

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

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ABSTRACT

In his final dramatic work, William Wycherley eschews the typical standards of Restoration comedy in order to provide his audience with more than just a few good laughs and a reassuring message of social superiority. Instead of presenting the light and witty activities of another Horner or Dorimant, he presents viewers with a study of obsession, desire, and the flaws inherent in current systems of social communication, and society as a whole.

Using elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis in a critique of character composition, sociolinguistic systems, and dramatic structure, this examination shows how, through delicate manipulation of character and audience perception, Wycherley succeeds in portraying the void of meaning beneath commonly accepted social practices, and offers his audience a new ideal in his (partially) reformed Manly: justice tempered with understanding, idealism moderated by tolerance. One of the most intricate and fascinating plays of the Restoration, *The Plain Dealer* refuses to allow its audience to reside comfortably in an objective position, “above” the events of the stage. Rather Wycherley draws his viewers further and further into this “drama of madness,” forcing us to confront ourselves not only on the theatre stage, but also in the drama of our everyday lives.