

THE SATIRIC COMEDY OF WILLIAM WYCHERLEY

by

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B.A. , David Lipscomb College, 1965

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1968

Approved by:



Major Professor

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The Satiric Comedy of William Wycherley

The four comedies of William Wycherley have caused a great deal of controversy among the critics because the plays do not fit neatly into the niche labeled "Restoration Comedy." An element of purgative satire is the root of this confusion and has led to the varying explanations of the nature of the plays. The confusion surrounding the plays can be seen in a brief summary of the criticism leveled at the dramas. Jeremy Collier admits that Wycherley is definitely a comedian, but absolutely condemns the plays, because he thinks that Wycherley is a complete libertine whose perverted view of sex can only do harm to the morals of the audience.¹ A more realistic and complex appraisal is Thomas H. Fujimura's argument that Wycherley is a Hobbesian whose comedies reveal through satire the naturalism and skepticism which control his thinking.² Among other critical comments have been John Palmer's contention that Wycherley is a comedian but that he occasionally shows his Puritanism in a fierce burst of satire,³ and Kathleen Lynch's belief that the satiric outbursts in the plays indicate the playwright's intellectual inability to compete with contemporary writers in their social milieu.⁴ The most extreme, as well as most recent, position has been taken by Rose A. Zimbardo who states:

¹Jeremy Collier, A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage (London, 1699), pp. 3-4, 142.

²Thomas H. Fujimura, The Restoration Comedy of Wit (Princeton, 1952), pp. 115-119.

³John Palmer, The Comedy of Manners (London, 1913), pp. 93-4.

⁴Kathleen Lynch, The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy (New York, 1926), p. 174.

Wycherley's mature plays cannot be fitted to the Procrustean bed of theory because not only are they not Restoration comedies, they are not comedies at all. Distorted when we try to make comedies of them, they are, ironically enough, quite regular, indeed formally perfect, when we recognize them as satires. The very qualities that render them unfit as comedy—decentralization of plot, absence of a hero, harshness of tone—are those that enable them to maintain perfectly the decorum of satire.⁵

The critics all seem to feel that Wycherley's plays are somehow inferior to other comedies of the period and are marred by the presence of the satiric elements.

The attempt to fit Wycherley's dramas into the category of "Restoration Comedy" has led critics and readers away from an analysis which accounts for the satiric mode so obviously present in the plays and yet still allows them to be classified within the broad realm of successful comedy. There is in comedy a tradition which Kratinos originated and which Aristophanes raised to its highest level. This tradition, the vetus comoedia, flourished in Greece in an age which greatly encouraged freedom of speech, even invective. The form and theme of the vetus comoedia capitalized on this freedom, as Quintilian remarks, "especially in chastizing vices."⁶ However, the vetus comoedia was more than a bout of mudslinging. Quintilian goes on to state that the old comedy was "sublime, elegant, and graceful." The invective and bitter doses of satire are couched in a realm of fantasy which allows the audience to laugh at the person or situation satirized without feeling personally affronted. The conscious mind can dismiss the

⁵Rose A. Zimbardo, Wycherley's Drama (New Haven, 1965), p. 3.

⁶Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, Translated by the Rev. John S. Watson (London, 1856), Vol. II, Book X, Chapter I, Section 65, p. 260.

criticism because of the fanciful situation, while the subconscious mind deals with the merits of the criticism.

In this comedy there is a general shape which can be discerned: the hero, or comic protagonist, who generally holds some sort of admirable moral values, is faced with a problem, gets an idea, and then sets machinery in motion in order to solve his problem; the hero is opposed by his "enemies" but still manages to achieve success in his plans; however, the hero must still cope with false friends who would like to benefit from his success; finally the hero exposes the false friends and then concludes the play with a celebration which generally involves marriage.⁷

Upon this frame, the playwright embroiders a social structure which represents a mixture of reality and fantasy. The playwright is concerned with the failure of people to face reality—some seek Cloudcuckoo-land and others hide behind a pretense to honor and reputation. Falseness and hypocrisy are shown to be the greatest faults in human nature. The satiric mode, employing parody, burlesque, and serio-comic tone, is utilized as a didactic tool in order to show the common failure of human beings to overcome their faults and to abide within the bounds of honor and truth. Satire in the vetus comœdia is aimed not only at particular people as in Dryden's description of Aristophanes' comedies, i. e., those comedies "which called some people by their own names and exposed their defects to

⁷For a general understanding of the patterns of the vetus comœdia, I am indebted to Cedric H. Whitman, Aristophanes and the Comic Hero (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); Victor Ehrenburg, The People of Aristophanes (New York, 1962); and Gilbert Murray, Aristophanes: A Study (Oxford, 1933). The plot structures of The Birds, Plutus, Peace, and The Acharnians actually do follow this pattern.

the laughter of the people,"⁸ but also at the hypocrisy surrounding actions contrary to the mores of polite society concerning economics, politics, and sex.

This pattern of comedy, although it went out of fashion with the advent of Menander and the "New Comedy," never completely died, and Aristophanes, as its leading exponent, was never entirely forgotten. Indeed, there were new Greek editions of his comedies printed in Europe during the fifteenth century. Latin translations were made as early as 1539 by Andrea Divo, and at some time during the 1540's Pierre de Ronsard, while studying at the Collège de Coqueret in Paris, translated the Plutus into French.⁹ Nor was interest in the vetus comoedia confined to the Continent; there was a Greek edition of Aristophanes' The Knights done at Oxford in 1543.

But it is not necessary to argue that Wycherley had any firsthand knowledge of the works of Aristophanes and other ancient comedians, or any knowledge of the "vetus comoedia" other than that available in extremely limited form in the many "crib books" which inundated the seventeenth century. The patterns of the vetus comoedia can be found in English comedy, e. g., the comedies of Ben Jonson with which Wycherley was certainly familiar.

Jonson himself said in the Induction to Every Man Out of His Humour that the play was designed to be "somewhat like vetus comoedia." Although it would be presumptuous to term Jonson an Aristophanic comedian (because

⁸ John Dryden, "The Original and Progress of Satire," in Essays of John Dryden (New York, 1961, reprinted from Oxford, 1900), ed. by W. P. Ker, II, 58.

⁹ Sidney Lee, The French Renaissance in England (New York, 1910), p. 283, and William Nitze and E. P. Dargan, A History of French Literature (New York, 1950), p. 179.

the influence of both Roman classical comedy and native farce is clear), there are elements in Jonson's comedies which heretofore have been unexplained and which may be elucidated by a comparison to the methods of the vetus comoedia. In fact, Jonson's Volpone has been subjected to the same kind of criticism which has been aimed at Wycherley's plays, i. e., the doses of satire are so massive and bitter that the play is somehow marred as a comedy.

In Volpone, the obvious criticism of avarice is set in a mythic world in which gold has become the eternal verity. On one level, Volpone himself represents the priest who raises the host for the sacramental blessing. The satire in the comedy is aimed not only at the realities of this greed, but also at the falseness and hypocrisy of the false friends who desert what normally are considered the virtues of a fixed standard, in order to curry favor with Volpone, the epitome of falseness.

When one realizes that the world in which Volpone and Mosca perpetrate their frauds is indeed a fabulous one, then the biting attacks on hypocrisy can be viewed not as personal criticisms but as the playwright's diatribe against a pattern of "morality" which should not exist. By this increase in the aesthetic distance between the world of the characters and the world of the audience, the playwright is able to make laughable an essentially serious situation. As Jonson states in the Epistle prefacing Volpone, it is "the office of the comic poet to imitate justice, and instruct to life, as well as purity of language, or stir up gentle affections." And gentle affections are more likely to be stirred when one is laughing at the situation of others who inhabit an unreal world than while one is being scourged for one's own villainy. So it is in the condition of fantasy that Jonson uses the devices of the vetus comoedia.

The three plays of Jonson which are generally termed satirical comedies employ this same concept: the construction of a mythic world in which the use of invective seems comic rather than bitter. In Every Man Out of His Humour, Cynthia's Revels, and Poetaster, Jonson takes a contemporaneous situation, e. g., economics, the moral and rational responsibilities of the courtier, and the theological and political implications of exclusive self-concern, and makes a generalization about the nature of human behavior, both actual and ideal.

However, Wycherley's familiarity with contemporary interpretations of the vetus comœdia need not have been confined to the comedies of Ben Jonson. As a boy of fifteen, Wycherley had been sent to a Jesuit school in the region of Angoulême. While he was in school there, Wycherley became a part of the coterie of Julie, Marquise de Montausier, one of the great French précieuses. Not only did the influence of French court life undoubtedly have a sophisticating effect on the character of the young Englishman, but also it was during this time that the first wave of popularity of the comedies of Molière swept France.

Molière's comedies bear resemblance to the concept of the vetus comœdia. For example, L'Ecole des femmes (one of Wycherley's sources for The Country Wife) parallels the patterns of the old comedic tradition. In this satiric comedy, the hero, Horace, is faced with the dual problem of winning the affections of Agnès and outwitting her guardian, Arnolphe. Horace, after many problems and trials, is granted Agnès' hand in marriage. The opposition to the love of Horace and Agnès which arises from Arnolphe's sexual desire for Agnès can be equated with the opposition of the enemies in the vetus comœdia. There are also "false friends" in the persons of Chrisalde and Oronte who seem to foster Arnolphe's designs on Agnès. At last, the

supposed false friends are revealed to be true friends, and Horace and Agnès are united.

The comedy takes place in a sort of Neverneverland in which villains are satirically treated (even beaten by servants) and the ideal virtues of love, honor, and truth conquer all. The satire is pointedly aimed at people who pretend to be something other than themselves. Arnolphe, as the greatest hypocrite (he obviously is so afraid of being cuckolded that he is unable to behave in a rational manner), bears the brunt of the satiric attacks, but the web of deception surrounding Agnès' birth provides the basis for the conflict and as such is implicitly criticized.

Vetus comœdia, then, would seem to be a practicable comedic mode which was used by other dramatists whose works Wycherley would have known. Wycherley's plays have the stylistic traits typical of other Restoration dramatists overlaid upon the basic pattern of the vetus comœdia. Thus, reading the plays from that vantage point does seem to be a reasonable approach since it allows the plays to be treated on their own merit rather than as "Restoration comedies" seriously marred by defects in tone, theme, and character.

At this point a brief description of the genre, satire, as accepted by the Restoration will serve to demonstrate the great difference in tone between the genre and the satiric mode as it appears in the comedies of Wycherley. The satiric tradition accepted by the Restoration had its roots in the Elizabethan concept of Roman satire, transmitted to them by the efforts of the early grammarians and the medieval schoolmen. English satire came into vogue during the Elizabethan age, and the Elizabethans evolved their peculiar brand of the genre from the mistaken etymology of the word "satire." The word was thought by the Renaissance scholars to have come from the

noun "satyr," the rough, half-human creature of early Greek farce. From this initial mistake, the belief followed naturally that a satire had to be "half-hircine: savage, harsh, and stylistically uncouth."¹⁰ This belief was strengthened by the reading of Juvenal's satires, since the harsh invective and lashing tone must have convinced the Elizabethans that the Juvenalian satirist was a "satyr" figure.

Another important concept in the Elizabethan view of satire was that satire was based in an attack on a particular personality. This idea was gathered mainly from the description of satire written by Aelius Donatus, a fourth century grammarian, who stated that satire was evolved from the vetus comedia which featured scandalous attacks on specific personalities.¹¹ Such attacks, although the people are disguised under other names, are found in the satires of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal.

Elizabethan and Jacobean satires—those of Breton, Marston, Hall, Guilpin, Jonson, and Weever—were generally written in the form of the verse essay, a direct descendant of the classical form of satire. They were often filled with harsh personal invective and served as the vehicle on which the quarrels among literary figures were carried out. The writers seem to have accepted verse as the normal vehicle of the genre, satire, and personal diatribe as the proper subject matter.

This, however, did not mean that satiric elements, or rather, the satiric mode, did not appear in other forms of literature. The War of the Theatres involving Jonson and Marston certainly revolved around plays which

¹⁰ John Peter, Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature (Oxford, 1956), p. 117.

¹¹ Alvin Kernan, The Cankered Muse (New Haven, 1959), p. 54.

contained satiric portraits of the rival playwrights. But just as the ancient Greek plays which contained satiric sketches of particular personalities were termed vetus comoedia, these plays with large amounts of satiric material were called comedies. There seems to have been no thought of calling a dramatic work a "satire"—if only to avoid prosecution by the authorities, since satires had been forbidden.

Naturally there are similarities between comedy and satire as genres which stem mainly from the appearance of the satiric mode in comedy. Both comedy and satire "are linked on the ground of social outlook; they are alike dependent for success on that power of observation which creates and guarantees their realism."¹² Further, comedy and satire share the realization that fools have gone beyond their bounds.¹³

The similarities of the two genres, comedy and satire, do indeed make it difficult to separate them. However, there are differences in satire as a pure form and in the satiric mode appearing in another genre. While satire generally ends on a dark, gloomy note of pessimism (e. g., Juvenal ends his diatribe against women in Satire VI with the conclusion that nothing can be done about the evil character of the woman and that man has no recourse against her wiles¹⁴), comedy incorporating the satiric mode will include the miraculous deus ex machina which sweeps all characters to the final scenes.¹⁵ At that time the good are rewarded in best fairy-tale fashion, and the wicked are also punished according to their faults.

¹² J. Wight Duff, Roman Satire (Hamden, Conn., 1964), p. 6.

¹³ Kernan, p. 20.

¹⁴ John Warrington (ed.), Juvenal's Satires (New York, 1954), p. 83.

¹⁵ Kernan, p. 34.

This characteristic ending of comedy can be seen in the closings of Wycherley's plays: In Love in a Wood, the characters all go out to St. James Park to gain revenge for slights or to gain love, and all coincidentally happen to meet with the very person who needs to hear their confessions or explanations, and they all live happily—or at least married—ever after; in The Gentleman Dancing Master, the two young Truewits, Gerrard and Hippolita, take advantage of the arguments between the fops, disappear into a chamber, and come out married; in The Country Wife, the quick wit of Horner, Allthea, and Lucy, the maid, manages to save the situation and Horner remains safely concealed in his false eunuchdom; and in The Plain-Dealer, the revelation of Fidelia's womanhood restores a rather large part of Manly's faith in human nature, and the wicked Olivia and Vernish receive each other as their just reward.

Satire rarely calls for progressive action. Most satirists from Horace and Juvenal to Anthony Burgess ask for a return to former virtue rather than a move to forge a new morality. The satirist holds up the glories of former days for adulation. For example, in his first satire, Persius speaks of the depravity of the youths of Rome and contrasts their poor efforts at cultural endeavors to those of earlier times.¹⁶

Comedy, on the other hand, has a regular movement from a society "controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law, and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom."¹⁷ This movement can be seen in Wycherley's plays. The appeal that the rather malicious rail-lery at the Witwouds and Witlesses had for the Restoration audience may be

¹⁶Warrington, pp. 191-99.

¹⁷Northrup Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 169.

best explained by the Hobbesian theory of egoistic laughter—that a man laughs at that to which he feels intellectually, socially, and morally superior.¹⁸ The satire in Wycherley's dramas was aimed not so much at the vice, but against the hypocrisy involved in pretending that one was not indulging in some action which violated the ostensible mores of society. In a way Wycherley was urging the formation of a new moral system to be built on concepts allied to actual human behavior. The Restoration audience of intellectuals and courtiers would sense an immediate kinship with the heroes of this new moral system—those characters who, while recognizing that man was separated from the bestiality of the lower animals only by his ability to reason, claimed truth, honesty, and naturalness in all situations.

In beginning a discussion of the individual plays, it is helpful to mention the sources of the comedies and the dates of composition or production, because such information can illuminate the forces which have influenced the playwright. In the sources of the plays may lie valuable clues as to the kind of drama the playwright has produced. Since Wycherley seems exclusively to have used comedies for his sources, the sources would tend to indicate that he was indeed a comedian, exploring the breadth of the comedic realm for a workable pattern.

Wycherley's first comedy, Love in a Wood, or St. James Park, is generally given a first production date of 1671, but if Pope's chronology of Wycherley's writings is correct, the comedy was perhaps written before Wycherley returned to England from France.¹⁹ The play can be traced to

¹⁸Fujimura, pp. 51-52.

¹⁹In Spence's Anecdotes, Pope records that Love in a Wood was written when Wycherley was nineteen, The Gentleman Dancing Master at

three possible sources. A specific comedy by Calderón, Manañás de abril y mayo, contains the intrigue and plot mechanism of mistaken identities which Wycherley used in a rather close parallel to the Spanish play.²⁰ A second source for the play can be seen in Fletcher's pastoral comedy, The Faithful Shepherdess. There is marked similarity of character between Fletcher's Cloe who states "Indeed I cannot be raped, I am so willing," and Wycherley's Lady Flippant who declares "I have left the herd on purpose to be chased, and have wandered this hour here; but the park affords not so much as a satyr for me, and (that's strange!) no Burgundy man or drunken scourer will reel my way" (V. iii). Another possible source may have been Sir Charles Sedley's comedy, The Mulberry Garden,²¹ although the dating of Wycherley's plays found in Pope's chronology would rule this out as a source. The main contention for Sedley's play as a source rests on the fact that a favorite haunt of the Rakes, the Mulberry Garden, is mentioned as a place of assignation in both plays, a coincidence tenuous enough in itself.

In any case, the sources for Wycherley's play are well known comedies of the period, and the reception of the play indicates its acceptance as a comedy. Even though there are no "disturbing" elements of satire in Love in a Wood, Wycherley has already begun to use the pattern of the vetus comœdia. The play seems to be made up of two loosely connected plots: the "high," probably Spanish, plot of mistaken identity and idealized love

twenty, The Plain-Dealer at twenty-five, and The Country Wife at thirty-two. Leigh Hunt, The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar (London, 1860, 2nd edition), x, note.

²⁰James Rundle, "Wycherley and Calderon: A Source for Love in a Wood," PMLA, LXIV (1949), 701-702.

²¹Henry T. E. Perry, The Comic Spirit in Restoration Drama (New York, 1962, rev. ed.), p. 35.

involving Valentine and Christina, the two noble lovers, and Ranger and Lydia, the slightly less noble but more lively couple; and the "low," native plot of intrigue dealing with a more sensual emotion. Lady Flippant's intrigues with most of the men in the comedy seem to occupy a middle ground, since she is allied by birth with the nobility and by instinct with Alderman Gripe and the two bawds, Mrs. Joyner and Mrs. Crossbite.

Valentine, the comic protagonist, has just returned from France and is anxious to prove that his loved one has been entirely faithful to him. He has a problem because Ranger has been seen leaving Christina's house late at night, and Christina swears that she has had no contact with another man. In order to prove Christina's loyalty to him, he sets up a trap revolving around a rendezvous in St. James Park. Valentine's predicament is mirrored by Ranger's pursuit of Lydia, and Lady Flippant's search for a husband. The "enemies" in this play are not only the Witwounds and Witlesses, but also the friends who make counterplots intended to aid Valentine. Even Christina, who perhaps is justifiably annoyed at Valentine's lack of faith in her honor, devises a plot aimed against the hero.

However, Valentine is not to be foiled. Coincidence and Fortune work in his favor, and he and Christina are able to resolve their differences. The play ends on a joyous note as all the couples plan their weddings, and Ranger declares:

The end of marriage now is liberty.
And two are bound—to set each other free. (V. vi)

It is in the "low" plot that Wycherley has created his most interesting, early characters and voices the satiric mode through these people. The satire aimed at Dapperwit, Sir Simon Addleplot, and Lady Flippant is so obvious as to verge on ridicule, and seems to have been included because of

its humor and not from any desire of the author to reform his audience. Alderman Gripe, the "seemingly precise" usurer, is a graphic picture of a hypocrite, and the two bawds, Mrs. Joyner and Mrs. Crossbite, are excellent character roles representing the prostitute and suggesting that there is not perhaps so much difference between the noble lady and her poorer counterpart as the lady would like to pretend. This difference between ostensible and real character is typical of Restoration comedy and is evidenced by "dissimulation, disguise, hypocrisy, affection, and intrigue."²² It is also a further indication of Wycherley's use of the techniques of the vetus comœdia.²³

Love in a Wood, although by no means his best play, made Wycherley a great success. It brought him to the notice of the court wits Sedley, Rochester, Buckingham, and Dorset, and also to the favorable notice of the King's powerful mistress, Barbara Villiers. Because of these associations, Wycherley was brought into the court circle where he could observe more and more of the hypocrisy of the people associated with the nobility.

The next year, 1672, The Gentleman Dancing Master was produced at Dorset Garden. The comedy was not so successful as Love in a Wood,

²² Norman Holland, The First Modern Comedies (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 42.

²³ One interesting note in Love in a Wood is that Wycherley seems to have indicated the central theme, if not title, of two of his later comedies. In Act II, scene i, Sir Simon Addleplot and Lady Flippant meet in St. James Park, and in their banter is a discussion of plain, "free," dealing. Lady Flippant wants the men to deal freely with her and Sir Simon is willing. In this passage, the term "free dealing" makes an interesting double entendre.

The idea of a gentleman dancing master is discussed in Act III, scene iii. While Gripe is not actually a gentleman by birth or action, he perhaps appears so to the bawds. This might be considered a reference to the plot mechanism of a gentleman, not a dancing teacher, who taught his pupil more than dancing, which appeared in The Gentleman Dancing Master.

perhaps because it verges too near the absolute burlesque of a modern situation comedy to give rise to the highest comic wit. There is nothing here for the intellect to seize upon or to ponder. The plot, though complicated, is predictable and the outcome is known from the beginning. Based generally on a plot by Calderón, and also on Jonson's The Devil is an Ass, which contains the plot mechanism used to arrange the meeting of Hippolita and Gerrard,²⁴ the plot takes its comic materials from these sources and moves on to burlesque the concepts of foppery.

The pattern of this play parallels that of the vetus comœdia. As a slight variation of the pattern, Wycherley uses both male and female in the role of the comic protagonist. Hippolita is a most active heroine and, realizing that her father intends to marry her off to Monsieur de Paris, "a vain coxcomb," she arranges to meet Gerrard. When the young man realizes the intelligence and beauty of the girl who has pursued him, he takes control of the situation and effects their marriage. The opposition is clearly outwitted by the bright young couple. The nurse, Prue, is shown to be rather like the false friends in the vetus comœdia, for at least a part of her helpfulness in encouraging the affair of Hippolita and Gerrard stems from her sexual desire for Monsieur de Paris.

In the closing lines of the play, the marriage of the lovers is revealed, and after much bickering between Don Diego (Mr. Formal, Hippolita's father) and Monsieur de Paris as to whose fault the calamity is, everyone at last rejoices. The two lovers are not even financially embarrassed by their impetuosity, because Don Diego does not disinherit his

²⁴D. Biggins, "Source Notes for Dryden, Wycherley, and Otway," Notes and Queries, n. s. III (1956), 299-300.

daughter and gives the couple "the most of his estate in present" (V. i).

The play centers upon Hippolita, the precocious young lady who is sure that she does not want Monsieur de Paris for a husband, and Gerrard, the dashing hero who is sensitive to the needs of an intelligent girl. The couple manage to marry in spite of the opposition from the fops of both French and Spanish variety. The fops in this comedy are pictures of the heights of absurdity to which people can aspire. Monsieur de Paris is a classic figure of the vain, dull, young man who apes the manners of another culture without understanding the culture.

Another character in The Gentleman Dancing Master deserves separate comment. The nurse, Prue, is a clever old woman reminiscent of the bawdy nurse in Romeo and Juliet. Both of these nurses are tremendously interested in the sex lives of their charges, and both have a healthy respect for the benefits to be derived from an association with a member of the opposite sex. I can find no justification for Miss Zimbardo's statement that Prue is pure sexuality and is debased by a base appetite too long denied.²⁵ She (Prue) certainly does pursue Monsieur de Paris with a vengeance, but she is so amusing in her attempts to seduce him that her proclivity to sex is not offensive.

Here, particularly, Wycherley's use of sexual humor resembles that of the vetus comedia. Puns and references with obvious sexual connotations abound in the vetus comedia and seem to be used to provoke laughter. Such use of sexual humor satirizes the difference between reality as it is envisioned by "society" and reality which is produced by the actions of the people who make up society. The satirical treatment of the discrepancy

²⁵Zimbardo, pp. 54-55.

between moral and action can be seen not only in Aristophanes' many references to masturbation, homosexuality, and the phallus, but also in Jonson's declaration that

'Tis no sin love's fruits to steal,
But the sweet thefts to reveal:
To be taken, to be seen,
These have crimes accounted been. (*Volpone*. III. vii)

Molière uses this pattern in *L'Ecole des femmes*. He contrasts the innocence of Agnès with the fears of Arnolphe as the young girl tells him of a ribbon and a kiss.

Although *The Plain-Dealer* was probably written before *The Country Wife*, it was obviously revised before its appearance as the last of Wycherley's plays to be presented, and so it will be considered last. The third play to be discussed is *The Country Wife*, a play that has been considered "Wycherley's masterpiece of satiric comedy."²⁶ Although Wycherley borrowed his eunuch from Terence's *Eunuchus* and some of the Pinchwife-Margery scenes (e.g., I. i) from Molière's *L'Ecole des femmes*, his finished product bears no great resemblance to his sources.²⁷

Wycherley does not desert the patterns of the *vetus comœdia* in this play. Horner, while not actually heroic by normal standards, does fill the role of the comic protagonist. His problem is that all the noble ladies would like to succumb to his charms, but all of them are too afraid of besmirched reputations to accept his advances. Cleverly, he decides to send out the rumor that a case of the French disease has left him a eunuch. He is

²⁶ M. Summers (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Wycherley* (Soho, 1924), p. 46.

²⁷ Thomas H. Fujimura (ed.), William Wycherley: *The Country Wife* (Lincoln, 1965), p. x.

opposed by the doctor, but overcomes this objection and proceeds with the plan. The announcement of his "eunuchdom" quickly divides the false friends from the true. The true friends accept him as friend with no reference to what he "is," and the false friends, the Witwouds and Witlesses, shun him if they are male and fight over who will enjoy him if they are female. Horner delights in seeing the true characters of the people revealed and seems to have contempt for those who indulge in hypocrisy of any sort. The play ends in a celebration: Horner is for the moment content to remain a "eunuch;" Mr. Pinchwife and Margery are reconciled; Harcourt and Alithea are united; and the Ladies Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish are gratified that they have not lost a convenient sexual outlet.

Some question has been raised as to whether or not the satiric elements in the play extend to Horner. H. T. E. Perry and T. W. Craik would argue that satire does not touch Horner and that his triumph is complete for two reasons: that Wycherley provides no disparaging comment on Horner,²⁸ and that it is Horner who bests the fools each time and is used as a touchstone to ridicule their foibles.²⁹ The theory has also been advanced that since Horner is left at the end of the play with a well-established reputation as a eunuch, the entire joke is on him since he will now be forced to ramble about in the wake of chattering women who assume that nothing they request could possibly encroach on the rights of the individual. However, in the light of Horner's last two speeches, the latter theory does not seem well taken. When Horner confesses:

²⁸T. W. Craik, "Some Aspects of Satire in Wycherley's Plays," English Studies, XLI (1960), 178.

²⁹Perry, p. 43.

Now sir, I must pronounce your wife
 innocent, though I blush while I do it,
 and I am the only man by her now exposed
 to shame, which I will straight drown in
 wine, as you shall your suspicion. (V. v)

the blush, although it might perhaps mean chagrin at being trapped, could be a signal more in harmony with Horner's philosophy—the feeling that he should blush to tell a lie as if it were really the truth. His final pronouncement seems to indicate his satisfaction with his role:

Vain fops but court and dress, and keep a
 pother,
 To pass for women's men with one another;
 But he who aims by women to be prized,
 First by the men, you see, must be despised. (V. v)

Since Horner's true friends do not seem to despise him and shun him, a man of his nature would hardly be bothered by the jibes and thrusts of fools like Sir Jasper, Pinchwife, and Sparkish.

In spite of his contentment, Horner is not free from the touch of satire. The fact that he is trapped into telling a lie, even if for the purpose of saving a lady's reputation, indicates that the playwright intends to show that good intentions do not salvage a wrong action. Yet, this treatment of the hero is perfectly in keeping with the techniques of the vetus comoedia, which deals with the aspiration for good and not always its achievement.

The Country Wife is probably the most neatly structured of all Wycherley's comedies. The two plots, Horner's attempts to seduce all the married women of the town and the nearly thwarted love of Alithea and Harcourt, revolve around Horner and are "built around the idea that jealousy is petty, mean, absurd, and ultimately fatal to its own ends."³⁰ The jealousy of Pinchwife finally sends his wife into Horner's arms; the jealousy of

³⁰ Perry, p. 43.

Sparkish loses for him the chance to marry Alithea; and the jealousy of Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Lady Squeamish nearly loses for all both pleasure and honor. The ideals, the Truewits, Harcourt and Alithea, are contrasted in a favorable light with those who are tainted with jealousy.

The theme of plain-dealing occurs in The Country Wife and seems to be the theme which is recurrent in Wycherley's plays. The theme is common enough in the vetus comœdia and is consistent with the desire of the comic protagonist to find a place for virtue. In Act IV, scene iii, in The Country Wife, Horner calls plain-dealing a jewel and tells Sir Jasper plainly what will happen to Lady Fidget if she comes to bother him again. In Act V, scene iv, Mrs. Dainty Fidget praises her group of ladies for their openness and plain-dealing—an ironic remark since the opposite would more accurately represent the character of the ladies. Horner's plain-dealing with women like these, concerned for honor or reputation in public but libertine in private, may be justified by the common Restoration contempt for "all that forces nature" (I. i). The satiric comments aimed at the ladies and their husbands have the familiar comedic intention of amusing while, hopefully, instructing.

Another aspect of the satiric material in The Country Wife has to do with sexual action as described in such passages as the China scene (IV. iii). The satire on the sexual mores of the time is one of the most amusing parts of the play. Other oblique references to sexual relationships, often termed "bubbles," contrast the standards which people profess to hold and the actions these people take. Because sex is brought out into the open, Fujimura states that there is little salaciousness in the play.³¹ This is an

³¹ Fujimura (ed.), The Country Wife, p. xv.

accurate observation because there is nothing of the prurient, the "peeping Tom," about the discussions of sex. The plays on words, e.g., "China," and "I have none left now," are witty and fashionably risqué, but certainly not obscene.

The Country Wife is a satiric comedy in the tradition of the vetus comoedia. The satiric spokesman, generally identified in this play as Horner, does not cause a wave of reform (he would, in fact, probably be quite astonished to find himself thought of as a reformer); his job is to cast aspersions on sacred cows so that the audience will be amused and not offended. The reforming influence which may have been brought about by the satirical elements does not remove the play from the realm of comedy because they are still consistent with the classic comedic concept which to some extent required that comedy be an instructive force.

If Wycherley did write The Plain-Dealer before The Country Wife, those critics who argue that Wycherley's satire was a dark, Juvenalian stream which developed into a torrent as the plays were written find themselves in a trap they might have avoided. The Plain-Dealer, first presented in 1674, is the darkest comedy that Wycherley ever wrote. Its hero not only condemns mankind bitterly, but also himself falls prey to the supreme vice, hypocrisy.

In this play Wycherley is extremely faithful to the plot structure of the vetus comoedia. The chief character of the comedy is Captain Manly, from whom it has been argued that Wycherley was given his nickname. Fujimura states that

The belief that Wycherley expressed himself through Manly is... quite thoroughly wrong; for though contemporaries referred to him as "Manly," it was principally in tribute to his masculinity and frankness rather than for any

virulent hatred of mankind. This identification represents a complete misunderstanding of Wycherley the Truewit and a total misunderstanding of the play.³²

The crux of the critical question is whether Manly is to be viewed as satiric spokesman or merely as hero. If a key to this character could be found, much of the controversy over these comedies would be ended. By considering Manly with reference to the heroes of the vetus comœdia, a great deal of his character can be explained. For in the old comedy (as well as most comedy), the comic protagonist does not have to be perfect—he merely holds a fixed standard of virtue as an ideal and strives to live by that standard. Since the hero is above all a human being, he naturally will display lapses from the ideal. Manly is such a character, and Perry's contention that Wycherley undoubtedly meant to create in Manly a "beau ideal"³³ seems to oversimplify both the character and the play. Manly, the sailor, as a burly masculine hero, would not understand the elaborate rules for conduct in a discreet society. He would rail against what he saw and condemned and yet would be confused by his own reactions to those things he felt to be wrong. The fact that Manly does stand as an intruder in the polite society tends to remove the play from a realistic, contemporary setting. Manly's position as the comic protagonist places the events in the realm of fantasy so often seen in the vetus comœdia.

Typical manners criticism would say that The Plain-Dealer is a furious satire on man, an attempt to expose vice for our disgust,³⁴ and

³²Fujimura, The Comedy of Wit, p. 146.

³³Perry, pp. 51-52.

³⁴Palmer, pp. 134-135.

typical wit criticism would maintain that although there are several good parts in The Plain-Dealer, this is a comedy inferior in form and structure.³⁵ The play does not differ fundamentally from other Restoration comedies in its concern with the corruption of society, the hypocrisy which attends such corruption, and the individual's allegiance to the principles of self-interest.

Nor does the play deviate from the patterns of the vetus comœdia. Manly, the comic protagonist, returns home from the Indies and notices a lack of enthusiasm in his beloved Olivia. He soon realizes that she has not only been unfaithful but also has squandered the money which he left with her for safekeeping. The enemies and false friends in this comedy are the same characters, Olivia and Vernish. The couple has an affair while Manly is on the voyage and in that sense they are enemies to the ideals which Manly holds. They are false friends because they expect to conceal their actions from Manly and to profit from Manly's intended marriage to Olivia. However, Manly discovers the plot and falls into a jealous rage. Ultimately his faith in the truthfulness and sincerity of women and the good will of men is restored by Fidelia's love and Freeman's honor. The play attempts to answer the question, "Can an idealist find his ideal in this imperfect world in which appearances can never really be consistent with nature?"³⁶ The intimation at the end of the comedy is that Manly can find his ideal in Fidelia.

The romantic ending which is imposed on the rather bitter comedy again indicates a discrepancy between satire as a genre and the satiric mode. Juvenalian satire, especially, ends on a dark, sour, cynical note. The Plain-Dealer ends on a hopeful note as Manly states:

³⁵Fujimura, The Comedy of Wit, pp. 147-149.

³⁶Holland, p. 62.

... Give me thy hand; for now I'll say, I
 am thy friend indeed; and for your two sakes
 [Freeman and Fidelity], though I have been so
 lately deceived in friends of both sexes,
 I will believe there are now in the world
 Good-natured friends, who are not prostitutes,
 And handsome women worthy to be friends;
 Yet, for my sake, let no one e'er confide
 In tears, or oaths, in love, or friends untried. (V. iv)

If Manly can still see hope for mankind, certainly this must be something other than a Juvenalian satire. It must be noted that the ending of this play is analogous to the celebrations and marriages which traditionally close the vetus comœdia.

The final estimate of Wycherley's drama must rest in the ultimate tone projected by the plays. We see clearly the awareness of moral problems and the occasional lashings at the weaknesses of society; and yet there is the clear sense that Wycherley is the "amused observer looking on with intelligent detachment,"³⁷ while the satirist traditionally has deep emotional involvement with his topic. Norman Holland rightly claims that these comedies in a very real sense "represent a brilliant synthesis of abstract thought about primary and secondary qualities [illusion, reality, love, honor, truth] with the disguises and affectations of the Restoration court life."³⁸

Wycherley's naturalistic point of view recognizes man's egoism and interest in sex as predominant factors in human character. Through satiric exposure of hypocrisy in these two areas, Wycherley fulfills a basic criterion for comedy during this period (by holding up the actions of man for ridicule) and adheres to the pattern of the vetus comœdia. Certainly these plays are

³⁷James Sutherland, English Satire (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 143-144.

³⁸Holland, p. 62.

not orthodox satire, and there is little reason to regard Wycherley as a fierce satirist of Puritan at heart. He is always a Truewit, naturalistic in his standards, skeptical of the "old philosophy," an enemy to coxcombs, anticonventional in his wit, a lover of freedom, and naturalness, and a believer in sound sense.³⁹

The comedies may be more effectively read and judged if one adopts the techniques of the vetus comœdia as a criterion for criticism of the comedies rather than comparing the plays to the works of other Restoration playwrights. William Arrowsmith's statements with reference to the Satyricon—

The effect. . . is neither scorn nor indignation,
but the laughter appropriate to good satire
enlarged by the final gaiety of comedy⁴⁰ —

might well describe the effect of the satiric comedy of William Wycherley.

³⁹ Fujimura, The Comedy of Wit, p. 155.

⁴⁰ William Arrowsmith (translator), The Satyricon of Petronius (Ann Arbor, 1959), pp. x-xi.

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THE SATIRIC COMEDY OF WILLIAM WYCHERLEY

by

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B. A. , David Lipscomb College, 1965

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1968

The Satiric Comedy of William Wycherley

The four comedies of William Wycherley have caused a great deal of controversy among the critics because the plays do not fit neatly into the niche labeled "Restoration Comedy." An element of purgative satire is the root of this confusion and has led to the varying explanations of the nature of the plays. The critics all seem to feel that Wycherley's plays are somehow inferior to other comedies of the period and are marred by the presence of the satiric elements.

The attempt to fit Wycherley's dramas into the category of "Restoration Comedy" has led critics and readers away from an analysis which accounts for the satiric mode so obviously present in the plays and yet still allows them to be classified within the broad realm of successful comedy. There is in comedy a tradition which Kratinos originated and which Aristophanes raised to its highest level. This tradition, the vetus comœdia, flourished in Greece in an age which greatly encouraged freedom of speech, even invective. The invective and bitter doses of satire are couched in a realm of fantasy which allows the audience to laugh at the person or situation satirized without feeling personally affronted.

In this comedy there is a general shape which can be discerned: the hero, or comic protagonist, is faced with a problem, gets an idea, and then sets machinery in motion to solve his problem; the hero is opposed by his enemies and is beset by false friends who would like to benefit from his success; finally the hero exposes the false friends and ends the play with a celebration which generally involves marriage.

Upon this frame, the playwright embroiders a social structure which represents a mixture of fantasy and reality. The playwright is concerned with

the failure of people to face reality—some seek Cloudcuckooland and others hide behind a pretense to honor and reputation. Falseness and hypocrisy are shown to be the greatest faults in human nature. The satiric mode, employing parody, burlesque, and serio-comic tone, is utilized as a didactic tool in order to show the common failure of human beings to overcome their faults and to abide within the bounds of honor and truth.

This comedic pattern was never entirely forgotten, and Wycherley could have seen working examples of the traditions of the vetus comoedia in the plays of Ben Jonson and Molière. Vetus comoedia, then, would seem to be a practicable comedic mode which was used by other dramatists whose works Wycherley would have known. Wycherley's plays have the stylistic traits typical of other Restoration dramatists overlaid upon the basic pattern of the vetus comoedia. Thus, reading the plays from that vantage point does seem to be a reasonable approach since it allows the plays to be treated on their own merit rather than as "Restoration comedies" seriously marred by defects in tone, theme, and character.

Wycherley's four plays, Love in a Wood, The Gentleman Dancing Master, The Country Wife, and The Plain-Dealer, all do follow the pattern of the vetus comoedia. The final estimate of the dramas must rest in the ultimate tone projected by the plays. We see clearly the awareness of moral problems and the occasional lashings at the weaknesses of society; and yet there is the clear sense that Wycherley is an amused, detached observer. Through satiric exposure of hypocrisy in the areas of man's egoism and interest in sex, Wycherley fulfills a basic criterion for comedy during this period (by holding up the actions of man for ridicule) and adheres to the pattern of the vetus comoedia.