holland, 1959: 108)². Actually she is Wycherley's simplistic code, which adored virtue, but allowed misbehaviour. Fidelia allows it almost in her shadow, as she waits outside the chamber where Manly and Olivia dally:

O Heav'ns! is there not punishment enough
In loving well, if you will have't a Crime;
But you must add fresh Torments daily to't, And punish us like
peevish Rivals still,
Because we fain wou'd find a Heaven here? (Wycherley, 1966 :
484).

Fidelia offers no sign of disapproval, only emotional distress that heightens the delight of voyeurs in the audience. Fidelia and Manly will marry, and then enter polite society. If she is less convincing than Christina, one should recall that Wycherley spent three weeks on her play, and not the probable several years he took for **Love in a Wood**.

Most discussions of Wycherley's plays argue that they are serious satires, perhaps recalling Theophrastus or Juvenal. Yet the interpretation argued here finds Wycherley serious when he promoted civility, his own sober version of the Renaissance veneer called **sprezzatura**. Most critical discussions also admit that his drama is coarser than its Spanish and French models, but then fail to emphasize that his drama is unsophisticated in its actual sentiments: of gentility and civility being passed on to grown-up boys by noble women. Wycherley's sentimental excesses would grow on the eighteenth-century stage, but it is idle to speculate on any further maturing of Wycherley's personal ideas. He wrote no more plays, for he had gained preferment at court, then married his countess; and about the same time, according to Pope, suffered the loss of memory that made his later verses dull (Spence, 1966, 1, 38).

So Wycherley retired from the theater. He had been one of what Pope called the «Mob of Gentlemen who wrote with Ease». That is to say, he was a Restoration courtier who composed easily, but misbehaved with the others a little too wildly. Since the time of Pope criticism has tried to dignify Wycherley's art by recasting the plays in terms of libertine indulgence, sternly opposed by Puritanism or directness and impatience at society's forms. This present essay had argued that this libertinism is only misbehaviour and that the principal force to contain it is the

sentimentalizing, moralizing influence of noble women. To say all of this is not to abandon the plays, which are funny and exciting, especially in the character of the irrepressible Marjory, the country wife. One need only qualify critical estimates by saying that the plays are not sophisticated moral forms.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a discussion of Horner as an insecure «prisoner of sex» see Anthony Kauffman, «Wycherley's **The Country Wife** and the Don Juan Character», **Eighteenth-Century Studies**, IX (1965), 216-237. For a synthesis of modern criticism see Ben Ross Schneider, **The Ethos of Restoration Comedy** (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), and Robert D.Hume, «The Myth of the Rake in Restoration Comedy», **udies in Literary Imagination**, X,i (1977), 25-55.
2. Holland p. 108. «And does not her very unreality represent Wycherley's ultimate revenge on the women in his audience?» Quoted from Virginia Ogden Birdsall, **Wild Civility, The English Comic Spirit on the rRestoration Stage** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 176. For hostile and admiring views of Wycherley heroines, see Cynthia Matlack, «Parody and Burlesque of Heroic Ideals in Wycherley's Comedies: A Critical Reinterpretation of Contemporary Evidence», **Papers on Language and Literature** VIII (1972), 273-286. Also Douglas Norton Young, «The Virtuous Women in the Restoration Playworld: the Concept of Marriage and the Social Status of Women in the Comedies of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve», **Dissertation Abstracts International** XXXVIII 1978 , March-April), 5133A.

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