

**Pastoralism and Restoration comedy:  
The Example of William Wycherley's *Love in a Wood; or, Saint James's Park*  
(1672)**

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On the face of it, Restoration comedy, with its highly urban London setting and usual contempt for anything remotely connected with the countryside, appears light-years away from any rustic society of shepherds and shepherdesses discussing love and death. In Restoration comedy, it seems that elements akin to the pastoral tradition can only be found fleetingly and always used for ironic purposes.

There is however one particular comedy among the nearly one thousand plays written between 1660 and 1700 which may serve as a possible example of the particular treatment given to pastoralism in the Restoration period. It is *Love in a Wood* by William Wycherley, produced in March 1671 by the King's Company and published in 1672.<sup>1</sup> In Restoration days, the subtitle of a play often served as its main title. That means that the contemporaries of Wycherley who saw the play went to see a comedy which they actually entitled *Saint James's Park*. Ultimately, the subtitle and title – whichever way one may choose to read it – suggests the meeting of pastoralism and a Restoration *locus* par excellence, that of the London park.<sup>2</sup>

In Wycherley's comedy, the (sub)title *Saint James's Park* marks the symbolic and thematic importance of the park in Restoration comedy, in which park scenes were becoming a staple of comedies set in London, just as it was the done thing for any member of what was known as the *Town* who wanted to appear fashionable to go to the park on a regular basis.

Although they were often the subjects of literary works, London parks, as Anne Barton has shown, have been described in very different manners according

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<sup>1</sup> William Wycherley, *Love in a Wood; or, Saint James's Park*, 1672, *The Plays of William Wycherley*, éd. Arthur Friedman, Oxford, Clarendon, 1979. One important source of the play was Calderón's *Mañanas de abril y mayo*, which Wycherley used freely for the lovers' plot.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed semiotic account of London parks in the period, see Cynthia Wall, *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*, Cambridge, 1998, in particular p. 150-67. For the historical evolution of the various parks and the changing tastes in relation to the different royal gardens, see Liza Picard, *Restoration London*, London, Phoenix, 1997, especially p. 60-63.

“*Pastoralism and Restoration comedy: The Example of William Wycherley’s Love in a Wood; or, Saint James’s Park (1672)*”

to the author and the rapidly changing tastes of the *Town*. In 1661, Edmund Waller published a poem entitled "On Saint James's Park, As Lately Improved by His Majesty" to celebrate the alterations ordered by the newly restored Charles II. Waller calls the park a "Paradise," another Eden, and sees it as presided over by a benevolent shepherd king. The poem describes joyous innocent pursuits, all of which take place in broad daylight. Waller describes "the lovers walking in that amorous shade; / the gallants dancing by the river's side; / they bathe in summer, and in winter slide." But a decade later, in 1672, the place is revisited by the infamous Rochester, in a poem called "A Ramble in Saint James's Park." The place is now described by night and in strikingly different tones. As a man who would know, the poet speaks of "an all-sin sheltering grove", where every "imitative branch does twine / In some loved fold of Arentine / And nightly now beneath their shade / Are buggeries, Rapes and incests made."<sup>3</sup>

So if we bear in mind those two descriptions, *Love in a Wood* – contemporary with Rochester's poem – may well suggest a slightly rougher, more down-to-earth approach to love. It may account for the usual Restoration imagery of the sexual hunt. It also points to the potential misunderstandings and confusions that wanderings in the park may bring about, since the pun love "in a wood" refers both to what we could call courtship in the park, though "courtship" is probably too lofty a word for Restoration comedy, but also, it refers to love made in confusion, in a state of bewilderment. Love in a wood would be an equivalent to the phrase "love at a loss." This title encapsulates the two main strands of the comedy's fabric: the spatial particularities of the comedy – in which half of the 15 scenes of the play take place quite literally at night, in the dark, and in the park – that is, the wood of the title –, and the chaotic flux that is to run through the play. Mentally, as it were, and spatially, it is a comedy of frantic movement, or more specifically, of dislocation, where movement itself is running amok, so to speak, because taken to absurd limits, as characters are always moving about and in addition constantly misconstruing signs that are themselves ever shifting and slippery.

As is usual in a Restoration comedy, the plot, or rather the plots, of *Love in a Wood* are too complex to try and summarize them fully. It presents the usual self-contained world in which couples often rush off to the park at night to indulge in masked flirtations just after they have declared undying love to their respective partners and made sure they would stay at home for the night. The gap between fidelity and lust, truth to one's word and inconstance is unceasingly underlined in what could be called a pastoral circus. One character is named, fittingly enough,

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Barton, "Parks and Ardens", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 80, 1993, p. 49-50.

Lady Flippant. She is a trademark character of Restoration comedy: that of the aging husband-hunting widow who rails against marriage in the hope that very raillery will attract men – which it doesn't. She is no doubt making her way in a wood, both figuratively and in the proper sense. First of all she is manipulated by a Mrs Joiner – an apt name again for a matchmaker – but is quite unaware of it. It is no small irony that at some point in the play she is said to be short-sighted, and that her visual deficiency arises from an excessive use of mercury water. Lady Flippant goes to Saint James's Park at night with Lydia. Lydia is the mistress of Ranger, whose name suggests yet another vagabond, just like Lady Flippant is a social drifter desperately looking for a rich husband. The whole of the second act of the comedy develops the nocturnal wanderings of the two women in the park and their consequences. Properly masked, sure to be undetected, Lady Flippant and Lydia start "rambling" in the park [to ramble is a key-verb in the play], but Ranger, having just left Lydia at home – or so he thinks –, is also present, and obviously ranging, in the company of a friend, for what he calls "a midnight coursing in the park" (2.1.2) "where many a match is made" (2.1.76). Contrasting sharply with those characters is the virtuous Christina, twice referred to as Penelope (2.4.32 / 108). Christina has resolved to remain fixed in the isolation of her dwelling-place, away from the sun, until her lover Valentine returns to England – he has fled to France after fighting a duel in defence of Christina's honour. That *topos* of self-secluded virtue and fidelity is underlined by Christina's maid Isabel who remarks that "since Mr Valentine's flying into France, [her mistress has] grown mad, [has] put [herself] into mourning, lived in a dark room when [she]'ll see nobody, nor take any rest day or night, but rave and talk to [herself] perpetually." (2.2.31-4) And Christina herself, in a very brief soliloquy, describes herself as a personification of loyalty towards her absent lover. In properly elevated diction, she says: "Unhappy Valentine, could thou but see how soon thy absence and misfortunes have disbanded all thy friends and turned thy slaves all renegades, thou sure would prize my only faithful heart." (2.2.46-9)

The opposing plots of fixed virtue and changing places and partners combine when Christina is unwillingly drawn into the confusions of the park without even leaving her room. The somewhat still life pastoral tableau is stirred into motion. Ranger has followed Lydia from the park believing he has been pursuing a new conquest and mistaking Christina for the object of his pursuit. Lydia storms into Christina's privacy and asks her friend to pretend *she* was in the park to save Lydia from the embarrassment of admitting to her lover Ranger she was ranging just as he was. Conveniently enough, Christina and Lydia are the same height and are both in mourning. This sparks off a chain of jealous

*“Pastoralism and Restoration comedy: The Example of William Wycherley’s Love in a Wood; or, Saint James’s Park (1672)”*

misunderstandings and misapprehensions, especially when Christina’s lover Valentine returns from exile.

A clear yet passing hint that Wycherley has been reworking the pastoral tradition in this comedy crops up when Lydia and Lady Flippant arrive at Christina’s home from the park, with Ranger hot on their heels. Lady Flippant greets Christina as "faithful shepherdess" (2.2.51; 196). Added to Christina’s own description of her "only faithful heart", the phrase is an obvious echo of Fletcher’s play (1608), but it also ironically marks how radically remote from Restoration London and its mores Christina is. She is, as Derek Hughes put it, "a solitary devotee of an incomprehensible creed."<sup>4</sup>

I believe it is no coincidence that it should fall upon Lady Flippant to use that phrase when addressing Christina. Different as they may be, Wycherley made sure the two women shared scenes more than any other pair of female characters in the play. As Rose Zimbardo suggests, the two characters may themselves be slightly reminiscent of Fletcher’s Clorin and Cloe. Clorin, who gives Fletcher’s play its name, is a model of chaste fidelity to the memory of her dead lover, the memory of which she swears she will be wedded, whereas Cloe is a wanton shepherdess, really a nymphomaniac.<sup>5</sup> I’ve already commented upon Christina’s staunch fidelity, and a nymphomaniac Lady Flippant certainly is. Clorin spends most of her time wandering through the woods courting assault and pretending she is, like the other Arcadians, platonically in love. At one point in the play, when Lady Flippant ranges through the forest in search of new preys, she says she fears only wild beasts and declares that men cannot terrify her because: "I cannot be raped / I am so willing." Transferred from the meadows of Arcadia to Saint James’s Park, Lady Flippant cries out, at the very end of the play: "Unfortunate lady that I am! I have left the herd on purpose to be chased, and have wandered this hour here; but the park affords not so much as a satyr for me, and no Burgundy man or drunken scourer will reel my way" (5.2.168-71).

The pastoral echoes in "herd", "park", and "satyr" ironically suggest to the audience to view Lady Flippant in the light of parody. The confusion of these terms on the one hand with Restoration words ("Burgundy man", "scourer"<sup>6</sup>) and on the other with the elevated style ("Unfortunate lady that I am") reads as a satiric

<sup>4</sup> Derek Hughes, *English Drama 1660-1700*, Oxford, 1996, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> Rose A. Zimbardo, *Wycherley’s Drama. A Link in the Development of English Satire*, New Haven and London, Yale UP, 1965, 30-32.

<sup>6</sup> scourer: "One who made a practice of roistering through the streets at night, breaking windows..."; *OED*’s first example. *Oxford English Dictionary*, electronic version, 2000.

commentary on the age as well as the character. Her raging lust is mirrored in the confusion of terms in her speech. What love should be and what it has actually become, as Zimbardo suggests, is conveyed through the style used by the character.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the park location, one of the devices used by Wycherley to keep the audience aware that there is some sort of pastoral design in his play seems, Rose Zimbardo explains, to be the planting of key pastoral words in place of their Restoration equivalents. For instance, during one of her chases in the park, the desperate and masked Lady Flippant spots a possible prey in the shape of a cloaked man and says:

But fortune will not see me want; here comes a single bully – I wish he may stand,  
*For now anights the jostling nymph is bolder*  
*Than modern satyr with his cloak o'er shoulder*  
 (2.1.101-104).

The sudden shift from ordinary life, run-of-the-mill prose to rhyming couplets together with the incongruity of the words "nymph" and "satyr" with the image of a daring restless Restoration female and her beau emphasise the distortion between Restoration London and the pastoral pastoral ideal.

As we move forward into the play, a conversation between Mrs. Joyner and Lucy could be read as an indication that pastoral drama in this particular comedy is on its last legs. Mrs. Joyner scolds Lucy for her falling in love with Dapperwit and says: "His [Dapperwit's] bewitching madrigals have charmed thee into some heathenish imp with a hard name." To this Lucy replies: "Nymph, you mean, godmother" (3.1.61-4).<sup>8</sup> The brief exchange conspicuously shows how the pastoral parlance is gradually becoming unintelligible, if not nonsensical.

There are other signs that point to the fact that Wycherley is veering towards Restoration standards despite his use of the pastoral tradition, blurring the distinctions between the two. Vincent, Valentine's bosom friend, an example of fidelity and truth, is supposedly a character from the high plot. But he actually operates on two levels and so cannot be said to belong entirely to it. He is not one

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<sup>7</sup> Zimbardo, *op. cit.*, p. 41. This statement, it is worth noticing, comes after all other expedients tried by Lady Flippant have failed: she has talked one of her brother's servants into seducing her, has been relentlessly pursuing a typical Restoration would-be wit named Dapperwit, and she has hired a bawd to get a husband – to no avail.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Zimbardo, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

“*Pastoralism and Restoration comedy: The Example of William Wycherley’s Love in a Wood; or, Saint James’s Park (1672)*”

to turn down an offer to the French house, the tavern, and thus falls into the well-known category of the Restoration wit. His taste for bawdy innuendoes and idle banter makes him the perfect rake. Yet more often than not he joins Christina and Valentine on what Rose Zimbardo calls "the high level of sentiment."<sup>9</sup> When he defends the honour of Christina from Valentine’s unfounded suspicions, the rake’s speech turns into neatly chivalric diction: "Methinks she should be innocent; her tongue and eyes together with that flood that swells do vindicate her heart" (4.3.188-89).<sup>10</sup> It is typical of Wycherley’s technique and purpose to present a supposedly noble character adopting whatever behaviour and style which may be required by the circumstances: the polarity of good and evil collapses.

Another similar instance of that comes from the fact that the first and last references to justice are due to the double-dealing matchmaker Mrs. Joyner. First, the arch-hypocrite that she is hails Alderman Gripe, at the beginning of the play, as "the head-band of justice" (1.1.128). At the very end of the comedy, she marries off Lady Flippant to Sir Simon with the following aside: "Like the lawyers, while my clients endeavour to cheat one another; I in justice cheat them both" (5.2.16-17). It is significant that the last word as well as the voice of justice should be given to the bawd, who thus becomes some sort of normative character. The triumph of false justice is in keeping with the use of the term "faith" throughout the play. It is mostly uttered by characters using it as a cover-up word for their unsavoury scheming.<sup>11</sup> Yet at the same time the phrase "faith and troth" is used by characters whose knightly dignity is genuine, such as the chivalric Vincent. What Wycherley’s play unceasingly stresses is the instability of the pastoral signs and symbols.

If we accept the idea that one of the aims of the pastoral drama of the seventeenth century is the presentation and the triumph of an ideal of love in comparison with other types of love which are deviations from the ideal, then that hierarchical pattern of gradations of love is present in *Love in a Wood*. Wycherley’s chain of love, as Zimbardo points out, copies that of Fletcher but is adapted to Restoration criteria. High up there stand Valentine and Christina, whose names are entirely devoid of satire unlike the other characters’ brand names. On the middle plane we find Lydia and Ranger and their typically Restoration-like love-chase, and from there we go to utter lechery with Alderman Gripe – an equivalent

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<sup>9</sup> Zimbardo, *op. cit.*, p.39.

<sup>10</sup> See also 2.4.39-46.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Dapperwit the would-be wit proudly says to Ranger: "I was a faithful sentinel" (2.3.1).

to the Fletcherian vice-fraught Sullen Shepherd – and his sister Lady Flippant. The Jonsonian humour characters are meant to counterbalance the purity of the ideal, and the middle protagonists provide perhaps the one authentic measure of love as it might have been conceived in Restoration London, neither ideally plentiful nor totally bestial, but as a realistic run-of-the-mill peaceful coexistence. The outcome of the play, even though it does contain a great deal of poetic justice according to which the good are either punished or rewarded, leaves the ending open. It is especially open as to what the audience is supposed to make of the pastoral tradition.

Wycherley's first play is a loose rendition of pastoral drama, or rather a comedy made of pastoral bits and pieces in which his satiric design is made conspicuous. In his later plays, *The Country-Wife* (1675) and *The Plain-Dealer* (1676), the pastoral elements will be almost entirely submerged by satire, as if the dramatist had left behind once and for all any tinge of Renaissance sensibility. All things considered, it is no surprise that Restoration comedy could not easily assimilate pastoral elements into its dynamics. As is well known, it was a theatrical age when cynicism reigned supreme, so that the intellectual frame of mind did not leave much room for idealism of any kind, except for the sake of mockery and parody.<sup>12</sup> So for all the parks London offered at the time, there could hardly be such a thing as an Arcadia.<sup>13</sup> In specifically dramatic terms, the park in Restoration comedy was merely an extension of whatever happened in the privacy of the characters' homes. Or, depending on how you look at it, the distortions found in the homes were brought out into the park, which in both cases mingle the public and private spheres even more. What is left for the protagonists is what could be named their own private Arcadia, that is, Christina's cozy little place teeming with lecherous satyrs, or Dapperwit who is told, at the end of the play, to "hire a little room in Covent-Garden and set a coffee-house" (5.2.91-92). Such a string of precarious isolated spaces hardly stands for an Arcadia. What's more, the spatial characteristics which Wycherley exploits combine with what seems to be a "conceptual" impossibility to imagine such a thing as a Golden Age in Wycherley's drama and possibly in the whole of Restoration comedy. Alderman Gripe the hated Puritan and his situation throughout and at the end of the play may provide a good example of that double spatial and temporal quandary. As he attempts to rape Lucy

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<sup>12</sup> *The Restoration Mind*, ed. W. Gerald Marshall, Newark and London, Associated UP, 1997, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> The order of fashion of the various parks, from the Restoration onwards to the early eighteenth century, was as follows: Saint James's Park, Hyde Park, Mulberry Garden, and later Vauxhall Gardens. See Wall, *op. cit.*, p. 160-63 and Picard, *op. cit.*, p. 54-63.

“*Pastoralism and Restoration comedy: The Example of William Wycherley’s Love in a Wood; or, Saint James’s Park (1672)*”

Crossbite saying "I love my privacy" and, upon entering the house of the wench: "Peace, plenty, and pastime be within these walls" (3.2.263) in a hypocritical rewriting of the biblical blessing<sup>14</sup>, his sexual Arcadia is destroyed by the unexpected entrance of Mrs. Crossbite.<sup>15</sup> But also, typically enough, the character of the Puritan is the very one Restoration comedy sought to lash out against. In every Restoration comedy, the type is associated with the past. As such, not only is Restoration comedy deprived of an Arcadia but it cannot turn back to or even conceive of a Golden Age, since the only references that may be made to the past are at best to an unfashionable time but mostly to an abhorred time which is constantly mocked. The very essence of Restoration comedy, as is presented by Wycherley in *Love in a Wood*, precludes the notion of pastoral drama in its usual forms and pattern.

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<sup>14</sup> "Peace be within thy walls", Psalms: 122: 7.

<sup>15</sup> Gripe is constantly looking for private spaces in which to hide his depravity. See 3.2.275-76: "I look for a private space to retire to, in time of need", with the ironically polysemic use of "need".