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# QUESTIONING CONVENTIONAL GENDER ROLES IN WILLIAM WYCHERLEY'S THE PLAIN DEALER

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## **Abstract**

*This article argues that the notion of gender is not a fixed category and doesn't have any given essence to it. The male and female characters in William Wycherley's play *The Plain Dealer* perform roles that tend to challenge our traditional conception of gender roles. Gender identities are complex things and it is not possible to reduce them to simple and unproblematic essences. The Character Manly falls into the trap of a woman's machinations and succumbs to her power. His lack of manliness and the Widow's knowledge and alacrity prove that traditional gender roles are open to challenge and can be reversed by different characters in different situations. This article analyses the role of the characters in the light of Foucauldian discourse and Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance.*

**Keywords:** *Gender roles, essence, performance, reversal, discourse, destabilization,*

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## **Introduction**

Wycherley's play *The Plain Dealer* is radical in the sense that it exposes the weak links of social discourse regarding gender roles. The concept of gender that is considered to be natural and unproblematic is challenged and questioned. This article argues that the present play helps to unmask the constructed nature of the notion of gender. Wycherley's revaluation of gender roles doesn't fit into a neat and coherent alternative but remains contradictory, thereby questioning the ability of any discourse to stabilize moral, social and ideological values. In *The Plain Dealer* gender roles are destabilized in so far as they are disconnected from the notions of essentiality. The play empties gender of its essence and it is shown as a cultural construct.

Traditionally, females are portrayed as weak and submissive creatures who shy away from taking part in public activities. However, the character Olivia's role symbolizes active female initiation which helps to blur traditional gender distinctions. The male character Manly has to rely on Olivia for getting his job done and she also manipulates him for fulfilling her own interests. This reverses the conventional understanding of gender. Gender is not a given but a category that gets denaturalized as different male and female characters act differently in different situations. The article will analyse the play using Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance and Foucauldian notion of discourse. Some other pertinent ideas will also be taken from other theorists as well.

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## Analysis of the Text

Widow Blackacre is another character in *The Plain Dealer* who declares that "I am no common woman; but a woman conversant in the laws of the land . . . though I have no bar gown (50) and proves this through two moves. On the one hand, she refuses to be married and on the other she renounces Jerry as her legitimate child and considers him an alien because he was conceived outside wedlock. "Thou art but my base child; and according to the law, canst not inherit it" (75). She uses her knowledge of law to manipulate these situations. This shows that even though Jerry is her son he was born out of wedlock and it does not give him any legal right to ask his mother for inheritance. She is a widow now and is not ready to give any property to her son. She is active and knows how to manipulate law in her favour. It helps to establish her as a bold and an active woman. She is unlike many traditional women. Freeman's dialogue reveals what kind of woman she is, "The widow Blackacre, is it not? That litigious petty - fogger, who is at law and difference with all the world" (13). She brings cases against people who create trouble for her. For a traditional woman it would be impossible to face the world like the widow is doing. This shows how bold and confident she is. This kind of behaviour of a lady helps to deconstruct our conventional understanding of what a woman is like and what she is capable of.

Monique Wittig's remark, "one is not born a woman" (158) supports the idea that who a woman is depends on what she does in the world. A woman is not born with her traits but it is the society that creates a woman by producing her through its social behaviour and practices. Woman is not an innate category and it is created socially and can also change when the women begin to act differently from how they have been described and defined. This applies well to the Widow in the play because she doesn't make herself sexually available to Freeman which creates a reversal of gender positions. Freeman, a male, is ready to sell himself for a woman. In traditional marriages, women's bodies become objects of transaction but opposite is the case here. She doesn't want to remarry because her status as a wife would make self-determination impossible. So, she wants to remain as widow because matrimony is a prison. It curtails her autonomy.

In the end she surrenders herself to Freeman, which shows her acceptance of traditional role but this shifting meaning of gender destabilizes the discourse of stable sexual identity. For Butler, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of discourse of primary and stable identity" (2497). The idea that a woman is weak and is always controlled by men is a fabrication and this kind of discourse is challenged and destabilized as women act boldly and cleverly. The identities constructed are not stable and can change when we find examples of women who act to prove wrong the perceptions about gender roles created by different cultural discourses.

It is possible for a man not to have guts to face the world. The main character Manly is afraid of facing the world because he cannot trust the flatterers and the frauds. Announcing his desire to keep his doors shut for keeping people outside he remarks, "I would sooner be visited by the plague; for that only would keep a man from visits and his doors shut" (6). The people of his society have troubled and pestered him so much that the only way to be safe from them is to die from plague. This is something that doesn't suit a male. Instead of being ready to face the world he is frightened and keeps a guard to stop people from visiting him. He confesses that love has made him weak and he feels defeated. A male is supposed to enjoy the company of many

mistresses and lead an amorous and an adventurous life. Contrary to this understanding he feels defeated and admits that love has really made him feeble and effeminate. Speaking to Fidelity he says that "love has enfeebled him" (47). His statement is a clear indication of his cowardice to be afraid of loving and facing women. Instead of manipulating people and situations he stays home and is manipulated by other female characters mainly Olivia. He asks Fidelity to intercede on his behalf and help woo Olivia. His request to Fidelity, "Go Flutter, lie, kneel, promise anything to get her to me: I cannot live unless I get her" (33) makes it very clear that he cannot persuade and make Olivia his own and has to rely on a woman whom he asks to disguise and go to Olivia and trap her for him. What kind of man is he that he has to use someone else to woo a woman for him. This is a mockery of the traditional gender discourse that presents males as daring, outgoing and resourceful. Manly's actions prove the falsity of those established discourses. Contrary to our expectation Olivia plays the role of the manipulator and makes Manly to move and act according to her plans and strategies.

In place of Manley, Olivia turns out to be the manipulator of money and desire because she controls the movement of these things. In her relation with Plausible and Novell also she receives jewels and presents in return for her sexual favors. The association of female power with prostitution shows the limits of the discourse which cannot see female autonomy outside stereotypical assumptions of gender. Manly's expression of surprise that "Ay, a mercenary whore; for she made me pay her before I lay with her" (97) reveals how badly he has been cheated by a woman. Olivia enjoys the company of many men and they spend a lot of money on her. Like weak creatures, men succumb to the power of love and sex and women use them as their playthings. Judith Butler's view that "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires as performance that is repeated" (2500) makes it clear that gender is not something innate or a given but it is only a matter of performance. It is always possible that in actual life a male may act like a female and a female may act like a male. The roles one performs show who a person is not what society considers him or her to be. The behaviour of the main characters in the play serves to establish the reversal of conventional roles. When Fidelity goes to Olivia in disguise her husband fails to recognize that she is a man disguised as a lady. His failure to tell a man from a woman shows that there is no inner essence to gender and it is all a matter of form. Forms can be changed and the role one assumes determines his or her gender and there is no inherent meaning as such in any gender and everything is a matter of performance. When Olivia says to one of her friends . . . d'ye think he doesn't know a man from a woman?" (92). We know that the very idea of gender as performance strikes us immediately. People may change themselves as chameleon and challenge the notion of gender as fixed and stable. Gender distinctions collapse in Fidelity's deceptive body. Fidelity's transvestism proves gender to be a matter of performance. Fidelity illustrates the over-determination of essence by form.

Manly begs for the sexual favor of a whore which pinpoints the reversal of power positions between Manley and Olivia. As his name suggests, Manly is supposed to represent manliness, valor, truth and plain-dealing. However, Olivia's manipulation deconstructs Manly's manliness. He falls into the trap of his own desire and it brings to light the constructed character of his gender position. He asks Fidelity to disguise herself as a woman and woo Olivia for him. For Foucault, "Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements" (1145). This view also reveals that gender or any other concept has no essence and the truth about anything is a result of

discourse that society produces in different historical periods to guide and regulate the activities and behaviour of the people of that time. These discourses are used a means of controlling the populations for the sake of maintaining law and order. Gender identity of someone is a complex thing and cannot be reduced to simple and fixed essences that fail to match the changing character of such roles. Again the same view underlies her observation when Cixous comments on gender "as infinite and mobile complexity" (543). Gender is something infinite and it may assume various forms in various kinds of situations. Its meaning and value changes in different social situations when different people perform it in various guises and in changing circumstances.

## Conclusion

The roles played by characters like Olivia, Manly, Fidelia and the Widow in the play *The Plain Dealer* come to prove that the idea of gender is not innate or natural. Such categories of identities are a result of discursive practices and a matter of performance. These roles are not fixed and stable and are always open to change and manipulation. Manly is a male character, but he is afraid of facing the world and falls into the trap set by a woman character. It is very unworthy of a man that he should succumb to the machinations of a woman like Olivia. On the other hand, Olivia's manipulation of males challenges the traditional idea of what a female is and what she can do. The widow is a very clever woman and uses her knowledge of law to avoid the challenges posed by social norms and other males. Foucault's notion of truth as a product of discursive practices and Butler's theory of performance help to debunk these traditional understandings of gender roles.

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