

REFLECTIVE GAZES:
CHARACTER AND AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVES
IN WYCHERLEY'S *THE PLAIN DEALER*

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REFLECTIVE GAZES:

CHARACTER AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTION

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presented by Brittany Rigdon, a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

According to John Dennis' recollection of Wycherley's anecdote, the audience at the initial performance of *The Plain Dealer* (December 11, 1676) was "Doubtfull what Judgement to Form of it" until given a raucous round of applause from the likes of the Earl of Rochester, the Duke of Buckingham, and Edmund Waller "which gave it both a sudden and lasting reputation" (Holland 170). Why this confusion? Why this hesitance? Audiences knew what to expect from the theatre, and they presumed to know what to expect from Wycherley as well. 1675's *The Country Wife* had enjoyed great popular success, and is still regarded as Wycherley's masterpiece by a majority of critics (McCarthy 62). But in *The Plain Dealer*, Wycherley twists the cheerfully loose morals and cool rationality of *The Country Wife* inside out. As Peter Holland states,

In each case, indeed in every part of the play, their expectations were thwarted, turned back on them. Expectations founded on their experience of contemporary comedy and theatre practice, on their judgement and morality were suddenly proved to be inapplicable. Things no longer meant what they wanted them to mean, or rather, not *only* what they wanted. The evaluation of any action, the perception of event, the nature of the significance of language were presented as elusive, no longer susceptible to the application of the frameworks within which social and cultural determinations of meaning would operate. (170)

Indeed, *The Plain Dealer* is a play about perceptions: the characters' perceptions of themselves and each other, but also the audience's perception of these characters—and yes, themselves. *The Country Wife* allows viewers to keep a relatively objective distance from its characters and their actions. There is no need to question Horner's motives or the underlying "truth" of his declarations; we are "in" on all of his secret plots from the beginning. Since we know he will succeed against the ignorant fops and fools of the Town, we simply take delight in watching him engineer his success. But this relatively

safe, “objective” position is forbidden to us in *The Plain Dealer*. Manly, the main protagonist, is an obsessive misanthrope who bitterly rejects “the World” and all its social corruption. Typically, such a character would be rejected, yet Wycherley gives Manly a depth and complexity that he gives to none of his other characters. The secondary protagonist, Freeman, is a “Complyer with the Age,” a light-hearted rake in whom the audience finds its mirror image. As with Horner, we are assured of his eventual triumph, and we truly enjoy watching his adroit verbal duels with the Widow. But when juxtaposed with Manly’s passionate struggle with his identity, we find ourselves somewhat disturbed by Freeman’s cool detachment.

The Plain Dealer shows a series of obsessional characters, most of whom remain entirely unchanged by the events of the play. Manly, our fascinating-but-flawed protagonist, provides the prime example of obsession, but with a crucial difference: he is the only character to experience an internal collapse, a significant fracture in his personal philosophy. Whereas the fools (Novel, Plausible, Major Oldfox) remain fools, the ideal characters (Freeman, Fidelia) remain (relatively) virtuous, and the villains (Olivia, Vernish—and yes, I believe the Widow Blackacre could be placed under this heading as well) are punished but remain unreformed, we are allowed to witness the disintegration of Manly’s particular world-view, his loss of meaning, and his descent into hypocrisy.

This exposure of Manly’s internal crisis not only affects our view of Manly, but our view of Freeman as well. Manly’s impassioned struggle with identity serves to reveal the rather disturbing *lack* of passion in Freeman’s otherwise comedic pursuit of the Widow’s fortune. Though Freeman represents the “typical” rake-hero, an elevated position from which a Restoration audience was accustomed to viewing the events of a

comedic play, the exposure of Manly's internal conflict causes us to question the very foundations of that viewpoint, and ultimately our own viewpoint.

Stranger yet is Manly's seeming "redemption" at the play's end. While the villains are all appropriately shamed, Manly's judgmental errors are "rewarded" with the companionship of Fidelia and Freeman, those two most worthy characters that he has most abused. But I propose that, in this union of obsessive desire with dispassionate moderation, Wycherley is offering viewers a corrective model for the excess and absence of desire. Manly's obsession with honor, truth, and justice is both validated by Fidelia's love and tempered with Freeman's tolerance. Rather than show the entirety of Manly's philosophy as "wrong," Wycherley gives him the chance to turn from brutal severity to more effective raillery. The complications of Manly's character refuse us any simple answers or easy judgments—but I believe this is Wycherley's ultimate point. Donald Bruce makes the point that Wycherley was something of a trendsetter: "People looked to Wycherley as a dramatist to set the fashion; as a kind of dancing-master to guide their movements in the artificial performances of society" (26). In *The Plain Dealer*, however, Wycherley steps beyond the fourth wall of the stage to address the very artificiality of those social performances, to call into question not only the meaning (or lack thereof) behind them, but also his audience's participation in them.

Arguably one of the Restoration's most complex and most contentious comedies, William Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* has astonished, bewildered, irritated, exasperated, and enthralled literary critics for decades. What were Wycherley's intentions? Is Manly meant to be comedic hero, comic dupe, or something in between? Freeman is the more likely comic rake-hero—why is he made into a secondary character? How are we to understand Manly's strange "reward" and "redemption" at the play's end? Using

psychoanalytic criticism in analyses of character, language, and dramatic structure, I intend to show that as Wycherley presents the destabilization of Manly's worldview, he also destabilizes audience expectations in order to challenge current standards of social perception and judgment. *The Plain Dealer* does not allow its audience to reside comfortably in their seats as mere observers; rather, in our differing connections to Manly and Freeman, Wycherley looks back at us from the footlights, forcing us to reconsider our positions in the real World.

MANLY

Wycherley explains to his audience in the Prologue how his play will turn *all* of their preconceived notions of character and plot on their heads. The “Plain Dealer” of the Prologue tells us that the “fine Woman” of the play will turn out to be “a mercenary Jilt, and true to no Man” (34, 35), and that the “Men of Wit” will be “as dull Rogues, as ever cumber’d stage” (36, 37). Then we learn of Manly:

I, only, act a part like none of you;
And yet, you’ll say, it is a fool’s part too:
An honest man; who, like you, never winks
At faults; but unlike you, speaks what he thinks:
The onely fool who ne’r found patron yet;
For truth is now a fault, as well as wit.
And where else, but on Stages, do we see
Truth pleasing; or rewarded honesty?
Which our bold Poet does this day in me. (40-48)

The “fine Woman” will be made a whore, the witty men will be made laughable, and we will think the hero a fool. Perhaps Restoration theatergoers thought nothing of these claims of character reversal. In *The Country Wife*, Horner might have been thought a fool for his bizarre wish to be thought a eunuch—at first; the audience quickly finds, however, that he is a brilliant strategist and manipulator. They have seen wouldwits like Sparkish, and Dapperwit from *Love in a Wood*, and Wycherley could well mean these character types for his “dull Rogues.” And it is obvious that Wycherley has set Manly up to be the protagonist, so his claim that the audience will say “it is a fool’s part” comes off as not so much a warning as a challenge: will we remain loyal to our hero, this “honest Man,” come what may?

Such a dare is easily accepted before the curtain rises, but *The Plain Dealer* is, as W. Gerald Marshall puts it, “a drama of madness” (16) in which all the main players

(with the notable exception of Freeman) are obsessional, living in sociolinguistic worlds of their own making in order to define their positions in the World at large. If observed from a relatively “objective” stance, Manly could be considered the most delusional of all the players, since he refuses to acquiesce to even the most basic social conventions in favor of his own notions of honor, truth, and justice. Such flagrant disregard for common courtesy was hardly considered a heroic quality for Restoration theatergoers. As Anne Righter explains, Manly “represents a curious departure from the ordinary Restoration comic treatment of the man or woman who rails against society and the age. Generally, in Restoration comedy, such characters are highly suspect. They are either old, hypocrites, or cranks, and thus disqualified from membership among the truewits” (81-82). Wycherley does not allow his audience to judge Manly by typical Restoration standards, however. In *The Country Wife*, he presented a gifted social manipulator at work; in *The Plain Dealer*, it is Wycherley himself who manipulates the perception of his audience. As we shall see, Wycherley carefully constructs both scene and character to influence the audience’s opinion of Manly, to ultimately pin their sympathies to him in spite of—and because of—his obsession.

INTRODUCING MANLY: SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE PORTRAITS OF OBSESSION

When the play opens, we see Manly enter with a *true* fool, Lord Plausible. Manly enters “surlily” and commands Lord Plausible, “Tell not me (my good Lord *Plausible*) of your *Decorums*, supercilious Forms, and slavish Ceremonies; your little Tricks, which you the Spaniels of the World, do daily over and over, for, and to one another; not out of love or duty, but your servile fear” (1-6). In this little opening speech, we are instantly apprised of Manly’s character. He is indeed the Plain Dealer, sneering contemptuously at

the formal deceptions and social frauds of “the World.” It is significant that Manly uses the word “Tricks,” as this indicates the willful deceitfulness he sees taking place not only in Plausible’s speech and gestures, but in all those who follow after Plausible’s example. These deceptions are for no real purpose, serve no function but to gain favor with the powerful and to protect the flatterer against a potential rival’s reprisal. In his railing we get to hear the whole of Manly’s philosophy: he refuses to play the games of court and gentlemanly society; he “can do a rude thing, rather than an unjust thing” (I.i.44-45); he is, by his own admission, “an unmannerly Sea-fellow” who will not endure blithely the customary charades of social life, but will rather openly offend those he finds worthy of offense (57-75). Manly rails at him quite effectively, making Plausible’s intolerable tolerance laughable and contemptible. We enjoy Manly’s attack; he makes a good argument against Plausible’s continual protestations of good will and friendship, and when railing doesn’t work, Manly physically removes him from the scene by throwing him down the stairs. Manly amuses, shocks, and earns our respect for being able to see through Plausible’s dissemblance *and* able to respond swiftly and without forgiveness. He is not afraid of saying precisely what he thinks, of insulting openly the man or woman he finds offensive. He will not waste his time trying to flatter or appease those figures for whom he has no respect. He will not suffer fools gladly; he won’t suffer them at all! Nor has he any patience for stupidity, or the clever word games so common among society. He has a clear command of speech and he does have wit (though most of it comes from the exposure of others’ want of it). This initial representation of Manly’s disdain for blind sycophancy and empty words endears us to him not in spite of the harshness of his tone, but rather *because* of it. We admire his willingness to be so straightforward—even ruthless—with a courtly gentleman; his boldness is shocking, and yet pleasing to us at the

same time. Manly drives a sword through the veil of pretense and seemingly frees himself from the thorny, forked-tongue language games of society. He is not afraid of other men's opinions or their supposed power. He does what we all wish we could do: he gives the lie to those who would seek to charm him into submission.

Our initial admiration for Manly does not blind us to the ineffectiveness of his approach, however. Manly's conversation with Plausible is marked by each man's inability to productively communicate with the other. Each speaks in a different language; words mean different things for each man. Manly attempts to strip away all pretense and make words mean precisely what (he feels) they are *supposed* to mean. Plausible, on the other hand, uses a specific form of speech—flattery and obsequiousness—to gain favor and familiarity. While Manly tries to make Plausible understand that he cannot stand Plausible's company, let alone anything and everything he stands for, Plausible simply refuses to acknowledge Manly's disdain and disregard. They talk *around* and *at* each other rather than offering a meaningful exchange of information. Manly and Plausible are not communicating with each other here so much as they are communicating with and for the benefit of the audience. In overhearing their argument, we are made witness to each man's social philosophy. Plausible is made ridiculous in the face of Manly's "plain dealing," and Manly is elevated to position of rugged, no-nonsense hero.

The conversation between the two sailors encourages this impression, as we get Manly's background from those who lived with him in isolation on board his ship. Manly's blustering is no charade, we learn, but a part of his true personality. We trust Manly; we may not agree with him, but we trust that he is sincere. The sailors are good-humored fellows, which does not fit at all with Manly's curmudgeonly outlook, and again

we see how Manly's speech and the sailors' does not mesh to form perfectly meaningful conversation. The sailors are aware of the slipperiness of language, and so feel the need to double- and triple-check that what Manly says is what he truly means. Manly, who never says more or less than what he means, is frustrated with their attempts to search beyond the surface (and, for him, fundamental) meanings of his speech. Again we see how communication between these characters is flawed and difficult due to "the World's" ambiguity and Manly's stubborn firmness.

Similarly, when the Widow enters the scene we see how her obsession with the law and legal terminology blinds her to any other form of dialogue. She frustrates Manly's desire to have news of Olivia by flatly directing all of his questions into references to her legal dealings:

Manly: But the incomparable *Olivia*, how does she since I went?

Widow: Since you went, my Suit—

Manly: *Olivia*, I say, is she well?

Widow: My Suit, if you had not return'd—

Manly: Dam your Suit, how does your Cousin *Olivia*?

Widow: My Suit, I say, had been quite lost; but now—

Manly: But now, where is *Olivia*? in Town? For—

Widow: For to morrow we are to have a Hearing.

Manly: Wou'd you would have a Hearing to day.

Widow: But why won't you hear me? (I.i.538-549)

Both characters talk *at* each other rather than *to* each other, and there is no communication between them. Each is aware of the other's particular obsession: Manly clearly knows of the Widow's litigious nature (514-535), and the Widow knows of Manly's desire for Olivia (566-572), but each refuses to moderate that obsession to engage in a meaningful dialogue. Since neither can see outside his or her language-world, any substantial exchange of ideas is impossible. But the objects of Manly's attack (Plausible's obsequiousness and the Widow's avarice) are distasteful to us, so our

perception and judgment of these exchanges reside with Manly. His encounters with both Plausible and the Widow show us Manly's ability and willingness to denounce those character behaviors the audience despises, so naturally we will define Manly's obsession as somewhat more acceptable than those others'.

But Manly's vicious treatment of Fidelia provides yet another contrast and comparison of two obsessions. Manly abuses his "little Voluntier" (I.i.406) brutally, but while his verbal blows cut her to the quick, she absolutely refuses to believe him anything but good, honest, "the bravest and worthiest of Mankind" (431-432). Fidelia, too, is an obsessional character. She can see, as Freeman can, the flaws in Manly's judgment (at least when it comes to Manly's devotion to Olivia), but her view is obscured by her obsession with Manly as the ideal man and the ideal mate: she defines her world by her loyalty to Manly. She has sacrificed her own material happiness, comfort, and safety in order to follow him in his overseas adventures; she has even negated her sex in order to become nearer to him. This self-sacrificial devotion clearly marks her as Manly's female match: she is pure and faithful and nothing could destroy her loyalty to Manly's cause. But because she has taken on the appearance of a man, Manly defines her by that appearance. Her feminine nature makes Manly despise her for her weakness, her cowardice, her emotional outpouring of love and dedication. Such behavior might be expected of a woman, but is unbecoming to a man. She is at an extreme; she is perfectly lovely and devoted and unbelievably steadfast, and she refuses to think any wrong of Manly. Though she does recognize his flaws and attempts to bring him out of his obsession with Olivia, her strength comes from her own obsession with Manly. But Manly chooses to define her as he defines the whole of the World: by his own unyielding terms. We the audience are privileged with the knowledge of Fidelia's true identity and

the truth of her commitment, but since she has always presented herself to Manly in the guise of a man, he applies to her the same principles of masculine conduct and honor to which he holds himself and other men. And since his economy permits of only one true lover and one true friend, all others must be wanting in some degree. Fidelia's feminine faithfulness, coded as masculine, violates his uncompromising requirements for friendship, and thus provides further support for his worldview.

Manly likewise denies Freeman his friendship because Freeman refuses to subscribe to Manly's particularly savage brand of plain dealing with the World. This conversation, however, is the first moment in which Manly engages in a dialogue with a relatively "equal" character: Manly's male "match." Freeman is neither a fool nor obsessive, so it is natural for the audience to find his viewpoint more closely aligned with their own. But though Freeman offers pure practicality, "the practice of the whole World" (I.i.364-365), as justification for his compliance with the World's hypocrisy, we can see that Manly's argument for "plain dealing" has its own kind of practicality. Manly may wish for true honor and justice, but his counterargument to Freeman's protests does not rely upon an individual's genuine acceptance or even understanding of integrity. Whereas Freeman claims that plain dealing will cause one to lose power in the social arena, Manly suggests that through it one may actually *gain* power: by identifying and announcing others' corruption, one may force them into honest behavior due to their resulting fear or shame (343-361). Of course Freeman is the more "correct" in this scene, since he is the advocate for moderation, but Manly's ability to reason equally with Freeman earns our respect, if not our (complete) approval.

Given that the first act ends with Manly's refusal of friendship to either Freeman or Fidelia—obviously his two most loyal allies—we are left to wonder about the true

objects of Manly's affection, Olivia and Vernish. We have seen Manly in action, have both overheard and witnessed the strength of his character. He has abused those well in need of abuse (Plausible and the Widow Blackacre), but he has also denied those two most worthy figures, Freeman and Fidelia, their deserved membership in his tight circle of friends. We have also seen his desperation to draw from the annoyingly evasive Widow any news of his Olivia. After seeing all of his "good" parts, we *want* to trust his judgment, but since he has rejected two obviously true and good characters as well, we are very curious to see those paragons of love and friendship that he so highly esteems. Manly has displayed a number of weaknesses, chinks in his psychological armor. He is inflexible, arrogant, and plainly deeply in love with Olivia. In one of his longest speeches, Manly gives a detailed list of all her virtues: her beauty—"Art cou'd not better it, nor Affectation deform it" (I.i.712-713); her honesty—"Her tongue as well as face, ne'r knew artifice; nor did her words or looks contradict her heart; She is all truth" (713-715); and her affection for him—"She has often shut out of her conversation for mine, the gaudy fluttering Parrots of the Town, Apes and Echoes of men only...to be entertain'd with my sullen bluntness, and honest love" (718-724). He also claims to have "such proofs of [Olivia and Vernish's] faith, as cannot deceive me" (I.i.755-756), but that is all he says; we are never told what these proofs are or how Manly came to receive them. For a man who is more than willing to express his thoughts on humanity's flaws and his lover's virtues, such reticence toward the evidence of loyalty in his two ideal companions is somewhat suspicious. We are clearly meant to like Manly, to be on his side. But this is only the first act of five. There must be some dramatic crisis that will accelerate the plot.

THE TURN

In the beginning of Act II, we are introduced to this paragon of beauty and faithfulness, Olivia. She opens her dialogue much as Manly does in Act I. She sighs at length over “the filthy World” and quickly declares herself above worldly deceptions. But we soon see that her complaints carry none of the seriousness, none of the weight or substance that Manly’s carry. She is, in this case, one of the “Parrots” Manly claims she is not—she is merely repeating the expected lines of a polite, chaste, morally superior lady. She is feigning innocence for Eliza’s sake, but, unfortunately for her, Eliza has a better grasp of this kind of language system than does Olivia. It is unlikely that the audience would fail to perceive the hollowness of Olivia’s language if Eliza were not present: in her efforts to appear pure and incorrupt, she repeatedly uses the words “aversion,” “filthy,” “hideous,” “obscene,” “nasty,” and “horrid.” Such protestations of course emphasize rather than conceal her duplicity. Eliza’s witty and sophisticated commentary throughout simply serves to further highlight the ineffectiveness of Olivia’s dissembling.

We then witness Olivia’s simultaneously unctuous and malicious conversation with Novel. This fop struggles throughout the scene to heap detractions on those socialites he has seen about town, but he is never able to complete his performance; Olivia railroads him at every turn, providing portraits even more cutting and vicious than could ever come from Novel’s brain. Here Olivia’s true talent comes to the fore: not only is she exceptionally skillful at cataloguing others’ flaws and faults for her own (and others’) amusement, but with her sharp mind and piercing wit she has also wrested all power from Novel. Novel wishes to impress Olivia with his sly portraits and witty epigrams on the characters therein, to entertain her and thereby gain her approval and

admiration. Novel *is* entertaining to Olivia, but not in the way he had hoped. Olivia uses him as a tool, to supply her with fodder for her own display of talent.

Olivia is obsessed with maintaining a proper social appearance, but her hyperawareness of slander and scandal (brought on by her wish to avoid detection of her scandalous deeds) reveals rather than conceals her guilt. She is also obsessed with domination and manipulation of others. She is like Novel in that she greatly desires to be seen and heard as a sophisticate and a lady, but her eagerness to control others gives away her game. In Act II, we get to see the object of Manly's overwhelming love, and from her very first line we can see her reflection of Manly. As the scene progresses, however, we become less and less sure of her honesty—the lady doth protest too much. She enters the scene with Eliza, much as Manly does with Plausible, but whereas Manly's railing is condoned (because we can see that Plausible *is* foppish and ridiculous) Eliza provides a foil for Olivia's increasingly useless railing at "the filthy World" (II.i.7) by playing moderation to Olivia's excess. As Plausible serves to give justification for Manly's anger and annoyance, Eliza serves to point out Olivia's hypocrisy and to provide a Freeman-like moderate viewpoint. In seeing Olivia's hypocrisy, we begin to mistrust Manly's judgment and our judgment of Manly. The man who has proclaimed himself undeceived by the World has been taken in by the one woman he claims to love. Suddenly Manly's reasoning becomes suspect.

In a swift, merciless stroke, Wycherley has cut his audience's estimation of Manly by half. Any other character Restoration "hero"—a Dorimant, a Harcourt, a Freeman, some more moderate libertine—would not have made such uncompromising declarations of immunity in the first place. But even if he had, we would not feel as surprised by this development. We trust those more temperate characters to take such events in stride,

with dignity, and to plot a dignified revenge. But Manly has given himself completely over to the role of undeceived plain dealer. Is this seemingly heroic character going to be made a fool as the Prologue promised? It is easy to imagine the rest of the play dealing with Manly's complete ignorance of Olivia's deception and the efforts of Freeman and Fidelia to "save" him from himself. Manly, like Olivia, has been caught in his own "mouthtrap": in light of this new evidence, his vehement protestations become somewhat ridiculous.

THE REPUDIATION

When Manly surreptitiously enters the scene, the audience is anxious to discover his reaction to Olivia's by-now obvious manipulation of Novel and Plausible. This is a crucial moment in the audience's overall opinion of Manly: will our plain dealing protagonist allow himself to be used and abused in the same way? Or is he truly the man he says he is? Manly's continual justifications for Olivia's comments indicate his desperate attempts to maintain his belief in her loyalty, but even he cannot excuse her insults. Olivia is clearly unaware of his presence, and, as we have seen, we know others' true opinion of us when they believe we cannot hear. What at first appears to be concern for Manly's health is then shown to be a particularly cruel expression of disappointment in his safe return: "[I] confess I alwayes lov'd his Brutal courage, because it made me hope it might rid me of his more Brutal love" (II.i.638-640). Her sighs turn from affected revulsion toward "the filthy World" to true disgust for Manly's "boisterous Sea-love" and the stench he will bring with him: "Foh! I hate a Lover that smells like *Thames-street*" (670-671). But there is no real passion in this, not nearly so much as she had feigned in her pompous speeches on the World's corruption; there isn't even a

glimmer of the rabid joy she took in her bloody dissection of Novel's social characters. Olivia does not hate Manly; she *disdains* him, and that is worse.

Manly's entrance upon the scene surprises the party out of their momentary honesty, and Olivia, Novel, and Plausible all smoothly shift gears to conceal their detractions. Yet again, Manly eschews the delicacy of social protocol and openly lashes out at Olivia for her deception and at Novel and Plausible for their foolish and cowardly retreats. We are relieved to know that Manly has not been duped or blinded by his love, and all of these characters deserve Manly's vitriol. But his fury cannot penetrate their cool, smooth exteriors. He demands to know what could have attracted her to Novel or Plausible:

[Of Plausible] ...[W]hat was't, about this spark, cou'd take you? was it the merit of his fashionable impudence, the briskness of his noise, the wit of his laugh, his judgment, or fancy in his garniture? or was it a well-trim'd Glove, or the scent of it that charm'd you?

...

[Of Novel] ...Then, Madam, for this gentle piece of courtesie, this Man of tame honour, what cou'd you find in him? was it in his languishing affected tone? his mannerly look? his second-hand flattery, the refuse of the Play house tiring-rooms? or his slavish obsequiousness, in watching at the door of your Box at the Play-house, for your hand to your Chair? or his janty way of playing with your Fan? or was it the Gunpowder spot on his hand, or the Jewel in his ear, that purchas'd your heart?

(720-725; 736-747)

When Olivia recognizes that Manly has slipped from her grasp, she ceases her dissembling and becomes quite indifferent to his anger. Here her true nature comes through: cold, unsympathetic, mercenary. In reply to Manly's demands, she mocks her supposed attraction to his honor (II.i.753-756), his manliness (761-765), his rough appearance (768-775), and his courage, "which most of all appears in your spirit of contradiction, for you dare give all Mankind the Lye; and your Opinion is your onely Mistress, for you renounce that too, when it becomes another Mans" (789-793). Her

ridicule is a double torture to Manly: she destroys utterly Manly's image of womanly perfection, and she pronounces that his dedication to honor is just as much of a pose as Plausible's flattery, or Novel's "Gunpowder spot." Though Manly tries to return her mockery with pure ire ("And henceforward [I] will despise, contemn, hate, loath, and detest you, most faithfully" II.i.845-847), her cool return of his final curse—"May the Curse of loving me still, fall upon your proud hard heart" (961-962)—ultimately gives her the victory over Manly. He is a man of ferocity and passion, and as such he is far more vulnerable than she to curses of emotion.

Our perception of Manly is somewhat restored by his recognition and vicious condemnation of Olivia's deceit, but now that Manly has been made to recognize (publicly) his own susceptibility to deception, what will become of him? From what we know, he could very well cut his losses entirely and seek a means of escaping the World. Or he might make some kind of attempt to regain possession of his fortune. We do *not* expect to see him beg, or then to seek a revenge motivated by his remaining love-lust for Olivia. And we *certainly* don't expect to see him struggle at length with the recognition of his own hypocrisy. Manly's pride and arrogance have been wounded, and in the coming scenes we will see his poor attempts to justify his actions to Fidelia ("Well, call it Revenge," IV.i.189) and to shore up his weakened defenses by railing even more demonstratively at the various hypocrites of the world (Act III in Westminster Hall; Act V, scene ii with Novel and Oldfox, and Vernish). Were we only allowed to witness these scenes, Manly might become ridiculous—indeed, somewhat loathsome—to the audience. To have a protagonist who has at length denounced hypocrisy and foolishness, a man whose personality (if not his philosophy) appeals to us, suddenly and without question or explanation turn counterfeit and embrace those actions he has condemned would brand

him irrevocably as a rather repugnant comic butt. Wycherley refuses us this easy censure of Manly, however, and instead reveals his protagonist's self-awareness.

THE CRUCIAL TWIST

At the beginning of Act III, before Manly begins his tirade against Oldfox, the Lawyer, and the Alderman, he laments his fall from grace in a blank-verse soliloquy:

How hard it is to be an Hypocrite!
At least to me, who am but newly so.
I thought it once a kind of Knavery,
Nay, Cowardice, to hide ones faults; but now
The common frailty, Love, becomes my shame. (III.i.35-39)

This is the beginning of the dramatic turn in the play, the crisis that will serve both to accelerate the plot and to give depth and complexity to Manly's character. Though he insists upon simple definitions for the World as a whole, Manly himself defies easy classification. He is painfully aware of the destruction of his romance, his ego, and—most importantly—his worldview. All other characters—even Freeman and Fidelia—are flat, two-dimensional beings, predictable and “safe,” whose personalities and beliefs remain unaltered throughout the course of the narrative. As Rose Zimbardo explains in her discussion of *The Plain Dealer* in *At Zero Point*, “Throughout the play, character = line drawing, as in Novel's charge that Olivia is ‘Giving the character before [she] know[s] the man’” (84). Wycherley's “World” is all surface and no depth; appearance, attitude, and articulation are all one needs to accurately determine a man or woman's “true” nature. Manly proves to be the one exception to this rule. He alone experiences this philosophical “crisis of faith,” this recognition of fallibility. Though he rather quickly becomes the hypocrite he despises, this momentary hesitation at the brink

endows him with a humanity that colors the audience's perception of all his future deeds. Manly becomes third-dimensional here.

Following hard upon this revelation is Manly's struggle in how to express this newfound contradiction between his idealistic philosophy and the reality of his feelings:

He [Freeman] must not know I love th' ungrateful still,
Lest he condemn me, more than she: for I
It seems, can undergo a Womans scorn,
But not a Mans— (III.i.41-44)

He then encounters Fidelia, whom he mocks and scorns mercilessly in an attempt to rid himself of her presence: "Go, pr'ythee, away: thou art as hard to shake off, as that flattering, effeminating mischief, Love" (82-83). When Fidelia catches this reference, she immediately questions him, and Manly undergoes one last moment of crisis in deciding whether or not to reveal his frailty. His uncertain vacillations ("well, if I had? that thing cou'd not think the worse of me:—or if he did?—no—yes, he shall know it" 88-90) finally land on the side of disclosure, but Manly is simultaneously aware of his resulting obligation to keep Fidelia as a constant companion, "for they are such secrets, that make Parasites and Pimps Lords of their Masters" (91-92). He is reluctant, but willing to make this sacrifice of his independence, "for any slavery or tyranny is easier than Love's" (91-93).

Manly's desperate admission of love is painfully sincere, interwoven with fear, anger, and—most importantly—obvious self-deception. When Fidelia proclaims her willingness to keep his secret "as if your dear precious life depended on't," Manly snaps, "Dam your dearness. It concerns more than my life, my honour" (III.i.97-101). This impassioned statement reveals where Manly's priorities lie—indeed, it is the basis of his worldview. His previous objections to Plausible, Freeman, Novel, and Olivia all arise

from their dishonorable actions: dissemblance, affectation, flattery, and insincerity. Yet these are all the things that he asks Fidelia to do for him: “Go flatter, lie, kneel, promise, any thing to get her for me” (129-130). He is clearly aware of the outward deception involved in this attempt, and he repeatedly notes Fidelia’s supposed aptitude for the task (115-125). The most treacherous deception, however, occurs within Manly himself. In the midst of Fidelia’s enumeration of Olivia’s faults (she is “most infamous, most false” 137-138), Manly cuts her off with a sigh: “And most beautiful!—” (139). Immediately following this intimate declaration, Manly struggles to gain back some of the pride he has just relinquished by nominally changing the focus of his goal from love to “revenge” (144, 145). Fidelia reminds him of his previous rejection, but Manly stubbornly refuses to acknowledge this: “I know not what I did last night; I dissembled last night” (148-149). Fidelia’s gasp of surprise at this statement echoes that of the audience. Thus with an honest confession Manly takes his first steps into duplicity.

Yet again, Wycherley has twisted the perception of his main character. The plain dealer’s honesty and rationality have fallen in the reality of his emotions. A large portion of Manly’s worldview has been cracked to its foundations; the enemy of hypocrisy has himself become a hypocrite. The audience’s views of his vehement attacks on the pretensions and shams of the figures at Westminster Hall are transformed with this knowledge of his weakness. Rather than simply being a savage and accurate commentary on avarice and flattery, these confrontations become the acts of a man struggling to reestablish and reaffirm his crumbling view of himself. Olivia’s loyalty, his own invulnerability to deception, and—most importantly—the strength of his dedication to honesty and honor were shown to be illusions, so he must make reparations to his fractured ideology. He accomplishes this by railing even more determinedly at those

objects of his disgust. We are drawn to that which defines us, whether through connection or opposition, and Manly has defined himself against the World in his objections to its corruption and in his belief in Olivia's loyalty. The collapse of the latter causes Manly to build furiously on the former in order to maintain his crucial illusion: the illusion of control. Were he never to become aware of his own fallibility, the audience would see him as the "fool" the Prologue claimed he would (seem to) be. But Manly *does* become devastatingly aware of his mistake in choosing Olivia, and as this discovery is made first in secret (but witnessed by Fidelia and Freeman), then made quite public (witnessed by Freeman, Fidelia, Novel, and Plausible), no one can deny its reality. Manly has "seen too much"; his "objective" position—that he is a superlative judge of character, of "intrinsic worth"—proves to be an illusion. Olivia and Vernish appeared to fulfill all of his requirements for a successful love affair and a successful friendship. He had taken great care to gain "such proofs of their faith, as cannot deceive me" (I.i.755-756). Manly's anger (and his horror) is not so much in Olivia's deception, but in the destruction of his self-deception. His ideal woman does not exist for him anymore—in fact, she never existed, except in Manly's fantasy space, which Olivia's denouncement has effectively crushed. In viewing the real of his desire, he finds it to be nothing more than a self-imposed delusion. This horror is then compounded by his realization that inexplicably, despite her obvious contempt for him, despite her violation of all his well-structured codes of honor and loyalty, he is still in love with her.

Manly's brief soliloquy at the beginning of Act III signals his consciousness of his turn to hypocrisy. But this is the crucial moment in the entirety of *The Plain Dealer*—no one bears witness to this confession *except the audience*. This is the "blot" in the play itself, the moment where suddenly the audience "sees too much." Manly's

character can no longer be taken as a broad caricature. He is not immune from criticism—indeed, he is more susceptible to it—but his recognition of his own breakdown militates the audience’s judgment of him. His words and actions from that point forward become subject to interpretation. Žižek describes this kind of moment in terms of Lacan’s *point de capiton*, or “quilting point”: “a perfectly ‘natural’ and ‘familiar’ situation is denatured, becomes ‘uncanny’ ...as soon as we add to it a small supplementary feature, a detail that ‘does not belong,’ that sticks out, is ‘out of place,’ ...” (88). Until this point in the play, the audience has viewed Manly from a relatively safe, “objective” location. We have been given “proofs” of his true nature, but we have also observed his pathological suspicion and his stubborn pride, not to mention the fact that we were privy to Olivia’s deceitful nature long before Manly was made aware of it. From our privileged position, we could judge these characters by their public displays of philosophy and opinion. Manly’s small soliloquy of self-awareness, however—what Žižek terms the “anamorphic blot”—cannot be accounted for in the realm of Restoration comedic standards. Heroes do not—should not—experience catastrophic self-doubt, crises of faith. They do not allow their emotions to manipulate their reason. It is at this moment, this quilting point, that we can no longer trust entirely in our assumptions of stock character standards; this is the moment when our own supposed objectivity is shattered. Describing the effects of “surplus knowledge” on the subject, Žižek states,

Such a ‘vertical’ doubling [of action] entails a radical change in the libidinal economy: the ‘true’ action is repressed, internalized, subjectivized, i.e., presented in the form of the subject’s desires, hallucinations, suspicions, obsessions, feelings of guilt....The more we find ourselves in total ambiguity, not knowing where ‘reality’ ends and ‘hallucination’ (i.e., desire) begins, the more menacing this domain appears. (90)

Since the audience is the only entity that overhears Manly's initial acknowledgement of his need to both confess and conceal his shame, this "surplus knowledge" infects their view of all of his future declarations and actions with uncertainty: at what point does his lust for the return of his ideal transform into his lust for true revenge? He has become a hypocrite in love; does this mean should we now suspect *all* of his condemnations of social duplicity, even if they are accurate? As Žižek explains, "[T]his paradoxical point undermines our position as 'neutral,' 'objective' observer, pinning us to the observed object itself. This is the point at which the observer is already included, inscribed in the observed scene—in a way, it is the point from which the picture itself looks back at us" (91). Even as Manly experiences the dissolution of his symbolic universe, the audience experiences a similar breakdown, a collapse of narrative distance that refuses to allow them a purely "objective" view of Manly's character.

MANLY THE OBSESSIONAL

In her exploration of socially constructed barriers to love, Renata Salecl gives Lacan's definition of the obsessional: "Lacan characterizes the obsessive person as one who installs himself in the place of the Other, from where he then acts in such a way that he prevents any risk of encountering his desire. That is why he invents a number of rituals, self-imposed rules, and organizes his life in a compulsive way" (182). Žižek, in *Looking Awry*, adds to this definition: "The obsessional participates in frenzied activity, he works feverishly all the time—why? To avoid some uncommon catastrophe that would take place if his activity were to stop; his frenetic activity is based on the ultimatum, 'If I don't do this (the compulsive ritual), some unspeakably horrible X will

take place” (35). Manly fits this characterization almost perfectly. He attempts to remove himself from the language games of the world, to step back into a safe space where he may judge it from the outside—into the place of the Other. But in order to keep this place, he must constantly define his position by classifying others as lesser; they are deluded by their participation in the social economy, whereas Manly is able to see all and understand all from his location outside that economy. And indeed, his grim taunting and insults to Plausible, Novel, and Olivia and his behavior at Westminster Hall in the third act prove that he does understand the machinations of others, the ways in which they use language and affectation to manipulate others’ actions and perceptions. Manly refuses to play those games, but proves that, to a certain extent, he could—but only if he already knows the outcome, i.e., if he can “win” the contest of definition. Manly’s insult to Plausible, that the gentleman fawns and flatters due to “servile fear,” is equally true of Manly—he despises the world because he fears its machinations. The multilayered symbolism of the social world leaves too many possibilities for error, humiliation, so he refuses entirely to participate in it. Rather than face the world’s rejection, he will first reject the world. He protects himself against disappointment and betrayal by removing himself from the social game and keeping only one lover and one true friend. But his disdain is motivated by a dread of losing control, of becoming vulnerable to the demands of others—of being made effeminate. Once he is forced to admit his susceptibility to those social/language games, his own delusion of power is fractured. This momentary self-awareness at the beginning of Act III threatens Manly’s fantasy space, his illusion of control. Žižek describes this threat in his discussion of the Lacanian concept of “knowledge in the real”:

[I]n 'psychic reality,' we encounter a series of entities that literally exist only on the basis of a certain misrecognition, that is to say, insofar as the subject does not know something, insofar as something is left unspoken, is not integrated into the symbolic universe. As soon as the subject comes to 'know too much,' he pays for this surplus knowledge 'in the flesh,' by the very substance of his being. The ego is above all an entity of this order; it is a series of imaginary identifications upon which the consistency of a subject's being depends, but as soon as the subject 'knows too much,' gets too close to the unconscious truth, his ego dissolves. (44)

Olivia's rejection is not merely a blow to Manly's pride; her deception destabilizes his very perception of himself and the World. As long as he believes himself immune to the World's deceptions—as long as he does not question his own authority as the big Other—Manly's identity remains intact. But once he comes too close to the reality of his fallibility, once Manly's self-sufficient "manliness" comes into doubt, his symbolic universe begins to collapse. He must now work twice as hard to resymbolize his world and reestablish his identity. In his attempts, he becomes something of a bully, picking fights with men at the Inns of Court and with Novel and Oldfox, and forcing Fidelia to assist him in his "revenge" on Olivia.

Salecl adds, "The obsessive person also constantly delays decisions in order to escape risk and to avoid the uncertainty that pertains to the desire of the Other, the symbolic other as well as the concrete other..." (182). Though he verbally abuses his fellow sailors, we see at the end of Act III that Manly is willing to give the very last of his money to pay them: When Freeman asks "But is the twenty pound gone since the morning?" Manly replies, "To my Boats Crew: Wou'd you have the poor, honest, brave Fellows want?" (933-936). One might also call this act of generosity an act of control. In the remainder of Act III and in Scene ii of Act V, Freeman attempts at length to convince Manly that he should seek outside assistance, either by dining at others' expense or by borrowing directly from friends and/or relatives. Each time, Manly

staunchly refuses to put himself at someone else's mercy. The "Ordinary is too dear" for Manly, not only because he lacks the money to purchase a meal, but also because he will not use "flattery...[to] pay for my dinner" (III.i.944, 946). The Bishop's table will not suit him, either, for "[t]here you must flatter the old Philosophy" (948-949). The Alderman's house is also out of the question, for there the host will fill his guests with drink rather than food, and one must term his "Usury and Extortion, Gods blessings, or the honest turning of the Penny" (955-957). Lady Goodly's hospitality comes at the cost of "flatter[ing] her looks" (967), and to dine at the Lawyer's one is compelled to compliment his substandard fare and listen to "his barbarous eloquence in a Reading upon the two and thirty good Bits in a shoulder of Veal" (974-976). Manly will not speak undeserved praise, even in his own interest. Similarly, he will not humble himself even to ask for support from those he has "oblig'd particularly" (V.ii.58), nor even from his relations; the first will avoid him, and the second will scorn him (60-74). He won't even put in a request to the government for another ship, for "[i]f I have not solicited it by my services, I know no other way" (113-114). Manly can easily give his money away as a means of maintaining control; instead of being obligated to another, another is obligated to *him*. But he will not countenance even the remote possibility of being indebted, financially or otherwise. This attitude would account for Manly's incredible reaction to those sailors who rescued him from drowning. In Act I, these two sea-dogs reveal their admiration of Manly the sea captain, his bravery in battle, and his willingness to preserve his honor by sinking his ship (along with his fortune) rather than allowing the Dutch to take possession of it. They then recall the time when they saved Manly from drowning, and as a reward "he gave me a box on the ear, and call'd me fawning Water-dog" (169-170). The sailors are not outraged by this behavior, but rather speak of it in amused

bewilderment. Despite their bafflement at Manly's curmudgeonly attitude, it is clear that they bear respect for his bravery, his self-sacrifice, and his leadership. But since they had saved his life, Manly now owed them a debt of gratitude, a situation Manly finds unbearable. Asking for help, even receiving assistance unbidden, involves the risk of encountering an[O]ther's desire, of being made subject to that desire. Such an encounter threatens Manly's illusory position as the ultimate Other.

FIDELIA AS TOOL

The obsessional's avoidance of risk also gives reason to Manly's use of Fidelity in his pursuit of Olivia. First, why does Manly fear a man's derision, yet admit his weakness to Fidelity? A. Velissariou makes the claim that Manly's decision to confess to an effeminate male undermines his masculinity in the audience's eyes. "Gender distinctions collapse in Fidelity's deceptive body," Velissariou states, "but so does Manly's adherence to them. His contempt for effeminate men gives way to his dependence for his sexual success on a 'man' that he has repeatedly accused of effeminacy" (34). But his decision is entirely appropriate in light of his declaration that he "can undergo a Womans scorn, / But not a Mans" (III.i.43-44). Though Fidelity maintains a masculine appearance, her substance—her speech, her emotional reactions, her naïveté—remains feminine. Therefore, she is the perfect vessel to receive Manly's confession: she is outwardly coded as a man, thus passing Manly's gender requirement for confidence, but her emotional vulnerability simultaneously codes her as feminine, which relieves Manly of the fear of her ridicule. He does not respect her enough to value her opinion, and since she is utterly devoted to him, he retains a sense of power, of

masculinity, despite his own admission of weakness. Fidelia poses the least “risk” for Manly; she exists in an acceptable ambiguity to hear his declaration of “guilt.”

By having Fidelia woo Olivia in his place, Manly also avoids having to face again the truth of Olivia’s contempt, thus giving the encounter-by-proxy enough ambiguity to permit his reinterpretation of it. Before Manly lays his curses upon Olivia, he mutters in an aside, “I cou’d out-rail a bilk’d Whore, or a kick’d Coward: but, now I think on’t, that were rather to discover my love, than hatred; and I must not talk, for something I must do” (II.i.934-937). But it is *Fidelia* who acts, not Manly. Ronald Berman, in his article “Wycherley’s Unheroic Society,” quotes this dialogue and remarks that “the last phrase expresses Manly’s attitude, not his practice. The rest of the play is a record of his discourse, not his silence” (466). Indeed, Manly “acts” only twice in the remaining three acts: he enters Olivia’s bedroom in Act IV (though his actual activity in that arena has long been a matter of debate, which will be discussed presently), and he is forced to draw his sword against Vernish’s attack in Act V. In the time surrounding these two brief deeds, Manly repeatedly performs the only act over which he can have (almost) complete control—he speaks. Žizek explains, “It is commonplace to state that symbolization as such equates to symbolic murder: when we speak about a thing, we suspend, place in parentheses, its reality” (23). The very act of naming something establishes the speaker’s control over that thing. Manly attempts to reestablish his control over his now-irrational desire for Olivia’s love by constantly calling it a desire for “revenge,” a term that will allow him to continue his pursuit of her. Even so, he cannot bring himself to face Olivia’s utter dismissal again, and sends Fidelia in his place. Fidelia provides a filter through which Manly may interpret Olivia’s words and actions; he can choose how to “read” Fidelia’s report. For example, after hearing in disbelief Olivia’s insults from

Fidelia's lips, Manly clings to hope by offering a justification for Olivia's actions, much as he did at the beginning of Act II: "O—I understand you now. At first, she appear'd in a rage, and disdain, the truest sign of a coming Woman" (IV.i.60-62). When Fidelia admits Olivia's attempted molestation of her, Manly first accuses Fidelia of lying (86), then makes further excuses by arguing that Olivia's "lascivious" eyes were due to "a little Art" rather than real lust (98, 102). In the end, however, even he cannot deny the truth of Olivia's seduction of Fidelia, yet he still holds to his desire: he will go back with Fidelia to Olivia's apartment and will "act Love, whil'st you shall talk it only" (183-184).

Fidelia protests that he is violating his code of honor; in his most blatant act of hypocrisy, Manly replies, "Well, call it Revenge, and that is Honourable" (189-190). When this does not silence her, Manly accuses Fidelia of betrayal—a ludicrous proposition, of course, but it serves to put Fidelia on the defensive, and in an effort to further prove her faithfulness she almost immediately *offers* to bring Manly with her to Olivia's home at the appointed time. Manly calls Fidelia his "Rival" (196, ii.328) not only to silence her remonstrations, but also to allow himself to ignore her reasoning against the fulfillment of his "revenge." Not matter how logical or sound her argument, if he can consider her a competitor for Olivia's love, her objections become suspect and can therefore be disregarded.

DID HE? DIDN'T HE? WHAT EXACTLY WAS IT? MANLY'S ACT OF "REVENGE"

But what of Manly's actions in Olivia's bedroom? This scene has been a point of contention for many critics in determining Manly's status in the play; as Percy Adams points out, "'the plain dealer' is one kind of person if he rapes Olivia and an entirely different kind if he does not" (186). For Robert Markley, speaking under the implicit

assumption that a rape did occur, “[b]y sneaking into Olivia’s bedroom to take the place of the disguised Fidelity, Manly relinquishes any claim to satiric correction” (336). T.W. Craik calls this scene the place where “the play’s moral pretensions crumble....The revenge...is obviously inconsistent with Manly’s honesty, and must have made even Wycherley’s contemporaries uneasy...” (176). John A. Vance is clear in his belief that Manly does *not* have sex with Olivia, noting it as part of a “coitus interruptus motif” throughout the play’s action (161). Adams takes another approach in his address of this subject, describing justifications for both sides of the argument in order to reveal the deliberate ambiguity as a way for Wycherley “to direct his satire even more sharply at the lust and hypocrisy around him, to cynically give the playgoers a chance to damn themselves by their reactions to his play” (187). Similarly, Peter Holland observes this uncertainty, but states that in either case, Manly himself is damned: “in one way, he is a hypocrite...if he did not [have sex with Olivia]; in the other, he is a debased animalistic sensualist, an uncontrollable figure of lust” (198).

Both Adams and Holland make this point: since Manly later tells Vernish that he has lain with Olivia, the question not only concerns Manly’s ability to act, but also—and perhaps more importantly—Manly’s honesty. In his article “A Rape and No Rape: Olivia’s Bedroom Revisited,” Robert Bode gives a most convincing justification for the argument that Manly did have intercourse with Olivia—but also states that it could not be termed “rape.” He points out that rape, by definition, involves force, and that Manly strongly reassures Fidelity that he will “use no violence against [Olivia]” (IV.ii.314-315). Also, it is obvious that *Olivia* is the aggressor in this scene; she constantly urges and pulls at Fidelity to get her into the bedroom. Given Manly’s promise to Fidelity and Olivia’s obvious sexual desire both before and after Manly’s visit to the bedroom, “no matter

what does happen between Manly and Olivia...it is not a 'rape' within the usually accepted definition of the word" (80-81). Bode also hypothesizes that the portrayal of Manly's sex with Olivia as "rape" might have been a result of Bonamy Dobrée's 1927 criticism of the play, in which Dobrée describes "the grim scenes of Olivia's rape" (qtd. in Bode 80, 85).

Bode gives several reasons for Manly having had sex with Olivia, the strongest of which is that the alternative reading "requires...that Manly be viewed as a highly inconsistent character..."; this interpretation could be supported only if Manly suddenly becomes a brazen liar when he tells Vernish of his conquest (83). We have observed Manly's self-deception in his conversations with Fidelia, but there is a vast difference between Manly's particular interpretation of events and emotions and his telling of a very plain untruth. Vernish is the remaining pillar of Manly's trust and confidence. Manly is obviously unaware of Vernish's betrayal, and so would have no strategic reason to lie to him. Manly is willing to bend his own perception to better support his freshly wounded ego, but for him to tell a flat-out lie to the man he still considers to be his only true friend would be a death blow to the audience's perception of Manly as even a deeply flawed protagonist. This would mean that the previous scenes of the play have all gone for naught. Such a baseless violation of Manly's personality at this point in the play cannot and will not be forgiven. Given that we have witnessed a very detailed exploration of Manly's internal collapse, it is highly unlikely that Wycherley would so casually destroy the audience's perception of his main character—a perception that he has spent nearly three-quarters of the play carefully crafting.

Vance compliments Bode's reading, but provides the objection that "the plans for the second night would seem far less effective or at least superfluous had Manly already

‘raped’ Olivia” (239, n. 55). Here we must consider Manly’s true goal in his use of the bed trick on Olivia. He has now twice overheard her utter denial of love for him, and in this scene she reveals the whole of her duplicity:

Fidelia: But, Madam, what cou’d make you dissemble Love to him, when
‘twas so hard a thing for you and flatter his Love to you?

Olivia: That which makes all the World flatter and dissemble, ‘twas his
Money: I had a real passion for that. Yet I lov’d not that so well,
as for it to take him; for, as soon as I had his Money, I hastened
his departure: like a Wife, who, when she has made the most of a
dying husband’s breath, pulls away the pillow. (IV.ii.219-300)

Knowing that there is no possibility of winning Olivia’s love, Manly turns his attention fully to repaying her humiliation: “it wou’d be a Revenge sufficient, to make her accessary to my pleasure, and then let her know it” (323-325). But though he completes the sex act, Olivia’s humiliation is not assured, for “I am without Witnesses; for if I barely shou’d publish it, she wou’d deny it with as much impudence, as she wou’d act it again with this young Fellow here” (359-363). Manly’s actions have no real meaning unless they are properly contextualized. Olivia could contradict the truth of his act as easily as Manly denies Fidelia’s protests. In order to make the deed undeniable, there must be an audience who will recognize and name Olivia’s guilt. An act done in secret belongs only to those who are “in the know”; only they can determine its meaning. When a deed is made public, it becomes subject to common social symbolization—in this case, hypocrisy, culpability, and shame. Since Olivia’s deception and denouncement of Manly was made public (before Novel, Plausible, Fidelia, and Freeman), the only way to appropriately retaliate is to make his *act* of deception and denouncement public as well, to give it equal meaning in the social symbolic network. Since this initial act had not the

proper collective symbolization, it does not truly “exist.” The act itself may satisfy Manly’s physical lust, but not his lust for revenge.

FLAWS VERSUS FOOLISHNESS: MANLY VERSUS NOVEL

In the scene before Manly’s public discovery of Olivia and Vernish’s crimes (which will be discussed in the final section of this work), Novel engages Manly and Freeman to “Judge” his seemingly random battle with Plausible and Oldfox over the definition of “Wit.” The two protagonists are suddenly directly opposing the fools of the play in a debate over the use of language! At first glance, such a meeting might be seen as simple comic relief, a little light-hearted banter to temper the intensifying drama of the plot; such an excuse also gathers the entourage together for their immediate transportation to the final scene in Olivia’s apartment. But, as we have seen, Wycherley is too much a master of detail to let such a scene be mere comedy. When Manly claims that “alwayes talking; especially too if it be loud and fast, is the sign of a Fool” (V.ii.234-235), Novel responds with a frenetic justification for his definition of “Wit,” comparing it to fencing—“the quicker the better; run ‘em down, run ‘em down; no matter for parrying” (236-238)—currency—“[Wit] makes a very pretty show in the World, let me tell you; nay, a better than your close Hunks....what are we the better for your substantial thrifty Curmudgeon in Wit, Sir?” (251-256)—and eventually turning it into a celebration of anarchy:

...talking...[is] a mark of Wit; and so is Railing, Roaring, and making a noise: for, Railing is Satyr, you know; and Roaring, and making a noise, Humor.

...

...but that young Fellows shou’d be so dull, as to say, there’s no Humor in making a noise, and breaking Windows! I tell you, there’s Wit and

Humor too, in both: And a Wit is as well known by his Frolick, as by his
Simile. (258-261; 279-284)

It is impossible to ignore the similarities between Novel's and Manly's character in this very telling scene. Both are obsessive, constantly struggling to maintain their identities through the use of language. Novel greatly desires others' recognition of him, so he attempts to be at the forefront of every current fashion, especially Wit. But though he can copy the style of the truewits, he has no real wit of his own; the best he can do is mimic their words and deeds. His "wit" is a mere *approximation* of true Wit. For Novel, the meaning behind his actions is not nearly as important as the response those actions inspire in others. Even Manly's abuse provides Novel with the attention he desires. His dispute with Oldfox quickly devolves into a series of vicious (if somewhat feeble) insults, but these words have no true impact on either man's ego; in the end, sated, Novel concludes the argument quite abruptly and amiably: "therefore, let us be friends, Oldfox" (V.ii.317). Later he interrupts Manly's conversation with Vernish to beg Manly's company, for "all the fine things one says...are lost, without thee" (389-391). Without an audience to provide some kind of response, Novel is without definition. Vance offers an interesting interpretation of this scene, stating that "Novel's incessant verbiage...is at least more dynamic" than "Manly's desire for silence and retreat." I would agree that Manly does attempt to slow down "life's rapidity and flux" (168), but he does so in order to identify it, to quantify it, and to ascertain where it fits in his personal symbolism. Novel's way of thinking, though indeed lively and progressive, constantly changing as the fashion fits, is but another form of stagnation. Novel makes no distinction between skillful use of language and meaningless noise; *anything* may be called Wit as long as it brings about the desired response. He gives no thought to his choices, does not probe

their significance or their worth. For him, novelty is its own reward; if it is enough to make others acknowledge him—if it gives him some kind of social “currency”—there is no need to think the matter through any further. The words themselves mean nothing; it is *the reaction to them* that Novel values.

Vance also notes that Manly’s declaration that Novel “always talk’st without thinking” (V.ii.241-242) implies that “the deep ‘thinker’...often refuses to live because all action must be subordinated to a carefully conceived philosophy—a kind of contemplation that breeds the stagnant perfectionism that will not budge until all conditions are met” (168). This statement, of course, unmistakably fits the obsessional personality. Salecl explains, “The obsessive...substitutes thought for action and believes that events in the real are determined by what he thinks” (183). Manly has clearly shown this penchant throughout the play: he determines the meanings of words (as James Thompson observes, “Manly redefines ‘friendship’ for Freeman, ‘honor’ for Fidelia, ‘ceremony’ for Plausible, ‘wit’ for Novel, and ‘courage’ for Oldfox” 102) and finds validation for his definitions in the words and actions of those around him. Manly’s rules are several, and he will not tolerate any deviation from those rules. Novel also has his own rules of definition, but whereas Manly’s meanings have remained relatively stable, Novel’s are erratic, relentlessly morphing, shifting, enlarging to encompass whatever meaning might present him in the best light. Novel is caught up in the perpetual desire to be seen, *to be identified* by the World—but he is terrified of that judgment as well. So, rather than allow the World to measure his “true” worth, he takes on the cloak of fashion and novelty. As long as he continually alters his position in order to provoke a reaction—any reaction—he can never be accurately judged, or worse, ignored, and so is free to attach his own signification to those reactions. But this “dynamic” demonstration

“of life’s rapidity and flux” is the result of Novel’s essential *passivity*. While Manly chooses the terms by which he will define the World, Novel chooses the terms by which *the World* will define *him*. But since his meaning-making patterns are never stable, he is unable to communicate on anything more than a surface level. He does not change or grow. He is pure catalyst, inert unless he is causing a reaction from someone else. The reactions he creates, however, are in reality as meaningless as his “noise.” Trapped by the desire for recognition and a simultaneous fear of that recognition, Novel cycles endlessly in his performance of hollow wit and ultimately insignificant deeds.

What are we to make of this rather disturbing link between our protagonist and one of the play’s greatest fools? They are both plainly obsessional characters who manipulate terminology and perception in order to establish and justify their positions in relation to the World. There are two crucial differences, however. One is the fact that, as Berman states, “the objects of [Manly’s] rage are correctly perceived” (476). Plausible, Novel, and Oldfox are indeed fools; the supposed keepers of justice at Westminster Hall are more corrupt than their clients; Olivia is a “Mercenary Whore.” The audience may not condone all of Manly’s reactions to the World, but they cannot deny the truth in his observations. Novel’s argument, on the other hand, is utterly ridiculous. He takes up this position simply in order to be seen as an iconoclast, but it is obvious that his speech has no real meaning other than to create conflict, both in its substance and in its fact. Markley, in *Two Edg’d Weapons*, defines affectation as “unsuccessful dissembling, the inability to convince your audience that you are behaving naturally” (164). Though Novel may be “behaving naturally” in his attempt to gain the attention (and admiration) of those around him, his claims to style and trend-making are unmistakably artificial, which destroys their intended effect: instead of appearing sophisticated and witty, Novel

shows his want of wit and sophistication. One cannot “put on” such attributes as one might wear a suit of clothes, simply by adopting the outward trappings of urbanity. Zizek, quoting Jon Elster, calls these attributes “‘states that are essentially by-products’: an innermost emotion that cannot be planned in advance or assumed by means of a conscious decision...” (76). We cannot command another to “see” us in certain ways; these qualities must be *discovered* within us by that other. “The basic paradox of these states is that although they are what matter most, they elude us as soon as we make them the immediate aim of our activity,” says Zizek. “The only way to bring them about is not to center our activity on them but to pursue other goals and hope that they will come about ‘by themselves.’ Although they do pertain to our activity, they are ultimately perceived as something that belongs to us on account of what we *are* and not on account of what we *do*” (77).

This brings us to the second difference between Manly and Novel: Manly’s character has been made entirely open to the audience throughout the whole of the play. We have heard his speech, witnessed his treatment of others, overheard others’ judgments of him—we have been brought to believe in *his* belief in his philosophy. We have also been made witness to his collapse into hypocrisy, which might have demolished any sympathy we harbored for him, were it not for the fact that *Manly, too, becomes aware of it*. In *The Plain Dealer*, Manly is the only one who changes, who becomes self-aware—though only momentarily. Now we see not Manly-the-Plain-Dealer, but Manly-the-human. His words and (re)actions no longer arise out of mere self-righteous indignation toward the World; he is now a man struggling desperately to maintain his own (fatally flawed) position as outsider, as Other. His emotions have betrayed him, and he has become aware of his vulnerability to the World’s machinations. Still, rather than face the

breakdown of his particular paradigm, he attempts to shore up his defenses by redefining his terms: He desires Olivia in order to satisfy his lust for “revenge”; he may have Fidelia pimp for him as long as he considers her a “rival” for Olivia’s affections. In his hostility toward the gentlemen at Westminster Hall in Act III and toward Novel, Plausible, and Oldfox in Act V, he provides justification for his remaining judgments on the World and his place *outside* it. We might have given such rationalizations to Novel, had the play centered on his particular development. As it is, however, Wycherley has stacked the deck in Manly’s favor. This scene reveals how, in both the character of the Plain Dealer and the composition of *The Plain Dealer*, language and context serve to create meaning.

FREEMAN

The Plain Dealer has two plots, however, and two protagonists. What of Freeman, Manly's rakish-yet-loyal sidekick? The critical view of Freeman is somewhat varied, but much of it concerns the morality of his character. For Rose Zimbardo, Freeman is "adversarius" to Manly's "satirist." Though he is quite candid with Manly about his use of flattery and ephemeral friendship to advance his social position, this bit of plain dealing does not afford him any kind of moral superiority. Essentially, says Zimbardo, Freeman attempts "to reason the satirist to the side of unreason, to win him to the very vice he stands most firmly against" (*Wycherley's Drama* 127-128). Peter Holland also observes Freeman's lack of moral standing, even going so far as to say that the audience feels "contempt" for his designs on the Widow and his mercenary social dissemblance: "During the play, the character of Freeman has steadily become unattractive: more and more, Freeman's ideas, the social expression of how harmonious social existence is to be achieved through a modicum of lying, have been undercut and made unacceptable by the actions to which they have given rise" (200). Others, like Katherine Rogers and Anne Righter, admit that Freeman's acceptance of the necessity of social hypocrisy is understandable, but still lament his compliance with the World. Righter admires his shrewdness and acknowledges the practicality of Freeman's actions, but adds that "it scarcely adds it scarcely adds dignity to Freeman....to show him dealing successfully with the world by stooping to the world's own level..." (86). Rogers also notes his "decent expediency," but nonetheless states that "[s]urely there is something a little sordid about Freeman" (153).

Morality is obviously a major theme in *The Plain Dealer*: the majority of the play is taken up with Manly's curmudgeonly observations on the World's corruption, and, as Fidelity constantly reminds him (and us), his own honor is very much at stake in his portion of the plot. And Freeman is clearly a "Complier with the age," as we see from his initial conversation with Manly in Act I. But is he any more or less moral than Manly, or any of the other characters with whom he comes in contact? Does Freeman have any real integrity, or is he simply a hypocrite? And if he does have moral principles, how are they defined? To answer these questions, we must consider the framework within which Freeman operates.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

The Freeman-Widow subplot serves multiple purposes. The first (and most obvious) is that it provides the audience with some much needed witty comic relief after the relatively intense events of the Manly-Fidelity-Olivia storyline. Though many of those scenes have been saturated with humor, they have also been almost entirely populated with melodramatic characters and their various obsessions. We may admire Manly, Freeman, and Fidelity; we may laugh at Olivia's obvious dissembling and her ill treatment of the fools, Novel and Plausible; but a great deal of development and crisis have been packed into these scenes—we need to be reminded that *The Plain Dealer* is, at heart, a comedic play.

Second, these events show the contrast between Freeman's social skills and use of language and symbolization with that of the other characters. We have seen Manly's honest but unproductive railing; Plausible's insufferable sycophancy; the Widow's fixation on litigation and legal terminology; Fidelity's fantastic self-sacrificing devotion;

Olivia's unsuccessful affectation of purity and her successful abuse of others; and Novel's tiresome attempts at wit. These characters may be able to express their ideas and opinions clearly—indeed, Manly's dialogue is almost entirely devoted to his judgments on the World—but their declarations serve no purpose other than to be declarations. Rose Zimbardo argues this point in *At Zero Point*: “In *The Plain Dealer* there is no attempt at realism of character or dialogue, for characters (who are invariably are types) speak not to each other, in simulation of conversation, but rather directly to the audience....The style of deconstructive satire, whether it assaults us from the page or the stage is declamatory, not conversational” (80-81). There are no real conversations in the primary (Manly-Fidelia-Olivia-Vernish) plot; people talk *at* and *around* one another, not *to* each other. Though their articulations may be quite impressive in their accuracy, wit, or eloquence, ultimately they fail as communication in the World of the play. Characters attempt to construct worlds around themselves with language, but the problem is that their monopolization of language does not permit any variation. No one can communicate fully with another because each person weighs his or her words differently and cannot conceive or and/or admit any other interpretation. Language, and therefore communication, is inherently flawed in that signs and symbols do not bear precisely the same signification for every individual. *The Plain Dealer* is filled with terms, signs, and symbols that encompass vastly different meanings between the various characters.

“Successful” communication occurs when participants are able, explicitly or tacitly, to compromise in their meaning-making by either agreeing upon a particular signified and/or by becoming aware of another individual's meaning-making “templates.” Several characters in this play have some specialized knowledge of one or more particular symbolic systems that differ fundamentally from their own: Manly rails against

the hypocrisy of London middle- and upper-class society; Novel uses his limited understanding of the requirements for libertine fame to maintain his dubious social standing; Freeman gains access to the social network of Whitehall and the Inns of Court, exploits the Widow's litigious language for his own purposes, and is perhaps the only character who is able to communicate (somewhat) effectively with Manly; the Widow uses her knowledge of courtship and the courts to remove threats to her financial and personal freedom and to fill her coffers; and Olivia uses Manly's fierce idealism to dupe him, Novel's vanity both to embarrass and to lure him, Vernish's paranoia to conceal her cuckoldry, and her knowledge of polite social standards to mask her true opinions. But though these characters are somewhat successful in using their particular command of another's symbolic strategies, they are all—with the notable exception of Freeman—at one point or another brought low by their incomplete mastery of that "second language."

Freeman, however, is clearly a master of *all* social "languages." He is able and willing to work within the World's codes and other's perceptions for his own benefit. While he can understand the obsessive extremes at which different characters operate, he is also aware of the impracticality of those attitudes. There is safety in closing out the world and retreating into a delusion, but it is not profitable. One cannot progress. In accepting the world as it is rather than applying some idealistic framework and attempting to force the world to fit within its parameters, Freeman earns his appellation—he is indeed free to move about, to interact, and to communicate effectively with the world's inhabitants. By accepting reality's imperfections, he avoids both self-deception and the deceptions of others. He can observe freely the way others use language to make meaning, and in understanding those meaning-making patterns, he is able to operate within them for his own benefit. He and Manly, therefore, are able to communicate with

each other because Freeman does not give Manly a reflection of himself (as do Olivia and Vernish), but approaches him plainly. He does attempt to justify his social deceptions, his “Court professions” and “Court promises” (I.i.291-292), but when Manly provides responses to all of Freeman’s explanations, Freeman can see that he will not be able to convince Manly of the impracticality of his philosophy, and so instead chooses to convince him of Freeman’s true loyalty. Rather than change the man’s paradigm, he attempts to change Manly’s perception of one man. He also realizes that he will not be able to do this with speech, but rather with acts: “try me, at least,” he begs of Manly (384). But even though Manly shoots down all Freeman’s suggestions, Freeman remains loyal.

Freeman is the only character in *The Plain Dealer* who has the ability to communicate with Manly on a somewhat equal footing. Freeman has been at Manly’s side throughout their days at sea, and so in knowing of Manly’s plain-dealing ways, he is able to approach him and speak *within* his particular language paradigm. His opening debate with Manly in Act I directly parallels Manly’s futile argument with Plausible earlier in the scene. Plausible (another obsessional character), like Manly, actually *believes* what he says, or, at the very least, is not entirely aware of the deception he dispenses. His attitude and speech are how he defines himself within the social sphere. He has carefully cultivated an identity of innocence, generosity, innocuousness. He is unwilling and unable to participate in the cutting exchanges of wit and double-dealing of which other courtiers are capable, so he removes himself from that particular game and instead participates from the sidelines, applauding all and receiving favor wherever he may. By speaking and *thinking* well of all the world, he insulates himself against ridicule. Even Manly’s painfully obvious threats and insults do not seem to phase him.

In this, we see Plausible's self-enforced delusion: he simply will not see the world in terms other than those that he himself has chosen.

Whereas Plausible *cannot* speak within Manly's language pattern, Freeman can. But we can see that while Freeman is able to slip through the various social strata and can speak the language of libertines and the court, he does not *define* himself by it, as Plausible does. But we note that Freeman does not equivocate, nor does he alter his beliefs to fit Manly's. Rather he approaches Manly as another kind of plain-dealer—the practical kind. Freeman understands human nature and accepts it as a part of how “the World” works. He does not allow himself to be fooled by the machinations and deceptions of others, but neither does he actively fight against it, as does Manly. Manly disparages Freeman for being “a *Latitudinarian* in Friendship, that is, no Friend; thou dost side with all Mankind, but wilt suffer for none. Thou art indeed like your *Lord Plausible*, the Pink of Courtesie, therefore hast no friendship” (I.i.261-266). But Freeman freely and willingly confesses his Whitehall deceptions to Manly. One might say that, since Manly has observed Freeman's dealings at Whitehall, Freeman has no choice but to own up to his double-dealing ways. But Freeman does not apologize for his attitude or his actions. He doesn't brag about his affairs, but he does defend their practicality. This is another sign of Freeman's honesty with Manly. He could very well attempt to do as Olivia and Vernish do and reflect Manly's personality in order to gain his trust and whatever fortune he might still possess. But Manly can give Freeman nothing. He has no money or power to speak of. Freeman does not desire Manly's lover. Manly will not find Freeman's machinations admirable. There is *no reason* for Freeman to argue with Manly, to try to get him to be more aware of the utility of the social con. Manly is honest with Freeman (for the most part) and Freeman is honest with Manly, for

no other reason than being honest. We can trust Freeman's words because he has nothing to gain from Manly other than simple friendship.

NEED VERSUS DESIRE

Freeman's initial conversation with Manly is significant in that it reveals the difference between each man's literal and symbolic value system. In his discussion of the libidinal economy of Zeno's paradoxes, Žižek illustrates nicely "the Lacanian distinction between need, demand, and desire":

[A]n everyday object destined to satisfy our needs undergoes a kind of transubstantiation as soon as it is caught up in the dialectic of demand[,] and ends up producing desire. When we demand an object from somebody, its "use value" (the fact that it serves to satisfy some of our needs) *eo ipso* becomes a form of expression of its "exchange value"; the object in question functions as an index of a network of intersubjective relations. If the other complies with our wish, he thereby bears witness to a certain attitude toward us. The final purpose of our demand for an object is thus not the satisfaction of a need attached to it but confirmation of the other's attitude toward us. When, for example, a mother gives milk to her child, milk becomes a token of her love. (5)

Both Manly and Freeman are exquisitely aware of this "transubstantiation" of need to demand to desire, but their responses to it are diametrically different. Manly refuses to speak or act within generally accepted social codes in order to avoid becoming a victim of their inherent deceptiveness. Everyone's words, even when offered in (supposed) friendship, conceal an ulterior motive, a desire for something *more*. This is particularly evident in his debate with Freeman in Act I: Freeman offers to "fight for you" (I.i.386), "lend you money" (389), "speak well of you to your Enemies" (394), and "wou'd not hear you ill spoken of behind your back, by my Friend" (397-398). Manly refuses to accept these acts as symbols of Freeman's friendship and loyalty, but instead calculates their possible "use value" to Freeman: Freeman would fight to enhance his own

reputation (387); he would lend only “To borrow more of me another time” (390); he would defend Manly’s reputation but “To encourage others to be your Friends” (395). Manly deeply desires to be able to trust another, but his greatest fear is the betrayal of that trust. As an obsessional, therefore, Manly refuses to put himself in a position in which he might experience that betrayal, which also precludes any possibility of real trust. Thompson makes the useful observation that Manly “is more willing to give up money than trust. Thus he offers gold and jewels to Olivia, gold to Fidelity, gold to Freeman, and gold to the sailors....Money, in short, becomes a substitute for faith in this play...” (104). Manly holds himself to a strict code of honor; his libidinal economy is highly symbolic, dealing almost exclusively in “exchange values.” He is well aware, however, that the World does not abide by his particular codes. Were he to become caught up in another’s libidinal circuit—were he to allow himself to believe in another person’s definition of loyalty, honesty, love—he would lose his “objective” status as Other. The only way to avoid this exposure, then, is to remove himself from those systems entirely by offering a literal payment of gold or jewels in exchange for a symbolic offer of love, friendship, and/or loyalty. Žižek remarks that this system of payment is what allows analysts to maintain a state of detachment from the analysand’s personal dramas. He offers a quote from Lacan that is quite apt here: “Everyone knows that money doesn’t just buy things, but that the prices...have the function of neutralizing something infinitely more dangerous than paying in money, namely owing somebody something” (61). Manly will not believe in Fidelity’s pledge of eternal devotion, so he responds to her request to stay with him by paying her for her service. The sailors obviously remain loyal to Manly even though they lost their fortunes when Manly sank his ship (itself an act of honor), but Manly negates that symbolic debt when he pays them

his last twenty pounds in Act III. Actually, in this case, Manly also *tops* their symbolic acts of loyalty and sacrifice with that gesture, thus allowing him to remain “above” them, outside of their particular libidinal economy. We can also see this one-upmanship in his “bribery” of Olivia. Even though he claims to have irrefutable evidence that Olivia will keep her promise of love, “that she might the better keep it, I left her the value of five or six thousand pound” (732-734). Manly desires above all else true expressions of love, loyalty, and honor, but he cannot accept that any such expressions are entirely “pure.” All of them, even those which most closely align with his ideals, must be “paid off” in some way in order to maintain his privileged position as Other.

Freeman, too, is quite aware of the degree of exchange that takes place in social interactions, but instead of fighting it, Freeman *uses* it to his advantage. Unlike Manly, Freeman does not point out others’ delusions; rather he accesses those delusions in order to satisfy his own needs and desires. His self-worth is not threatened by bowing to a foppish lord or by paying compliments to those who do not truly deserve them. For Freeman, such gestures are purely functional: they are empty signs and signals performed in order to receive something of substance (free meals, favors, and the continuation of those benefits). Freeman’s system of exchange does not hinge on symbolic value, as Manly’s does—it is entirely based upon “use value.” His pursuit of the Widow is nothing more than a strategy to pay his creditors, and he is perfectly willing to admit this—even to the Widow herself. After Manly and Fidelia’s exit at the end of Act II, Freeman remains behind to encounter the Widow Blackacre. He gives no long speeches, no elaborate justifications. When the Widow arrives on the scene, Freeman immediately proclaims to her his desire for marriage: “for I am a younger Brother, and you are a Widow” (II.i.1012-1013). Plain dealing, indeed!

FREEMAN'S PRACTICALITY

Why does Freeman—clearly a master of dissemblance and flattery—not approach the Widow in a more elegant style? Why does he not attempt to make her believe that he is in love with *her* and not her jointure? His opponent, Major Oldfox, a man who stubbornly clings to tradition, struggles with this more traditional approach. He strains to woo the Widow with his essays and poetry, but, as with Manly, the Widow turns all his attempts into legal references, until he cries out in frustration, “O Lady, Lady, all interruption and no sence between us, as if we were Lawyers at the Bar” (IV.i.281-313). Eventually, Oldfox resorts to a kind of aural rape: he ties the Widow down to a chair and gags her with the intention of forcing her to listen to his “well-pen’d Acrostics” (V.ii.530). Even then, however, his efforts are thwarted by Freeman’s entrance with the signs of the law: Jerry, the Bayliffs, and the Knights of the Post. Freeman is well-aware of the Widow’s “pettifogging” reputation, and he has witnessed firsthand her fixation on legal matters. From her conversation with Manly, it is all too clear that romance is a nuisance to the Widow: “And a pox of all vexatious, impertinent Lovers; they are still perplexing the World with the tedious Narrations of their Love-Suits, and the Discourses of their Mistresses; You are as troublesom to a poor Widow of Business, as a young Coxcomby Rithming Lover” (I.i.566-572). Armed with such knowledge, Freeman uses the Widow’s own terminology in his “love-suit.” He is able to interact with the Widow with some success because he works literally on her own terms: he works within her language frame. Whereas Oldfox approaches the Widow with his own words of romance, Freeman offers her a business deal:

Widow: You are an impertinent person, and go about your business.
Freeman: I have none, but to marry thee, Widow.
Widow: But I have other business, I’d have you to know.

Freeman: But you have no business anights, Widow; and I'll make you
 pleasanter business than any you have: for anights, I assure
 you, I am a Man of great business; for the business—
 Widow: Go, I'm sure you're an idle Fellow.
 Freeman: Try me but, Widow, and employ me as you find my abilities,
 and industry. (II.i.1011-1025)

Unlike Oldfox, Freeman has a mastery of the Widow's language and can manipulate her terminology to gain her attention, if not her consent. He turns the Widow's true passion—litigation—to his advantage and makes her terms of “business,” “employment,” and “industry” his courting terms. We can also see this businesslike outlook in Freeman's response to Manly's question of Freeman's pursuit of marriage: “Why, d'ye think I sha'nt deserve Wages? I'll drudge faithfully” (III.i.591-592). Real feelings of love or passion are no matter here; this is a sale of goods and services, not a love affair.

Freeman's cool attitude after his initial failure tells us a great deal about his character. He is not emotionally tied to the Widow, or even to her purse strings. Her avarice and deliberate manipulation of justice make her, as Righter puts it, “fair game”: she is a deliberately unattractive character—a caricature—so an audience expects her to be brought down a peg in the final scenes of the play, and would take great delight in witnessing her downfall (86). Freeman's attempts to win the Widow's hand are based on his desire to eliminate his debts, but we also see, as Virginia Ogden Birdsall points out, the pleasure he takes in the battle: “The very fact that the Widow knows him so well and that she is as cynical a realist as he makes the excitement of the challenge all the greater and the contest he wages with her all the more exhilarating” (171). The Widow is slippery, well-versed in the manipulation of words and meaning, and she is by no means taken in by Freeman's propositions. Like Freeman, the Widow views words and deeds as tools for personal gain, and like Manly, she has no compunctions about telling others

what she thinks of them (II.i.1087-1225). She is a worthy opponent, and this is almost as appealing as her fortune. Oldfox declares that he shall win the Widow's hand with "Assiduity, Patience, and Long-sufferings, which you will not undergo; for you idle young Fellows leave off love when it comes to be Business; and Industry gets more Women, than Love " (1229-1233). But Freeman states that he will "be industrious too, and make a business on't, and get her by Law, Wrangling, and Contests, and not by Sufferings" (1235-1237). For both Freeman and Oldfox, love is not a goal, but a means to an end. But Freeman clearly recognizes that the Widow's only true love is litigation; traditional romance means nothing in her economy. Since her only passion is for the law, he will have to outmaneuver her using legal reasoning—he will have to beat her at her own (and only) game.

For this reason, Freeman approaches Jerry, the Widow's beleaguered son. Jerry's desires are obvious: his mother denies him access to all forms of juvenile entertainment (including sexual recreation), but since he is entirely dependent upon her, he cannot escape her restrictions. Though he initially distrusts Freeman's designs on the Widow, Jerry is easily won over by Freeman's bribery and his professed sympathy with Jerry's joyless enslavement to a litigious mother. Even so, this arrangement does not involve any real emotional attachment between the two. Freeman adopts the boy not out of concern for Jerry's welfare, but his own, for "steal away the Calf, and the Cow will follow you" (III.i.505-506). He even refers to Jerry as his "Hostage" (IV.ii.407). Jerry, too, is aware of Freeman's less-than-altruistic motives, but since Jerry has as much stake in Freeman's success over the Widow, Jerry acts out of self-preservation. He is concerned only with Freeman's financial support and the potential freedom from his mother's control, and Freeman is clearly using Jerry (and the legal documents he carries)

as a bargaining chip against the Widow's resolve. Also, Jerry is privy to the Widow's secrets, all her legal chicanery, which Freeman can use against her. In essence, Freeman steals the Widow's "children"—both her son *and* her legal writings—as insurance; if she values not her actual child, she will value the green bags which, we find out, contain “all that concern[s] my Estate, my Jointure, my Husband's Deed of Gift, my Evidences for all my Suits now depending” (III.i.563-566). Even Jerry notes this connection when he exclaims that the Widow is “as furious, now she has lost her Writings, as a Bitch when she has lost her Puppies” (605-606).

And the Widow does prove to be an “unnatural Mother” (IV.ii.373) when she shows that she is willing to deny the legitimacy of her natural child in order to protect her unnatural children—her court cases, legal writings, her possession of the jointure and the Blackacre property. She keeps Jerry from boyish fun purely for her own benefit. If she can keep him under her thumb, she will be able to use him as a law clerk for the rest of her life, and she will not be in danger of his claim to the Blackacre estate. When Jerry finds independence (of a sort) with Freeman, rather than acquiescing to their demands, she simply severs her ties with her son. Her own legal and financial independence are more important to her than even her honor:

Oldfox: But, Lady, if what you say be true, will you stigmatize your Reputation on Record? And, if it be not true, how will you prove it?

Widow: Pshaw! I can prove any thing; and for my Reputation, know, Major, a wise Woman will no more value her Reputation in disinheriting a Rebellious Son, of a good Estate; than she wou'd in getting him, to inherit an Estate. (471-479)

Freeman gambled on the Widow's maternal instincts, and found them nonexistent when compared with her love for legal and financial control.

IS FREEMAN IMMORAL?

The interactions between Freeman, Jerry, the Widow, and Oldfox are not battles of wit or even desire so much as they are games of bondage. Freeman first offered a contract of prostitution—sexual favors in return for financial freedom. When that was denied, he organized another, informal contract with Jerry in which he would “stand by” Jerry and free him from his mother’s oppression in return for Jerry’s help in gaining the Widow’s consent. When in response the Widow breaks her familial bond with Jerry, Freeman’s final strategy is to catch the Widow in *flagrante delicto*, which he does both in her attempted forgery of the documents Freeman stole from her, and in Oldfox’s attempted “rape.” But whereas Oldfox’s literal bonds are easily untied, Freeman’s legal bonds hold the Widow fast, and she is “undone” (V.ii.558). Oldfox attempts to gain her affection and admiration (not only to acquire a portion of her jointure, but also to boost his own ego), but Freeman realizes that the only way to gain the protean Widow’s assent is to use the law to tie her hands so that she cannot escape; only when she has no other recourse will she give over. In the resulting exchange between Freeman, Jerry, and the Widow, however, everyone walks away at least somewhat satisfied. An actual contract is drawn up in which Freeman secures an annuity of four hundred pounds and the settlement of his debts; Jerry gains economic, social, and sexual freedom; and the Widow, while denied Freeman’s sexual favors, still gets to retain her litigious ways and is relieved of any future love-(or law-)suits upon her jointure from Freeman.

But there is no true emotion in these affairs, excepting perhaps irritation and pride. The Widow’s ill-humor comes more from frustration at being distracted from her court cases than from genuine fury or pain. She tries twice to appeal to Jerry and Freeman’s sympathies, but both efforts are based in legal issues. Her weeping when

Jerry declares that he will “Sign, Seal, and Deliver” when he comes of age (“O do not squeeze Wax, Son; rather go to Ordinaries, and Baudy-houses, than squeeze Wax; if thou dost that, farewell the goodly Mannor of Blackacre, with all its Woods, Underwoods, and Appurtenances whatever. Oh, oh!” IV.ii.397-401) seems rather strange for such a hardened woman. But given that she would rather damn herself a whore than allow Jerry even the possibility of laying claim to her property without her influence, one cannot help but assume that her tears (if they are even authentic) are entirely for her own potential losses. In Act V, she pleads not for her honor, but for the “power to sue in my own name”; she “wou’d rather be depriv’d of life” than lose “the benefit of the Law” (V.ii.570, 573, 572-573). She can see nothing outside of her own legal power, since that is where her “love” lies. We have seen in Act I her scorn of Manly’s passionate romantic desire, and in Act III we see that the Widow obviously knows the power of words to obfuscate or stall an argument: “deck my Cause with flowers, that the Snake may lie hidden” (196-197); “Mr. *Bluster*, pray bawl soundly for me, at the *Kings-Bench*; bluster, sputter, question, cavil; but be sure your Argument be intricate enough, to confound the Court” (231-234). The only “honest” emotions she ever displays are offense and annoyance. Her sentimental pleas, therefore, are useless to her cause—both Freeman and the audience recognize them as mere affectations, the last-ditch efforts of a woman who is, at her core, a mercenary.

Freeman is cool and placid throughout, though he is twice defeated by the Widow’s cunning. Even the pleasure he takes is moderate and level-headed. In both setbacks and success, he retains his calm rationality. Freeman has no internal motivation for his deeds—he does not desire revenge or romance. He needs money; the Widow has it and is available (to the man who can find a way to get it). So he takes the practical

course and commits himself to pursuing her “business.” His quest for the Widow’s hand is motivated entirely by personal profit, but the Widow is a worthy adversary: she is a shrewd cynic, and her avaricious nature mitigates any moral judgments we might have on Freeman’s schemes. He uses Jerry to achieve his triumph over the Widow, but he is not cruel, and he duly rewards Jerry for his service with adequate provisos in his final contract. But though he treats Jerry kindly, at no point does he express a sincere wish to improve the boy’s lot on principle alone. Freeman does so at the end because it is easy: he already has what he needs from the Widow, and adding clauses into his contract with her is no trouble at all. If Jerry had not spoken up to remind Freeman of his need, Freeman might have simply forgotten about him (V.ii.585-586). Being reminded, however, Freeman makes sure that Jerry is well taken care of. Again, we can see Freeman’s logic and moderation in play here. He does not consider situations from an emotional standpoint but from a rational one.

But do these actions make Freeman an “immoral” character? Are we meant to find his actions contemptible or “sordid”? Consider this: were Freeman’s plot to stand on its own, would his actions still be considered from the same ethical standpoint? Compared to Oldfox, Jerry, and the Widow, Freeman is affable, skilled in social communication, reasonable, and pragmatic—he is obviously the protagonist in *this* World. Since the audience has already seen in previous Restoration comedies how easily a character like Freeman can manipulate a character like the Widow, they are never in doubt of his eventual success; the enjoyment comes not from his virtue, but from watching a master of societal codes at work. Wycherley had already shown the success of the Machiavellian rake and the relative ease with which he gulls both the unsuspecting *and* the suspicious in *The Country Wife*. But few would equate the supposed immorality

of Freeman's deeds with that of Horner's. Horner simply enjoys cuckolding foolish husbands; Freeman pursues the Widow to satisfy a practical need. Freeman's approach may not be "morally and ethically pure" (Vance 173), but one cannot deny that it *is* pragmatic. Admittedly, there are far more ethical solutions to Freeman's financial problems, but for a typical Restoration libertine, such measures would not be looked down upon, especially considering that Freeman's eventual success "punishes" all the "right" people. Even Katharine Rogers admits, "Freeman *is* ideal in terms of the conventional standards of his society" (152). In the context of Restoration comedy, Freeman is an exemplar of poise, self-control, and rakish confidence. Yet many find his emotional detachment from the events he engineers somewhat unsettling. Why?

FROM WHERE ARE WE MEANT TO DESIRE? THE BRAIDING OF THE TWO PLOTS

The answer may be found in the third, most significant purpose of the Freeman-Widow subplot. As stated earlier, Manly is clearly meant to be the protagonist of *The Plain Dealer*: he gives the play's Prologue, and his plot dominates the play's action. But whereas *The Country Wife* focuses on Horner's smoothly confident (albeit shockingly indulgent) actions, *The Plain Dealer* focuses on Manly's passionate and obsessional reactions. Wycherley makes a full turn and explores the life of one who claims a clear-eyed view of the world and all its socially coded machinations, one who cannot be duped. Such a role would, indeed, seem a fool's part; any character that claims such immunity is almost always made to be a comic boob in the end (e.g., Pinchwife). If Manly's plot had stood entirely on its own, sans Freeman, that would probably be the result. In fact, in such a World of extremes, *no* character would—or could—come away unscathed—the play would become a farce. A Freeman-solo plot would have been a simple trickster tale.

But when the two are brought together, it is impossible to ignore the reflections each has upon the other.

Our sympathies are meant to lie with Manly from the beginning, as we have seen in the discussion of Manly's character. But he is not directly representative of the audience demographic. Yes, he does show that he can perceive "correctly" the motivations behind others' social deceptions, but in his volatile temper and his passionate disavowal of "the World," Manly deliberately marks himself as outsider, unwilling to take part in customary social signification. The Restoration theatre scene was also very much a scene of intricately-coded social interaction, so while an audience might have felt some admiration for the fierce convictions of honor and justice behind Manly's outrageous words and deeds, it is unlikely that one would find any real-life "Manlys" among them. Freeman, on the other hand, is calm and rational at all times, genial, never showing an excess of emotion. He is not obsessional, even in his pursuit of the Widow. Vance gives an excellent description of the "correctness" of Freeman's behavior:

It is what Freeman stands for that is ideal in Wycherley—the acceptance of what is inevitable, an accommodation with the truths of human behavior and motivation, which allow for faithfulness and sincerity. The most compelling irony in *The Plain Dealer* is perhaps that in resisting the heroic individualism important to Manly, Freeman is so very unique among Wycherley's male characters by being so very fit for the world.
(174)

Freeman provides a model reflection of *The Plain Dealer*'s audience. Freeman is the typical rake-hero: he is lighthearted; clever; witty; a master of language; a master of the social realm; he cozens those who deserve to be cozened; he is faithful to those who deserve fidelity. He does have a kind of moral code, but it is a practical morality—he knows "the World" and does not fight against it, but rather works within it. He is never out of humor in this play; we never see him fierce or snarling (as Manly), nor wickedly

devious and manipulative (as Olivia or the Widow), nor blindly loyal and subservient (as Fidelia), nor obsequious and drooling praises (as Plausible), nor foppish and obsessively fashionable (as Novel). True, he does contain many of these parts, and he does show aspects of them all in his subplot scenes of the play, but he is always in control of his actions. He is not bound to one uncompromising philosophy, as is Manly, but rather accepts all as they are and as they will be used. The Widow can satisfy his debts, and she has no honor—therefore, he is free to manipulate her for his own gain. The courtly gentlemen of Whitehall are all playing the same game of manipulation, so why not join in and take what is offered? Manly is fiercely honest and steadfast, so Freeman chooses to show him true friendship. Freeman is a perfect blend of indulgence and restraint, hypocrisy and loyalty, flattery and plain dealing—he is moderation defined. Though the story is Manly's, it is from Freeman's cooler, more objective standpoint that Restoration viewers almost certainly considered it—initially, that is. Manly's cynical idealism may be commendable, but he is at an extreme, and, as Righter points out, “[excess] was still in 1676 too great a sin in Restoration comedy to escape without castigation” (83). And Manly certainly does not escape ridicule. His one true love is shown to be a “Mercenary Whore” and his supposedly flawless judgment is shown to be inherently flawed, all in the second act.

Manly's confession in Act III, however, effectively “pins” us to his character and denies us easy judgment of his future actions. Juxtaposed with this sudden complication of Manly's plot, Freeman's activities with the Widow seem almost effortless. Freeman never undergoes a moment of revelation because he does not need to—his moderation and mutability in the social arena allow him to “escape” such ideological crises. His expectations and standards of conduct are far lower than Manly's, so, since he does not

expect the World to subscribe to a universally accepted code of honor, he is never disappointed when others act in “dishonorable” ways. His scenes are marked by the rake’s typical cool rationality, and we feel assured that this type of character will eventually succeed in scheming the Widow out of a share of her fortune. We never question Freeman’s motives or his skill. Even his morality, though impure, is acceptable to us due to its practicality. If he could not succeed with the Widow, we can be fairly certain that he would abandon the plan and seek some other form of debt relief and monetary security. He is so adaptable to changes of fortune that we do not concern ourselves with his fate. Freeman is capable of having a truly objective view on the world because, unlike Manly, or the Widow, or Olivia, or any of the other characters, he has no particular obsession or compulsion that warps his judgment. In other words, *Freeman has no desire*. Zizek describes the *objet petit a*, the “object-cause of desire,” as

an object that can be perceived only by a gaze “distorted” by desire, an object that *does not exist* for an “objective” gaze. In other words, this object *a* is always, *by definition*, perceived in a distorted way, because outside this distortion, “in itself,” *it does not exist*, since it is *nothing but* the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of confusion and perturbation introduced by desire into so-called “objective reality.”
(12, italics Zizek)

Desire is a lens through which one views the world, and Freeman has no obsessive desiring lens through which his gaze is distorted. Surplus knowledge ties us to Manly because it has given us a lens through which we may view the rest of his actions, so, in a way, Manly’s desire has become “our” desire. But since the audience is now invested in Manly’s story, that “lens” also affects our view of Freeman. This is not to say that our tie to Manly causes us to adopt his vision of the World, but Manly’s passionate desire *does* make us aware of Freeman’s *lack* of desire.

Both Freeman and Manly are “realistic” characters, but each embodies a different kind of “reality.” Freeman is a reflection of the audience, of the “real” external World, and Manly is a reflection of the “real” *internal* world. In both arena places meaning may be arbitrarily created and destroyed in order to serve a purpose, but since our viewpoint has been “pinned” to Manly’s obsessive viewpoint (his “gaze ‘distorted’ by desire”), not only are *his* words and actions made suspect, but those of Freeman as well—the audience is made to question its own representative on the stage. While Manly’s (speech) acts are now endowed with possible subtextual meaning, in comparison Freeman’s dialogues with the Widow, Oldfox, and Jerry, though humorous, are remarkably shallow. Zimbardo notes this in her dissection of the initial conflict between Freeman, the Widow, and Oldfox: “This satiric language does not admit us into the psychology of its speakers; there *is no* interiority, no internal arena, in these figures....It does not permit us to wonder what the Widow is ‘really like’ or whether the caricatures of Major Oldfox and Freeman are ‘true’” (*At Zero Point* 85). Each character *is* precisely as he or she *speaks*. They may speak with the intention of deception, but these attempts are of no use; since each character has some knowledge of another’s symbolic paradigm, no one can effectively mislead all of the others. Consider, for example, the fact that Freeman’s eventual triumph is achieved not through deceit—everyone knows his motives—but through his discovery of the Widow’s *attempted* deceit. He then traps her into a carefully worded, legally binding agreement, using her own language against her to guarantee his success. Freeman appropriates the Widow’s system of symbolic value and uses it to secure a place for himself within her language-world. When Freeman shows that he has a finer mastery of the Widow’s personal brand of legality, she loses all of her power in that particular contest; in effect, she loses the ability to “speak” herself into a position of opposition.

Such exchanges are “real” in the fact of their externality: things are precisely as they are spoken of. There is no underlying “truth” to be found in these scenes, no subtext to be read. Freeman speaks and acts as he does not to satisfy some internal desire, but rather to fulfill an external need. It is this lack of transforming desire that we find unsettling; though we were initially prepared to witness the events of the play with Freeman-like objectivity, Manly’s confession to us forces us into a subjective position; this position requires us to reconsider the “internal” meaning of not only *his* actions, but also the very *lack* of internal meaning in Freeman’s actions. As practical and successful as he is, in contrast to Manly’s desire-driven obsession, Freeman comes off as somewhat cold and strangely distant.

The audience is faced, then, with two viable protagonists. Manly is anything but the “typical” libertine. He is exciting, fiercely dedicated to a personal code of honor, and clearly able to see through common societal facades. But though his assessment of societal shams and manipulations is for the most part “correct,” it is impossible to fully condone his flagrant violation of social codes. His refusal to “play the game” not only alienates him from the play’s “World,” but also denies him the audience’s complete approval. Freeman, on the other hand, is the archetypal rake-hero. He is the “control” in this play: it is against his moderation that all others are judged. But the subjective turn caused by Manly’s confession causes us to recognize Freeman’s superficiality, a lack of desire that makes his “standard” suspect. In the center of the play there is a bifurcation of audience perspective—given this complication of our judgment, how are we to read the conclusion of *The Plain Dealer*?

ACT V: MANLY'S ALTERATION

In *The Plain Dealer*'s rather hasty final scene, Manly is rewarded not only with the public discovery of Olivia and Vernish's treachery, but also with the love and friendship of Fidelia and Freeman. For the play's most complex character to have such a sudden (and seemingly complete) reversal of opinion is jarring to say the least. Is this ending justified (i.e., is there a definite purpose or "moral" behind it), or has Wycherley simply given undue recompense to a character he too much admired? This question has been the subject of a great deal of debate among Wycherley scholars, and there are as many different readings as there are readers. Among those in the latter camp, there are several who call this supposed resolution a "wish fulfillment," though opinions differ widely on the nature and success of this presentation. Rogers feels that the play suffers from "a blurring of artistic purpose"; Wycherley began by satirizing society's excesses, but "came to see some right in Manly's protests" and rescued his main character from his rightful judgment with a patently unrealistic conclusion (158, 159). Canfield offers an ideological approach, claiming that Manly's "witty dominance...over the fools and fops of the play," his defeat of Olivia (and Freeman's defeat of the Widow), is an attempt to reassert aristocratic masculine authority over the play's "uppity women"—to promote "the reestablishment of the establishment" (136-137). Markley, however, in *Two Edg'd Weapons* puts forth a very interesting interpretation of Wycherley's "wish-fulfillment," one that is particularly relevant to our purpose here. In *The Plain Dealer*, Wycherley launches an attack on "the corruption of wit" in order to highlight the "moral and ideological corruption" of Restoration society (187). Markley rightly points out that Wycherley indicates in his Prologue that the play's conclusion will be an "escapist

fantasy” (“And where else, but on Stages, do we see / Truth pleasing; or rewarded Honesty? / Which our bold Poet does this day in me” 46-48), but this fantasy, according to Markley, is “played as part wish-fulfillment, part joke” (193). Manly clearly does not deserve his reward, and it is equally clear that his reception of Freeman and Fidelia’s friendship has not changed his cynical outlook. Wycherley’s true intention, says Markley, was to reveal the irony of being able to identify the vices of society while having to subscribe to those same vices in order to function within it: “...the man of wit cannot wall himself off from the vices of his age; it destroys the myth of dispassionate observation that had, for half a century, been taken as a sign of good breeding” (194).

There is much that I agree with in Markley’s reading, but I feel Wycherley’s aim was a bit more optimistic than Markley suggests. I believe he does present two halves of the libertine, as Richard Braverman proposes, though not in the patriarchal guises he describes (154-155). Rather, Wycherley depicts both the impassioned misanthrope and the affable complier in a World of vice and hypocrisy and allows his audience to connect with both on different levels. Each has his virtues and vices which are made apparent through the juxtaposition of their plots and the audience’s perceptions, but both are eventually rewarded somewhat equally, and in the end they are brought together in a strengthened bond of trust and friendship. It is, of course, Manly who is the more affected, but he is not entirely reformed. Though his obsession has been tempered by the realization of his ideal mate in Fidelia and the recognition of Freeman’s loyalty, he still mistrusts the World and its manipulations. In this final scene, I suggest that Wycherley does not reform Manly so much as he *alters his perception*—and the audience’s—by at once validating Manly’s idealism and invalidating his obsession. Such alterations both remove Manly’s social “threat” and provide a more practical corrective possibility in

Manly's future character: the man of honor who is able to communicate effectively through societal codes—the socially adept plain dealer.

MANLY AS SOCIAL “THREAT”

We are meant to like Manly, both because of and in spite of his refusal to follow prescribed social codes. He dares to break the rules and speak his mind freely; he strips back the veil of pretense and exposes fools, fops, and frauds for what they are. But to maintain such a position is almost entirely unthinkable. He is able to see and understand others' societal deceptions, but this is *all* he is able to see. His denouncement of the World's corruption is entirely unhelpful. Though there is pleasure to be had in exposing others' deceptions, it ultimately fails as a means of correction. Though everyone else is as deluded as Manly, Manly's delusion is special in that he attempts to *correct* others' behavior, and in so doing, he threatens the stability of the social “illusion.”

States Zizek:

The fundamental pact uniting the actors of the social game is thus that the *Other must not know all*. This nonknowledge of the Other opens up a certain distance that, so to speak, gives us breathing space, i.e., that allows us to confer upon our actions a supplementary meaning beyond the one that is socially acknowledged. For this very reason, the social game (the rules of etiquette, etc.), in the very stupidity of its ritual, is never simply superficial. We can indulge in our secret wars only as long as the Other does not take cognizance of them, for at the moment the Other can no longer ignore them, the social bond dissolves itself. (72-73)

We have already discussed in the previous sections the concept of “surplus knowledge” and the breakdown of the symbolic universe that comes from “knowing too much.” In this World, language constructs reality, and though the superficiality of the social order is in fact its only substance, its function is based upon a universal “agreement” not to directly call it into question, but to believe instead—at least on some unconscious level—

in an “innocent third” (the “Other” Zizek speaks of) whose ignorance allows us to give our meaningless social customs some kind of additional significance, to fill in the void of the Real. Manly’s attempts to bring to light the truth behind others’ social deceptions are essentially attempts to name that which must not be named—an act which, if truly successful, would cause the intersubjective symbolic network to shatter. Such fracturing could never occur, however, since Manly deliberately speaks outside of the accepted social codes (in order to redefine his own position as Other). By and large, his attacks are either misunderstood or simply ignored. And, since all other characters use language to define their own positions in the social network, Manly’s savagery may in fact cause other characters to retreat more deeply into their own language-worlds in order to reaffirm their identities against Manly’s example. His unforgiving bluntness and fearless demands for the ideal may be attractive on the stage, where the audience is “protected” by its relatively objective position, but in “reality” it is entirely impractical.

Manly’s desire for control, for ultimate certainty in social relations, is of course impossible to satisfy, but there is merit in the ideology he uses to cloak this desire: honor, truth, and justice. The paradox here is that in order to effect any kind of change toward these ideals, personal or social, Manly must be able to communicate on some level within prescribed social codes—he must be at least somewhat “socialized.” Manly has only two options at the end of *The Plain Dealer*: he must either be removed wholly from the play-society (be it self-imposed, as Alceste in Molière’s *Misanthrope*, or ostracized as a figure of contempt) or he must be made to recognize and respect (even grudgingly) certain forms of socially acceptable communication. Katherine Rogers makes this point in her essay “Fatal Inconsistency: William Wycherley and *The Plain Dealer*”: “In that society the worldly wise inevitably overcame the unworldly, virtuous or not; and love at best was

enlightened self-interest. A person like Manly, unable to tolerate moral shabbiness of any sort—pretense, flattery, or self-seeking—would have to withdraw from society” (155). Given our relationship with Manly thus far, we don’t necessarily wish his banishment, nor do we necessarily wish to see him made a fool. But his “plain-dealing” ways do need modification.

RAILLERY VERSUS SAVAGERY

The Horatian motto of the play, “Ridicule commonly decides great matters more forcibly and better than severity,” reveals Wycherley’s intentions for some kind of social redress in *The Plain Dealer*. C.D. Cecil and John Haywood offer two particularly illuminating studies on use of raillery in the Restoration that help explain how Manly’s provocative confrontations ultimately fail in “deciding great matters.” Both authors note that the courtesy literature of the period was preoccupied with the concept of raillery and its most appropriate uses in polite conversation. Cecil explains that the wit and clarity of the *honnête homme*’s extemporaneous expressions were, of course, symbols of his sophistication and intelligence, but this display also serves to try others’ abilities to engage in raillery (148). Such displays might be used to correct others’ behavior, but only within the confines of the polite social performance: “Raillery may be directed against all who endanger society by breaking the golden rule of moderation; it may help turn conversation away from the disconcerting motives of behavior toward the less agitating and more engaging subject of their manifestations...” (149). Haywood goes a bit further in his discussion, presenting three different “modes” of raillery: it could be a delicate jest or subtle comment that invited another to a jovial battle of wit (108-109); gentle mockery of another’s foibles in a compliment could remove impressions of

sycophancy or empty flattery, thus making the praise more authentic (110-111); and finally, raillery could be used as an expression of “genuine contempt or distaste,” but this was usually reserved for fools and fops blinded by their own vanity, and even in this mode such comments should be made “in a subtle and indirect manner so that the surface of genial society would not be disturbed” (111). Both Cecil and Haywood agree, however, that while raillery might have been ostensibly intended for societal correction, its use in the Restoration was more a matter of “promoting ‘affability’” and “avoiding open disagreement” which could destroy the social illusion (Haywood 109, 112).

It is easy to see, then, how Manly’s assaults throughout the play violate these “rules” of social behavior, because it arises out of an objection to these very rules. But Sandra Sherman, in her article “Manly, Manliness, and Friendship in *The Plain Dealer*,” suggests that Manly’s all-or-nothing approach to homosocial relationships actually arises from the standards of another kind of courtesy literature: “[Manly’s] views are a zealous adaptation of contemporary guides addressed to ‘gentlemen’” (20). While books such as *The Art of Complaisance* (published in 1673) endorsed social ease and the maintenance of at least a surface conviviality, others such as Clement Ellis’ *The Gentile Sinner* (1668) and Edward Waterhous’ *The Gentlemen Monitor* (1665) required that a true gentleman eschew all forms of social pretense. True friendship, therefore, could only occur between two men of honor who were entirely transparent to each other. This is an impossibility, of course, which these books perhaps unintentionally demonstrated with their numerous warnings against others’ dissemblance and potential fraud (22-23). As we have observed throughout this analysis, the subjective nature of signification prohibits any completely “objective” dialogue; the stability of our symbolic universe(s) *relies* upon that “certain misrecognition.” Manly clearly follows the counsel of these works, however, and refuses

to admit any but ideal companions into his confidence. But this ideal, though modeled upon universal concepts of honor, could only be completely fulfilled in reflections of *himself*. As Sherman points out, “Too full of *amour propre* to make connections, he pursues eccentric attachments to clones of himself” (25). This is why Olivia and Vernish are able to deceive him so thoroughly. Olivia, in her oft-quoted line, makes this clear: “I knew he lov’d his own singular moroseness so well, as to dote upon any Copy of it; wherefore I feigned an hatred to the World too, that he might love me in earnest” (IV.ii.254-257). Manly’s philosophy, then, though honorable, is fatally flawed. His obsessive nature will not allow for any deviation from his requirements for interpersonal relationships, but these requirements are simply impossible to fulfill. Societal relations *require* at least some degree of performance, but Manly demands that there be no performance whatsoever. His rejection of the self-serving excesses of politesse is an opposing form of excess as he refuses to moderate his views. *All* forms of “Ceremony” and sociability must conceal some selfish ulterior motive.

In *The Plain Dealer*, Wycherley has presented two extremes: the egotistical raillery that paradoxically serves to conceal its own meaninglessness, and the savage commentary that, for all its wit and truth, is equally meaningless in its inefficacy. Throughout the play, we have seen Manly’s breakdown, the fracturing of his personal ideology, but though the rigorousness of his principles has been questioned, those basic principles (honor, truth, and justice) have *not* been destroyed. Wycherley might believe that Manly’s rage is indeed justified—even deserved in most cases—but not at the expense of meaningful communication and correction. Manly’s expressions of contempt must be scaled back to a more acceptable degree—ridicule rather than severity.

His response to the discovery of Vernish's betrayal is significant, then, because it shows a lighter touch for Manly, a more moderate response to duplicity. Whereas his response to Olivia's deception was full of invectives, his response to Vernish is far less passionate, marked by a recognition of Vernish's disgrace before the assembled company:

But 'tis, my Friend, in your consideration most, that I wou'd have return'd part of your Wives portion; for 'twere hard to take all from thee, since thou hast paid so dear for't, in being such a Rascal; yet thy Wife is a Fortune without a Portion; and thou art a man of that extraordinary merit in Vilany, the World and Fortune can never desert thee, tho' I do; therefore be not melancholy. Fare you well, Sir. (V.iii.169-177)

Vernish's dishonor has been properly punished since it was encoded within Olivia's humiliation, which instantly satisfies any desire for revenge that might have arisen otherwise in Manly. But here also we see shades of Manly recognition of a justice *outside* of his own. Indeed, Vernish has "paid dear" for his wickedness, and Manly had no active part in his discovery. Manly recognizes that Vernish's treacherous nature will serve as its own reproach. He does call Vernish a "Rascal" and a villain, but these insults are placed within a "softer" context—mock-sympathy for Vernish's shameful position. Though it still retains a very pointed commentary on Vernish's deceitfulness, this response cannot be called "severity." Nor does it come under the strict definitions of "raillery" as illustrated above. Instead, this takes a somewhat moderate position between the two extremes, a more *corrective* position.

MANLY'S DISCOVERY AND ACCEPTANCE OF FIDELIA

In his discovery of Fidelity's true identity, Manly is shown multiple exceptions to his uncompromising philosophy, which serves to further invalidate Manly's belief in his

own infallibility. Though he struggles to repay her for her love, her gentle replies frustrate all three of his attempts. Of all characters other than Olivia and Vernish, Fidelia has deceived Manly the most; however, the *circumstances* of her deception cleanse her of any wrongdoing. In fact, her deception was *necessary*, not only to Manly's eventual success over Olivia, but simply in order to fulfill his requirements for companionship. And she is a true and loyal companion, willing to remain steadfast despite his "rough, hard, and ill usage" of her (V.iii.137-138). She has proven herself several times in his service, against her own safety and interest. Manly's realization of the sacrifices she performed out of love for him causes him to confess his regret in a speech wrought with shame. He repents of his own cruelty to her, and then offers his heart to receive her justified vengeance: "and if my heart...were not a Sacrifice to prophane your love, and a greater wrong to you than ever I yet did you; I wou'd beg of you to receive it, tho' you us'd it, as she had done; for tho' it deserv'd not from her the treatment she gave it, it does from you" (140-146). Manly becomes fully conscious of the wrongs he has committed with his misperception—not only did he bring shame upon himself in being deceived by Olivia and Vernish, but also in his blindness to and abuse of Fidelia's loyalty. No longer can he hold himself above reproach. Instead, he finally holds himself to his own standards and awaits punishment. But Fidelia breaks Manly's code of justice and shows him undeserved mercy, forgiveness, and understanding.

Manly demonstrates that he is not entirely changed, however, when he then offers the cabinet of jewels to Fidelia after her expression of absolution. This act is, of course, directly paralleled with Manly's "bribery" of Olivia before he left for the Dutch Wars. This, too, is a kind of bribery, but within a different framework. Here, Manly does not question the integrity of his ideal so much as he fears his unworthiness in attaining that

ideal. Since Fidelia has forgiven him his maltreatment of her, he must make recompense in some way, so he buttresses the “prophane” gift of his heart with a more tangible gift of wealth. Again, Manly uses money as a means of control. He then states that the meager “Present” he offers her is not worthy of her, for she “deserve[s] the *Indian* World; and I wou’d now go thither, out of covetousness for your sake only” (V.iii.181-184). But Fidelia then takes Manly aside and reveals that she is in possession of an annuity of two thousand pounds, so she has no need of his fortune. Again, she not only proves her loyalty, but also denies Manly an avenue by which he might regain a position of authority. This reply also refuses Manly the opportunity of gaining an upper hand even with a declaration of his own sacrifice, and Manly states as much:

Nay, now, Madam, you have taken from me all power of making you any Complement on my part; for I was going to tell you, that for your sake onely, I wou’d quit the unknown pleasure of a retirement; and rather stay in this ill World of ours, tho’ odious to me, than give you more frights again at Sea, and make again too great a venture there, in you alone.
(V.iii.201-209)

The context of her confession has stolen all the earnestness from his announcement, and now it could appear “’tis your Estate that has made me Friends with the World” (212-213). Given what we have seen of Manly’s character and his “starving Honour” (IV.ii.106-107), not to mention the fact that he has just offered to deliver to Fidelia the entirety of his fortune, such a judgment is of course ridiculous. But Manly is refused the opportunity of *proving* it—he can produce no material evidence of his sincerity, so he must trust in another’s belief in him.

In receiving Fidelia’s love and loyalty, Manly’s belief in an ideal is validated while the narrowness of his perception and his need for control are invalidated. Manly and Fidelia’s relationship up to this point in the play has been based upon an outward

deception—a direct violation of perhaps his most sacred rule of companionship. But this necessary deception served only to prove the truth of her devotion. Manly treated her quite cruelly, believing her to be simply an effeminate sycophant; put in its true light, however, Manly realizes that his judgments were entirely skewed. Also, since Fidelia is in possession of her own fortune that surpasses his own, and since she makes no demands of him (other than a rather timid request that he keep his promise never to part with her, V.iii.149-152), there is no way to “repay” her selfless generosity. If he is to attain that ideal, he must relinquish control and allow himself to become subject to another. In effect, the truth of Fidelia’s love breaks Manly’s obsession by simultaneously fulfilling and denying his idealism.

MANLY’S “DISCOVERY” AND ACCEPTANCE OF FREEMAN

In acknowledging his wrongs toward Fidelia, Manly comes to realize that he was similarly blind to Freeman’s loyalty: the self-professed “plain dealers” turned out to be consummate fakes, and the self-professed hypocrite turned out to be a steadfast ally. With Freeman as with Fidelia, Manly’s conception of “intrisick worth” has turned out to be based upon his own uncompromising categorization of outward signs and symbols, a system that is obviously flawed. In accepting Freeman as a friend, Manly must accept that Freeman’s hypocrisy in the larger social realm does not preclude him from “plain dealing” on an individual level. Freeman’s willingness to admit his intended gibe that Manly was won to the World with Fidelia’s wealth gives even more evidence of this: “I must confess I shou’d [say that]; for I think most of our quarrels to the World, are just such as we have to a handsom Woman: only because we cannot enjoy her, as we wou’d do” (V.iii.214-217). Manly’s “quarrels to the World” do not arise from avarice, but from

a fear of losing control. In order to receive its benefits, however, he must hand over that control and admit his weaknesses—and in admitting his own, he must tolerate the shortcomings of others.

But it must be noted that this newfound tolerance of Freeman's hypocrisy does *not* equate to an acceptance of *all* social hypocrisy! Manly's final lines reveal that though he has accepted that his previous assessments of true honor and loyalty were unsound, his larger suspicion of society still remains:

I will believe, there are now in the World
Good-natur'd Friends, who are not Prostitutes,
And handsom Women worthy to be friends:
Yet, for my sake, let no one e're confide
In Tears, or Oaths, in Love, or Friend untry'd. (V.iii.225-226)

For Peter Holland, the seeming reversal of phrases in the second and third lines are an example of Manly's confused language, a sign that he "has not been incorporated into society. Language is still an imprecise, uncontrollable tool which blurs what aims to define" (202). But is this not the point? Manly's obsessive attempts to control absolutely the definition of words and concepts have caused the loss of his fortune, his humiliation at the hands of two mercenary villains, his abuse of his two most trustworthy companions, and his descent into hypocrisy. These lines indicate a new, more structured flexibility in Manly's terminology: though Freeman *has* prostituted himself in his pursuit of the Widow, his dedication to Manly has provided him with no personal reward or gain; and whereas Manly's love for Olivia was based upon the mere appearance of honor, Fidelity's disguised service has proven her worthy of both his platonic and romantic love.

The discovery of Olivia's disloyalty caused the first major break in Manly's use of language, a break that he attempted to repair with frantic self-deception. The discovery of Fidelity and Freeman's constancy, however, has simultaneously repaired that

previous break and caused another. Manly can no longer deceive himself; he cannot keep both his old obsessive strictures *and* the newfound embodiments of his ideals. His desire for honor, truth, and justice remains, but he must accept that his attempts to control language and definition (to maintain his position as Other) is ultimately the source of his weakness. Paradoxically, he must relinquish that need for control in order to better perceive both deception and true honor. But though he is willing to hand over that power to Freeman and Fidelia, this does not mean that he is willing to trust the World at large—they have only opened up the *possibility* of Manly's future trust in others. His altered perceptions will require that he develop new methods of "trying" potential companions: a more controlled form of speech, and a more judicious approach toward individuals rather than society as a whole. Manly's discovery and "reward" of Fidelia's and Freeman's love and friendship at the end are necessary to reintegrate him into society, to allow him to become someone who can understand and communicate effectively with others. Both Freeman and Fidelia will help eliminate Manly's threats to the social order, but, as evidenced by his final lines, his acceptance of their love has *not* negated his personality.

CONCLUSION

Freeman is, as Vance claims, "very fit for the world," but Manly represents the ideal of honesty. Perhaps Manly's success and reward at the end of the play *is* Wycherley's "wish fulfillment," as many critics claim. But it is not as absurd or unrealistic as many believe. It is significant that Wycherley did not destroy utterly Manly's worldview or banish him from "the World." Manly's character is too complex for either complete damnation *or* complete success. Though at first we observe Manly from a relatively objective platform, perhaps admiring him but withholding total

approval, Wycherley's manipulation of perspective extends beyond the stage to implicate us in Manly's third-act confession. Running parallel to this are the actions of a truly objective character, Freeman, the audience's supposed reflection. But our connection with Manly warps our view of Freeman's character, and while we may enjoy the comedy of this subplot, his lack of passion—his seeming lack of *desire*—makes us aware of the disturbing superficiality of his exploits with the Widow. Since Wycherley has refused to allow the audience a completely objective position, "a safe haven from which to pass judgement" (Markley 191), both characters' strengths and weaknesses come to light. Manly's worldview is unreasonable in that it is at an extreme—his cynicism (and idealism) is not moderated by even a reluctant resignation to the ways of the World. Freeman is an example of perfect moderation, but his complete acceptance of the World's surface nature makes him incapable of effecting any kind of change—except within Manly. Manly rails at the World in order to make the World more aware of itself, but since he speaks from outside commonly accepted social codes, he can make no progress. Though his aspirations are noble, he cannot effectively communicate them, so they are useless. Our dual perspective on these characters allows us to appreciate their symbolic union at the end: honor tempered with practicality.

Vance, noting Manly's final expression of uncertainty, remarks, "Perhaps at best we have witnessed only a movement from cynicism (if not nihilism) to a healthier skepticism" (173). Manly will never become Freeman, nor would we (nor did Wycherley, I believe) want him to. Manly's greatest sin is not his cynicism, his idealism, nor even his narcissism, but rather his generally extreme nature. In giving Manly Fidelia, Wycherley is at once providing a pure reinforcement for Manly's idealism and completing the circuit between the play's two unrepentant idealists. Their union

“removes” them both from romantic social interactions, thus ending the threat toward that level of the social network. In making Manly recognize Freeman’s friendship, he is encouraging Manly’s tolerance—though not necessarily his acceptance—of various social displays. Manly may now learn from Freeman how to speak and act through appropriate social codes, thus ending the threat to the stability of the social network. Neither of these figures will negate Manly’s ultimate personality, but they will provide him with moderation, which will allow him to interact more meaningfully with society, and will give him a better opportunity to express his disapproval not through severity, but through ridicule. In this “healthier skepticism,” we see the glimmer of a new ideal: the “practical” cynic-idealist—the socially acceptable plain dealer.

When the curtain falls, however, must face again the implicit question proposed in the Prologue: do we think Manly a fool? In Wycherley’s most fascinating and intricate work, the answer cannot be made lightly, for it involves not merely our reflections on the characters or the plot; it requires reflection upon ourselves. This is perhaps the best “lesson” we can take away from *The Plain Dealer*: though we may wish to adopt a purely objective stance, such a position is impossible to maintain. We are all imperfect creatures, and from our subjective seats in an imperfect [W]orld, the answers are never easy.

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