

Calderón's and Wycherley's Dancing-masters

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ABSTRACT: Wycherley's second comedy, *The Gentleman Dancing-Master*, is loosely based upon the central plot of Pedro Calderón's *El maestro de danzar*, which is adapted to produce a comedy of wit in line with the theatrical fashions of the 1670s. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Wycherley's use of his source and to identify the procedures he exploited in his adaptation, simplifying the plot, redefining the central characters, and introducing a cynical view of marriage.

KEYWORDS: adaptation, comparative literature, Restoration theatre, Spanish *comedia*, Wycherley, *The Gentleman Dancing-Master*, Calderón, *El maestro de danzar*.

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This essay analyses the connection between Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing-Master*, premiered in late December 1671, and *El maestro de danzar* by Spanish playwright Calderón de la Barca written around 1650.¹ Wycherley's source was identified as early as 1888 by Ward, who observed that the coincidences between both plays consisted in "few incidents, and in the name of Don Diego [the father figure]" (128). However, he did not attempt to explain how Wycherley gained knowledge of Calderón's work, why he used it as a source of inspiration and how he adapted it for the Restoration audience. Some of these questions were addressed by Loftis (1973, 121-30), who stated that "*The Gentleman Dancing-Master* is a parody of the Spanish plots – of their intrigues originating in the close confinement of young women, of their

¹ Van Lennep lists the first recorded performance of *The Gentleman* on February 6, 1672, but notes that the prologue alludes to the company's recent move to their new playhouse at Dorset Garden in December, 1671 (1965, 182). As for *El maestro*, the earliest registered performance is May 26, 1675, by Antonio Escaramilla's private company at the Alcazar of Madrid. However, metrical evidence indicates a date of composition c. 1650 (Hilborn 1938, 57-58).

code of honor, of at least one of their character types, the suspicious father” (125-26). I would like to expand on this idea, examining the changes Wycherley introduces in action, characters and themes, in order to move away from the conventions of the Spanish plots and create a Restoration comedy of wit.

Loftis could only suppose that the playwright must have been the Mr. Wycherley who accompanied Sir Richard Fanshawe in his embassy to Spain from February 1664 until March 1665, and that it was thus that he became acquainted with the *comedia del Siglo de Oro*. However, Thomas’s discovery in 1998 of a letter addressed by a member of the ambassador’s staff to the dramatist’s father has provided positive evidence of Wycherley’s presence in the ambassadorial party. Sir Richard was very fond of Spanish theatre, as his translation of Hurtado de Mendoza’s *Querer por solo querer* shows, and the retinue was entertained during the journey from Cádiz to Madrid with various theatrical representations (Bennett, 2004).² Once in the capital they doubtlessly had plenty of opportunities to attend a Calderón production, for instance the performances arranged for the festivity of Corpus Christi, which were two *autos sacramentales* by Calderón (Pérez 1905, 302). Moreover, Calderón’s *Tercera parte de comedias*, which included not only *El maestro de danzar*, but also *Mañanas de abril y mayo* (the source for *Love in a Wood*, Wycherley’s first comedy) was issued precisely in late August 1664. The choice of the motif of the dancing master and the close resemblance between central episodes in the plot of *The Gentleman* and Calderón’s *El maestro* indicate that Wycherley must have had first-hand contact with the source text, especially since there were no translations of Calderón’s play available into English or French.

In drawing on Calderón’s plays, Wycherley joined the group of Restoration playwrights (such as Samuel Tuke, George Digby, Thomas Sydeserfe, or John Dryden) who borrowed plots and characters from contemporary Spanish drama, adapting them to the taste of the English audience. Although this tendency went back to the sixteenth century (for instance, Thomas Kyd’s celebrated *The Spanish Tragedy*), it increased substantially during the 1660s and 1670s, partly owing to the playwrights’ eagerness to indulge the new monarch’s theatrical preferences and thus earn themselves a place in the monopolised London scene. Charles II had acquired a taste for Spanish literature in exile, since he had been in France when the Spanish influence in drama was at its peak, and in the Netherlands during the Spanish rule (Braga 2010, 109). Wycherley hence tried to gain both the public’s applause and royal favour, adapting works by the best-known Spanish playwright in England.

²In her memoirs, the ambassador’s spouse supplies further details about the amusements they were offered during their stay in Sevilla, Córdoba and Toledo, which included shows upon the river, plays, music and *juego de toros* (Fanshawe 1907, 139-43).

Wycherley's choice of *El maestro* can be explained due to the interest of the central character, a gentleman who pretends to be a dancing-master. On the orders of her overprotective father, Hippolita has spent a year under the custody of her aunt, Mrs. Caution, who has forbidden her all entertainment. Once the arranged marriage to her foolish cousin is imminent, Hippolita tricks him into bringing to the house Mr. Gerrard, "the fine Gentleman they talk of so much in Town" (I.i p.4). When her father and Caution surprise them, Hippolita passes Gerrard off as her dancing instructor. This resort to disguise and false identity opens up a series of dramatic possibilities which would certainly appeal to the audience. Indeed, it introduces complications which postpone the resolution of the intrigue, and hence pique the interest of spectators, who also experience a certain satisfaction in having more information than other characters. In addition, the figure of the dancing master granted Wycherley the opportunity to include both erotic and hilarious dancing scenes. The false dancing lessons are the most salient feature connecting both plays. However, neither the relevance of these scenes, nor the significance of the differences between one author and the other have been pointed out.

Wycherley's debt to Calderón is clear in the development of the plot, as three crucial incidents in *The Gentleman* are clearly inspired by *El maestro*. In the first one, which boosts the intrigue, Hippolita asks Gerrard to impersonate a dancing-master. Later on, when Gerrard has just aroused don Diego's suspicions by admitting that he cannot play the fiddle, she urges him to break one of the strings, thus delaying the anagnorisis. A third episode borrowed is the one in which Diego asks Gerrard to bring the next day a group of musicians for Hippolita's wedding. This contributes to the denouement, for Hippolita whispers Gerrard to bring instead some well armed friends, who will be decisive to help them accomplish their own purposes.

Despite the similarities in plot, the function and tone of the pretended dancing lessons differ to a large extent from those in Calderón's work. Wycherley's are filled with sexual innuendo and create a series of anticipations and expectations in the audience, which are, for the most part, frustrated. This is because these scenes also fulfill a comic function, as Caution unsuccessfully strives to prevent the lessons and warn Diego that Gerrard is a deceiver. Both the erotic and comic aspects are illustrated in the succeeding dialogue:

Ger. Come forward, Madam, three steps agen.

Caut. See, see, she squeezes his hand now, O the debauch'd Harletry!

Don. So, so, mind her not, she moves forward pretty well; but you must move as well backward as forward, or you'll never do any thing to purpose.

Caut. Do you know what you say, Brother, your self? now are you at your beastliness before your young Daughter? (III.i p.50)

On the contrary, in *El maestro*, the dancing lessons delay the resolution, given that they are conceived as scenes of confrontation between the young protagonists. Unable to bear being apart from doña Leonor, the lady he was courting in Madrid, don Enrique follows her to Valencia, where her father, don Diego, has moved after his return from las Indias. When Diego interrupts the couple's furtive interview, Leonor contrives to introduce Enrique as her dancing-master, thus inventing an excuse to meet him until they come up with a solution. However, Enrique is led to believe by a series of incidents that Leonor has other suitors and resorts to dancing double entendres, in order to express his jealousy and to accuse her of fickleness. The following exchange provides an example:

- d. Die.* Què le ha parecido al maestro?
 que el ayre luego se dexa
 conocer.
- d. Enr.* Que sabrà presto
 quanto ay que saber; porque
 a la primer licion veo,
 q ha hecho toda vna mudança.
- Leon.* Engañase, que no he hecho.
- d. Enr.* Yo la he visto executada. (II, p.40)

These differences are a natural consequence of the starting point adopted in each play. Calderón begins with a pair of lovers who are separated by external circumstances and have to face a series of obstacles in order to finally get married. In Wycherley's comedy, however, the protagonists do not know each other at the beginning, and the plot focuses on the process of courting with its own set of difficulties, primarily the need to deceive the elderly blocking figures.

Wycherley also made significant changes in the definition of the central characters: the lady, the gallant, and their two customary antagonists (the severe father and the rival gallant). Wycherley maintains the defining traits of the protagonists, though introducing the necessary features to approximate them to two Restoration types: the wild lady and the rakish hero. The antagonists are subject to wider-scope modifications, for Wycherley not only amplifies their function in the intrigue, but also transforms them into efficacious stock characters, the choleric humour and the fop.

Calderón's *dama*, Leonor, does not exhibit the passive attitude typical of the female protagonist of the *comedia*. She controls and resolves the confusions and conflicts originated by the intrigue, without appealing to an authoritative figure, but resorting to her own means. Leonor's resourcefulness emerges in critical situations in which her honor is jeopardized (for instance, when her father surprises her in the company of an unknown gentleman, or when Enrique questions her constancy). However, in relation

to the initial conflict, the separation from her beloved, it is Enrique who shows a greater determination by following her to Valencia and exposing himself to countless perils. Indeed, other than attractiveness, bravery and gallantry, Enrique's most distinctive quality is his complete devotion to Leonor. For instance, even though he acknowledges his inability to dance, he is determined to pose as a dancing-master in order to see her. In addition, Calderón's male protagonist is defined by his jealousy, which serves a functional role, providing the principal source of confrontation between the lovers, and thus delaying the predictable ending.

Wycherley's heroine unquestionably conforms to the category of wild ladies, for she contributes to the resolution of the conflict in a diligent though unconventional manner. Hippolita revolts against the tyrannical incarceration imposed by her father, and resolves to employ her wit to attain the freedom she longs for. Being aware that this liberty can only be reached through marriage, she is determined to select her husband-to-be, and manipulates her foolish betrothed to help her meet a more likely gallant. Not only does she take the initiative in the courting, but also dominates its entire progress: first tempting Gerrard to elope by alluding to her substantial dowry, then frustrating his expectations, confessing that she wanted to prove him and finally agreeing to marry him. Hippolita's testing of Gerrard has a double purpose. First, to check his advances, for, despite her provocative attitude, she is all-too-well aware that female virtue is an essential condition in any relationship leading to marriage.³ Secondly, to ensure that he is an eligible husband; in John Vance's words, "the kind of husband who would allow more freedom than restriction in marriage" (2000, 75). As Webster has argued, Wycherley uses the figure of the rake to "enact radical reform in marital, familial, and sexual relationships by emphasizing liberty of conscience over repressive moral obligation," yet he also reins in libertine behavior to forestall potential criticism (2005, 68). Indeed, Gerrard will not live up to the dissolute image that the audience had been led to expect from his reputation and, principally, his eagerness to attend a secretive assignation. He is undeniably outwitted by Hippolita, for he erroneously considers her too innocent and ignores her sexual innuendoes. Moreover, he is exposed to ridicule when obliged to perform as a dance instructor. The rakish suitor is hence transformed into a comic and inoffensive character, who is reintegrated in society through marriage.

As for the antagonists, *El maestro* includes three characters which fulfill this role: Leonor's father, Diego, and two rival suitors, Juan and Félix. Diego acts principally as an obstacle for the lovers' encounters, for he is uninformed and unsuspecting of their romance until the final scene, when Enrique's identity is revealed. Diego seeks

³ Hippolita, therefore, illustrates Canfield's interpretation of the Restoration female heroine: "however witty the typical female rebel, she refuses ultimately to engage in sexual promiscuity because she is wise enough to know that her value in English patriarchal society resides in her sexual purity, her ability to guarantee genealogical patrilinearity" (1997, 147).

reparation for his honour, though shortly consents to their marriage, on account of Enrique's noble birth. As for the rivals, even though Félix and Juan provoke Enrique's jealousy and hence interfere in his relationship with Leonor, no direct confrontation takes place between them.

Wycherley, on the contrary, devises two strong antagonists, the father and the rival, who are additionally opposed to each other. This opposition functions as one of the foremost sources of mirth in the play and is even implied in their descriptions in the *dramatis personae*. The rival suitor is: "Mr. Parris or Monsieur De Paris. A vain Coxcomb, and rich City-Heir, newly returned from France, and mightily affected with the French Language and Fashions". The father is called Mr. James Formal or Don Diego, "[a]n old rich Spanish Merchant newly returned home, as much affected with the Habit and Customs of Spain, and Uncle to De Paris". As Loftis has rightly pointed out, both characters embody a judgment on the imitation of foreign manners, and therefore vehicle the satirical content of the comedy (1973, 127). The antagonism is evident in the various scenes in which Diego forces Monsieur to wear the Spanish clothing, as an indication of the power he intends to exert over his future son-in-law. Indeed, Diego has strategically chosen an emasculated suitor for his daughter, as a means to preserve his domination over her and his authority within the family (Velissariou 1995, 117-8). His repressive personality sustains his characterization as a Spaniard and additionally conveys a parodic interpretation of the Spanish plots. Furthermore, they both conform to character-types that had proved successful in the contemporary London scene. Monsieur de Paris exemplifies a Frenchified fop whose paramount precedents were Jonson's Fastidius Brisk in *Every Man out of His Humour* (1599), Howard's Frenchlove in *The English Monsieur* (1663) and Dryden's *Sir Martin Marr-All* (1668). Diego is thoroughly affected by a choleric humour, attempting to be always right and behaving irascibly when being contradicted. The most evident example of his obstinacy occurs at the end of the play, when he pretends that he has always been aware of Hippolita and Gerrard's deception, and grants them her dowry in order to surprise them. This trait magnifies the character's comicality, as his alleged Spanish gravity is contradicted by his childish and ridiculous behavior. Each of these two characters associates Wycherley's work with a separate comic subgenre, the fop-pish comedy and the comedy of humours, which were in vogue since the late 1660s. Indeed, the company producing the play, the Duke's, excelled in both categories and had in their roster two comedians specialising in these roles, James Nokes and Edward Angel, who played respectively Monsieur and Diego.⁴

⁴Although the original cast is not specified in the text, as Genest has rightly pointed out, the following dialogue would be meaningless "unless Nokes had acted the part himself" (1832, 137):

Hipp. Methinks now *Angel* is a very good Fool.

Mons. Nauh, nauh, *Nokes* is a better Fool. (III.i p.39)

Finally, with regards to the thematic variations, it should be mentioned that Wycherley introduces a harsh critique on marriage, which was particularly characteristic of the genre of the comedy of wit in the 1670s. On the contrary, the *comedia* rarely deals with matrimony, which is conceived neither in positive or negative terms, but as the inevitable conclusion of love and courtship. Wycherley's play, despite preserving the final wedding of the protagonists, abounds in satirical remarks on this institution, primarily built on female infidelity, for instance Gerrard's reproach to Hippolita: "Next to the Devil's the Invention of Women, they'll no more want an excuse to cheat a Father with, than an opportunity to abuse a Husband" (IV.i p.75). This constitutes a further major difference with contemporary Spanish comedies, in which jealousy, even if constantly portrayed as the outward sign of love, is necessarily excluded from marital relations, given the conservative nature of the genre. Nevertheless, after her reconciliation with Gerrard, Hippolita expresses a position on jealousy analogous to the conventional Spanish conception: "I differ from you in the point, for a Husbands jealousy, which cunning men wou'd pass upon their Wives for a Compliment, is the worst can be made 'em, for indeed it is a Compliment to their Beauty, but an affront to their Honour" (IV.i p.83). Her strong stand against jealousy stems from her primary motivation for marrying which, as explained above, is not love, but her desire for independence.

In conclusion, in *The Gentleman Dancing-Master*, Wycherley borrows inventively from Calderón's *El maestro de danzar*, a play he chose most likely for the dramatic possibilities of the fake dancing lessons both as sensuous and comic scenes. Wycherley's freedom in reworking his source is reinforced by the pronounced differences between the Spanish and English theatrical conventions, mainly in connection to stock-characters and ideology. He delineates the protagonists as two Restoration types – the rake and the wild lady – and redefines the antagonists to suit the talents of the chief comedians in the Duke's company. He also presents a cynical view of marriage alien to the *comedia*, but much in line with the libertine ideals emanating from the court of Charles II. Therefore, Wycherley surpasses his contemporaries in rewriting a *comedia* by abandoning the pattern and the values of the Spanish plot and creating instead a comedy of wit.⁵

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