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## "Play Your Fan": Exploring Hand Props and Gender on the Restoration Stage Through the Country Wife, the Man of Mode, the Rover, and the Way of the World

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EXPLORING HAND PROPS AND GENDER ON THE RESTORATION STAGE  
THROUGH THE COUNTRY WIFE, THE MAN OF MODE,  
THE ROVER, AND THE WAY OF THE WORLD

Jarred Wiehe



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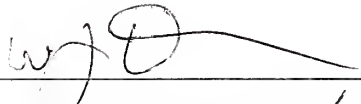
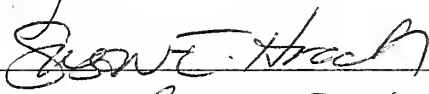
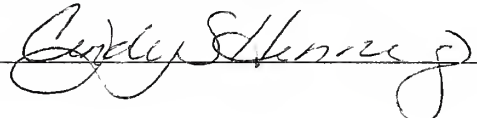
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“Play your fan”:  
Exploring Hand Props and Gender on the Restoration Stage  
Through *The Country Wife*, *The Man of Mode*, *The Rover*, and *The Way of the World*  
By  
Jarred Wiehe

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‘Play your fan’: Exploring Hand Props and Gender on the Restoration Stage through *The Country Wife*, *The Man of Mode*, *The Rover*, and *The Way of the World*

The full irony and wit of Restoration comedies relies not only on what characters communicate to each other, but also on what they communicate to the audience, both verbally and physically. Hand props help foster this important relationship with the audience as props provide moments of dramatic irony where the visual meaning portrayed through the object complicates the verbal text. Specifically, gendered props such as the fan, the sword, and the pistol visually establish conventions for the sexes, yet are also used to subvert these conventions through gesture, appropriation, or misuse. Thus far, the critical conversation concerning the possibility of these hand props has been mostly dramaturgical and fairly limited critically. For instance, J. L. Styan emphasizes the common, yet important, use of fans to convey the actresses’ moods, and begins to realize the full connection between body and item, but leaves his argument resting in a practical space, stating only that it “served the actress so well on stage” (107). Styan also dissects the actor’s prop list, noting the importance of the sword among his personal items (59). Thus, while critics point out that swords and fans ubiquitously appeared on the Restoration stage, most do not consider the important role such objects play in reinforcing gender. While playwrights of the era do not provide a prop list as such for modern readers, through the dramaturgical work of Styan and others, as well as what diarists such as Samuel Pepys record. It is certain that fashionable women always had their fans; fashionable men always had their swords. These objects become gendered in the sense that they not only help the actor and actress perform masculinity and femininity, but these props also become extensions of their bodies. Through an exploration of gendered props in William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675), George Etherege’s *The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676), Aphra Behn’s *The Rover, or*

*the Banished Cavaliers* (1677), and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), modern readers envisage how such fans, swords, and pistols destabilize gender roles in comedies in a time of shifting gender politics.

Imagining how performances would have been staged is key in fully interpreting the plays as modern readers do not have access to original performances, and while we can easily picture the use of swords, the use of the fan is more foreign. Andrew Sofer provides an informative and convincing reading of Restoration fans and the power these items have on stage. For the first time, women were allowed to play women's roles, thereby complicating the traditional portrayal of femininity and feminine power on stage. One such way in which actresses asserted their new roles and dominated the playing space was through their fans and fan language. While reporting that some conduct books offered a unified fan language, Sofer debunks the myth of a solid, codified language of the fan, asserting that instead "the fan amplifies those telling gestures that might otherwise be invisible or easily missed," thus accentuating the female body (127). There is no denying, however, the overwhelming incorporation of fans and gestures in Restoration theatre, as the fan "was such a ubiquitous female accessory that it must have graced virtually every play" (122). Yet for such a prop, playwrights avoid writing stage directions which directly refer to fans. Sofer asserts that "[b]etween 1660 and 1737 the fan is mentioned in a relatively small number of stage directions, presumably because the playwright would have expected the actress to incorporate her own fan business into virtually every scene" (129). Actresses were responsible for providing their own fans and could find agency by deciding how to employ them in scenes. Thus, while there is no way to know for certain how actresses would have used their fans, clearly these hand props have the ability either to embellish a text or to destabilize it through gesture.

Fans work to draw the actors closer to the audience in Restoration theatre through their manipulation of the relationship between stage and playhouse. Edward A. Langhans explores the “feeling of intimacy” in Restoration playhouses resulting from “an apron or forestage—an acting area forward of the curtain, thrusting well into the audience space, with permanent proscenium entrance doors on each side” (7-8). The apron provided “an acting space that was part of the auditorium, close to the audience and flanked by spectators,” which served to bridge the gap between spectator and performer (Langhans 8). Langhans also writes that the “forestage was ideal for plays where words were important” so in plays which were “highly verbal and full of wit [...] frequent soliloquies and asides to the audience” often occurred on the apron (7-8). Asides done on the apron with a fan further heighten the intimacy as the fan, held to the face, closes off the actress from her scene partners and creates a small space in which she interacts solely with the audience as if she is then sharing a secret with the audience, thereby either implicating them in her plots or alerting them to her feelings. Fans bridge the small, but important, gap between audience and actor, thus allowing direct communication with the audience, but also create a moveable wall to interact privately with other characters on stage, thereby making fans quite a powerful theatrical tool for an actress to wield effectively.

In addition to creating private spaces, women employ “fan language” as a means of communicating by certain gestures with their fans. In many ways, their bodies tell more than their texts, especially as the Restoration stage thrust real female bodies into the acting space for the first time in English public theatre. First, fans serve to hide, yet paradoxically reveal. Sofer writes, “The fan hid blushes and court glances, but it also drew attention to them, even as it magnified the slightest movement of the arm and wrist and thereby betrayed inner perturbation or arousal” (121). Clearly, the women’s hand prop cannot escape being intertwined with their

sexuality. Besides being sexually provocative, Restoration theatre is rooted in rhetoric of duplicity and duality, both of which are physically reinforced through fan language that may serve to reaffirm or subvert the literal language of the text. Thus, the complete double-speak of Restoration theatre emerges through the use of gendered hand props such as fans; furthermore, the comedies I will examine apply pressure to conventional gender roles as fans are placed against masculine weaponry in the playhouse.

I have chosen to examine these four comedies not only for their popularity in the mid-to-late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, but because of their commonly anthologized textual life in modern scholarship; all four of these works appear in a Norton critical edition of Restoration comedy. They also provide insights into the two main theatre companies of the time: the Duke's Company managed by William Davenant and the King's Company managed by Thomas Killigrew. *The Country Wife* was first performed in 1675 by the King's Company at the Drury Lane theatre. *The Man of Mode* and *The Rover* were both performed on the Dorset Garden stage by the Duke's Company in 1676 and 1677. Davenant's company performed *The Way of the World* as well, but in their Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre in 1700. These companies and their playing spaces help shape readings of the texts, as well as readings of the props. The Duke's company had such popular actresses as Elizabeth Barry, Anna Bracegirdle, Mary Betterton, and Elinor Leigh, and as each actress embellished the texts with her personalized style, cognizance of the specific actress becomes increasingly important; in some cases, playwrights even wrote roles with specific actresses in mind. Elizabeth Howe provides a very informative reading of how 17<sup>th</sup> century spectators conflated Barry and Bracegirdle's personal lives with their stage lives, thereby revealing the importance of the actress as an individual (102-7). Furthermore, her fan helps the specific actress in her power to shape a role. Barry, explicitly praised for her tragic roles, easily



carries her personality into comedy, using her prop to highlight tragic moments in the text; her role as Mrs. Loveit in *The Man of Mode* is laced with such tragedy. Bracegirdle, highly regarded for her morality offstage, uses her gestures to reinforce the witty, yet moral, Millamant in *The Way of the World*. Thus, in recognizing the connection between specific actresses and the text, readers also understand how the actresses' stage history informs readings of their hand props.

In compartmentalizing the four plays, readers see how props function for specific companies and playwrights while also sustaining this stagecraft throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century. First, *The Country Wife* alerts readers to the importance of the fan as a tool for communication in fashionable London circles. The characters of Alithea, Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Lady Squeamish are able to highlight the hollowness of the rampant deception in the play with their fans. Margery Pinchwife, as the eponymous country wife, cannot participate in the same physical conversation as she might not have a fan; furthermore, her "breeches role" underscores the comedy of performing masculinity in the play, especially when juxtaposed with her husband's ineffectually used sword and penknife. In *The Man of Mode*, Wycherley's lovers take on an air of didacticism as they demonstrate how props are intertwined with bodies through moments of fan tearing and flirting. *The Rover* illustrates how women participate in the male dominated space, both through Angellica and Hellena's navigation of gender roles and handling fans, swords, and pistols, and through Behn's place as a female playwright in a sexually unstable political atmosphere under Charles II. Finally, *The Man of Mode* transforms the playhouse into a feminine space and suggests that disruption and penetration are inexorably connected as evidenced by the sword, pistol, and the legal document. Thus, the mid-to-late 17<sup>th</sup> century stage becomes a center for exploring shifting boundaries between the sexes as perpetuated by the gendered fans, swords, and pistols.

## I. Communication and the Fan in *The Country Wife*

Wycherley's play establishes the conflict between truth and dissembling among the sexes through several crucial scenes—namely, the interactions between Harcourt and Alithea, Margery's cross-dressing scene, and the dinner party scene—which become increasingly unstable in regards to acceptable performance of gender as illustrated through the use of fans and swords.

First, in facilitating courtship through Alithea's fan, Wycherley stages a feminine voice which provides her with power in the scene and over the playing space. While modern audiences cannot be certain of Alithea's gesturing, readers do receive verbal indications of her physicality in her interactions with Harcourt in front of Sparkish and Pinchwife. This ultimately alerts readers to the importance of the actress' body in the scene, while also further creating visual tension between the feminine hand prop of the fan and the masculine hand prop of the sword in a battle of the asides. First, after Sparkish presents his bride-to-be to Harcourt in a very naïve and disconcerting sexual exchange, Sparkish chides her, saying, "Nay, dear, do not look down" (2.1:19). Alithea's reaction is ambiguous. With the right fan gesture, looking down could be a defensive, modest move; Alithea thereby uses her fan as a means to defend against Harcourt's objectifying gaze as perpetuated by Sparkish. In this case, Alithea's movements serve to combat Harcourt's advances and reinforce her virtue. Despite her defensive use of her fan, Alithea, trapped by Harcourt's unscrupulous eye, is still vulnerable. Harcourt calls attention to her bodily responses from his sexual advances by announcing, "I see, madam, you can guess my meaning" (2.1:19). Ostensibly, Alithea, in keeping with a common Restoration gesture, is blushing in front of Sparkish and Pinchwife, and instead of her fan hiding it, the prop highlights it, thereby reinforcing Sofer's observation of the unstable power of the fan. Alithea's vulnerability does not

last long, however, as she adroitly defends herself from Harcourt's advances once he "*courts Alithea aside*" (2.1:20). This gesture becomes visually gendered as Harcourt's masculine prop, his sword, would swing by his side and Alithea's side as they cross the stage. Thus broken away from the other two characters, Harcourt believes he can literally and verbally corner Alithea; his power relies on physically separating her from the other men. Alithea, in realizing this, shifts the balance by calling over Sparkish, probably with the help of an accompanying gesture. An unfurled fan used for an aside just as easily helps separate Alithea from Harcourt and his sheathed sword as well as directing her voice over to Sparkish. Readers note how the intrinsic beat in Alithea's line begs for a shift in body position:

ALITHEA: Nay, now you [Harcourt] are rude, sir. – Mr. Sparkish, pray come hither, your friend here is very troublesome, and very loving.

HARCOURT: (*aside to ALITHEA*) Hold, hold! – (2.1:21)

Perhaps to emphasize her rejection, the actress may use her unfurled fan to close herself off from Harcourt. It is also telling that Alithea's more public vocalization sends Harcourt running to the smaller vocal space of the aside. She makes him vulnerable to discovery and the gaze of the other characters onstage. Furthermore, Sofer remarks that the actress, gesturing with an unfurled fan, gains more physical acting space, and Alithea's regained physical space parallels her vocal space, as constructed by her hand prop (122). The same thing happens again as she honestly tells her fiancé and her brother of Harcourt's designs:

ALITHEA: He spoke so scurrilously of you, I had no patience to hear him; besides, he has been making love to me.

HARCOURT: (*aside*) True, damned, telltale woman!

Alithea literally pushes Harcourt aside in a moment of honesty. This all, of course, hinges on a reading of Alithea as initially repulsed by Harcourt—an emotion which is not entirely there.

While Alithea's fan may work to uphold decorum and moral rigidity, her prop simultaneously complicates the dialogue by providing a fluid, ironic sub-text. Audiences know that Alithea is actually quite charmed by Harcourt's gallantry and uses her fan gesture to manipulate the interaction between men onstage. For instance, after first revealing to Sparkish that Harcourt slandered him to her, Sparkish disrupts the playing space as he "*offers to draw*" his sword. He tells the audience, "I may draw now, since we have the odds of him. 'Tis a good occasion, too, before my mistress—" (2.1:22). Sparkish's aside reveals two things concerning his masculinity: firstly, drawing his sword would emphasize his masculinity through his phallic prop, and secondly, he feels sexually inadequate compared to Harcourt—it would take two men (Pinchwife and Sparkish) to gain the advantage over the rival. Although ignoring the sword's implications when juxtaposed with Alithea's fan, Barrie Hawkins reads Sparkish's prop in a similar way, asserting that "it is an ideal weapon to signal sexual failure" (50). Furthermore, in a more direct moment of control, Alithea, in a way, furthers Sparkish's impotence. While Sparkish "*offers*" to draw, his sword is kept sheathed by Alithea exclaiming, "Hold, hold!" (2.1:22). Audiences can imagine a fan gesture here would accentuate the line, especially as her next line is a direct incorporation of the fan with an aside to the audience, revealing her attraction for Harcourt: "I must not let 'em kill the gentleman neither, for his kindness to me; I am so far from hating him that I wish my gallant had his person and understanding" (2.1:22). Her admission causes audiences to question her previous interaction. It also visually presents the conflict between fan and sword as representative of the conflict between men and women. For instance, are audiences to read Alithea's constancy without question, or rather would her fan not work to



reveal a subtext of uncertainty and attraction? When pulled into the corner with Harcourt, Alithea states, “No, now you have put a scruple in my head; but in short, sir, to end our dispute, I must marry him, my reputation would suffer in the world else” (2.1:21-2). She admits doubt, and the structure of the sentence also reveals her uncertainty as the semi-colon tenuously juxtaposes a scruple with duty. Furthermore, the actresses would use her fan to facilitate the beat in the line, thereby allowing her to express interest in Harcourt in the first part of the sentence while coyly and coquettishly pulling away after the semi-colon, creating a flirtatious fan-gestured sub-text. Pinchwife’s paranoia, then, is not entirely unfounded as from across the stage, he could witness and interpret his sister’s body language. Alithea’s ability to communicate her possible desire through a silent, visual prop thus allows her to keep her reputation intact, suggesting the repressed nature of women’s sexuality as represented by Wycherley. Despite whether audiences envisage her gestures as honest or ironic, Alithea dominates the playing space through the power of her hand prop, which illustrates how Wycherley’s representation of communication between men and women may be complicated by the actress’ fan, especially when juxtaposed with the actor’s sword.

Clearly, gender and control are integral to Wycherley’s construction of Pinchwife, Margery, and Horner, and to his observations concerning gender roles and perception in Restoration society. Wycherley further explores how men perceive women through Margery’s cross dressing scene in Act III. Structurally, the scene occurs practically at the center of the play, which suggests its importance to the thematic and dramatic development of the comedy, yet the tendency is to read cross dressing scenes such as this one as solely moments of sexual spectacle. Jacqueline Pearson, for instance, weighs the possibility of subversion in the actress assuming a male disguise, while also acknowledging its limitations, writing, “The transvestite motif, then,

has an inbuilt ambiguity. The assumption of male disguise might allow either an extreme assertion of a woman's independence or an extreme demonstration of her dependence on men and the male order" (108-9). She also provides statistical evidence of the non-threatening perception of the female transvestite as "suggested by [the role's] popularity," occurring in about a quarter of the plays from 1660-1700 (102). More recently, Elizabeth Howe reads the actress' body in a transvestite role as distinctly reaffirming the status quo as "breeches roles became little more than yet another means of displaying the actress as a sexual object" (59). She further asserts that "[e]ven in those plays where the device does not blatantly exploit the actress's physical attractions, transvestite roles rarely seem to have been written in a way which might disturb male spectators" (59). Thus, the critical conversation concerning staged women transvestites solidly accepts the adoption of men's clothing as a way to move the actress out of the dress and into the breeches to show off her legs, which creates heightened eroticism rather than disturbance for male spectators.<sup>1</sup> Critics, while successfully negotiating between reading support or subversion from the transvestite role, are rightly concerned with the actual shift in clothes, but fail to consider the ramifications of switching costume props; that is to say, as the actress trades a dress for breeches, she also, in theory, trades adopts a masculine costume prop, the sword, which illustrates how fashionable Restoration gender is performed and received on stage. For instance, Wycherley certainly creates an erotic stage picture as Margery, whose legs are accentuated by her male disguise, is passed around the stage for men to kiss and for audiences to ogle. Yet Wycherley exposes more than the actress' body, revealing Pinchwife's awareness of the subversive potential for the actress' props in the previous scene, thereby

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<sup>1</sup> Pearson is a little more hesitant, though, to give up the possibility of subversion available to female playwrights who incorporate the breeches role. She maintains that the role "is perhaps especially popular with female dramatists, who may have seen the transvestite as symbolic of their own ambiguous roles as women in a literary world of men" (100).

reshaping the transvestite role as a commentary not on a shift in clothes, but on a shift in props and gesture. After Alithea suggests placing Margery in a mask, Pinchwife concludes, “I’ll dress her up in the suit we are to carry down to her brother, little sir James [...] Come, let’s go dress her. A mask! No—a woman masked, like a covered dish, gives a man curiosity and appetite” (3.1:31). Pinchwife’s paranoia demonstrates a distrust of the vizard-mask, a distinctly female costume prop, and thus visually represents his attempt to limit and control the power of feminine props. In separating Margery from her gender-appropriate prop, Pinchwife creates a scenario which leaves his wife sexually vulnerable.

Reimagining the cross-dressing scene in *The Country Wife* in order to reveal the conflict between props as representative of the conflict between the sexes relies on the assumption that Margery, dressed as a man, would also be armed as a man. Samuel Pepys writes that all fashionable men would wear a sword outside, and since Pinchwife is earnestly trying to conceal his wife, it would make sense for him to dress her according to the fashion. She would most likely be wearing a sword. Wycherley, however, does not write that Margery’s disguise includes a sword, and only indicates, “*Enter MR. PINCHWIFE, and his wife in man’s clothes*” (3.2:34). But what about Margery’s disguise causes Horner and the other men to immediately recognize that she is a woman, despite Pinchwife’s attempts to properly disguise her? In a panicked aside, Pinchwife laments, “’Sdeath, he knows her, she carries it so sillily!” (3.2:40). Pinchwife observes that Margery carries herself poorly as a man, but the ambiguous wording—the pronoun “it” left dangling without an antecedent—leaves his critique open for questioning. Certainly, the “it” refers to gender; Margery is not able to play a man convincingly, but in what way is she inappropriately performing masculinity? Intrinsic in the visual performance is Margery’s inability to carry her new sword properly. The feminine misuse of a masculine prop is at the

heart of the visual comedy. Styan illuminates the potential for onstage disasters when inexperienced actors wore swords:

Needless to say, a sword constituted a further demand on propriety of behaviour. Its sheath was under a man's coat, and it was necessary to swing the baldric to the side if he was not to find the sword dangling between his legs [...] Lacking elegance, a gentleman with a sword at his waist would look very funny indeed. (64)

Margery fails to perform masculinity correctly, and her prop, most likely resembling Styan's comic imaginings, reveals to Horner, Harcourt, and the others (as well as the audience), that she is either not a man, or a very sexually inadequate one; she cannot control her phallus. Since she has no control over her prop sexual organ, and her former prop has been removed, Margery cannot help but become the object of Horner, Harcourt, and Dorilant's sexual exchange. If, however, Margery does not wear a sword with her disguise, a similar conclusion can still be drawn; her props—or rather the absence of a prop—visually communicates Margery's helplessness and illustrates how the men are able to gain control over the female body. Without a sword, the disguised Margery cannot gesture as a man, and without her fan, she cannot try to control the gaze of the audience, or of the other characters on stage. By denying her props, Pinchwife literally places his wife in a state of total objectification from both Horner and the playhouse audience, thereby leaving Margery sexually vulnerable, revealing through the absence of props the ability of the fan to facilitate power and control.

Furthermore, Margery's potentially ill-wielded prop may provide a chance to mirror Pinchwife's rather impotently handled sword, thereby comically undercutting Pinchwife's patriarchal domination and illustrating the strained communication between the sexes through the juxtaposition of the feminine and masculine props. Pinchwife is very keen on his pointy



phallic objects, threatening to stab, cut, and maim his wife. Starting in Act IV, scene ii, and continuing until the end of the play, Pinchwife draws attention to his weapon seven times; more telling, however, is the fact that before the cross-dressing scene, Pinchwife never mentions his prop. The scene, then, marks a shift in awareness of masculine props, perhaps resulting from Margery's misuse of the sword. Pearson, in summarizing J.H. Wilson's argument, agrees that the transvestite role "allowed mockery of male behaviour" (103). Thus, while the cross-dressing scene clearly objectifies the actress, it also prompts a heavier influence from male props, and just as Margery's imagined sword is comically in the way, Wycherley constructs Pinchwife's prop list as equally disruptive, yet ineffectual. First, in the Pinchwife-Margery scene directly following the transvestite comedy in the New Exchange, Wycherley places husband and wife in a state of domestic and sexual violence, highlighted by Pinchwife's threat of penetration: "Write as I bide you, or I will write 'whore' with this pen-knife in your face" (4.2:51). Pinchwife's prop is phallic and presents a visual display of subjugation. It also expresses his sexual anxiety as Pinchwife never actually penetrates his wife. Furthermore, while the sexual violence cannot be overlooked, there is humor in this moment of prop misuse, which parallels the imagined flailing sword that accentuated Margery's femininity, or rather, lack of masculinity. Pinchwife's impotence, as suggested by his misuse of props, continues as he delivers Margery's letter to Horner, threatening Horner with his sword:

PINCHWIFE: I will not be a cuckold, I say; there will be danger in making me a cuckold.

HORNER: Why, wert thou not well cured of thy last clap?

PINCHWIFE: I wear a sword.

HORNER: It should be taken from thee lest thou shouldst do thyself a mischief with it; thou art mad, man. (4.3:62)

First, Pinchwife relies on his sword to illustrate power, reinforcing the relationship of masculinity and domination, but Horner's final retort reveals that Pinchwife has little control over his prop and will only end up harming himself. Pinchwife's prop again reflects his impotence. Since their exchange is filtered through the dramatic irony caused by Margery's letter, audiences are fully aware that Pinchwife's phallus will never rise to the occasion of preventing Horner's sexual conquests. The comedy again stems from an awareness that Pinchwife ineffectually uses his weapon, thus illustrating how gender roles are destabilized through improper handling of props. Like the pen-knife indicated in the text, Pinchwife uses his phallic sword to try to subjugate his wife after catching her writing another letter, but unlike earlier, the audience is confronted with an unsheathed sword. Pinchwife threatens, "But make an end of your letter, and then I'll make an end of you thus, and all my plagues together. *Draws his sword*" (4.4:65). The sexual implication of Pinchwife's drawn weapon is clear as Margery immediately exclaims, "O Lord, O Lord, you are such a passionate man, bud!" (4.4:65).

Wycherley compounds innuendo upon innuendo as Sparkish, on entering and seeing Pinchwife with his sword, diffuses the violence, saying, "What, draw upon your wife? You should never do that but at night in the dark, when you can't hurt her" (4.4.65). Through the stagecraft and the text, audiences discern that Pinchwife's inappropriate use of his sword leads to his perception as impotent (as he cannot "hurt" or penetrate his wife). Furthermore, Wycherley scripts another prop in this scene, which emphasizes the visual conflict between the sexes as shown through gendered props. He writes that Sparkish "*pulls asides [Margery's] handkerchief,*" which she presumably has used to defend herself against her husband. Wycherley thus stages the sexual violence in the domestic sphere through the juxtaposition of Pinchwife's masculine weaponry and Margery's feminine defense. However, Pinchwife never uses his sword other than in

instances of unsubstantiated threats, and in fact tries to draw three times in the final scene, but never can, thereby revealing his impotence with his inability to use his prop. Therefore, in imagining moments of conflict and miscommunication between the sexes, such as Margery's cross-dressing or the domestic scene with her and husband, audiences discern how the actor and actress' hand props reveal anxiety in performing gender roles, as evidenced by Pinchwife's impotence reflected through props.

The fact that Margery tries to defend herself with a handkerchief—an ostensibly weaker prop than the more solid fan—raises the question whether Margery has a fan at all. While she does live in London, she is explicitly kept away from fashionable society, and thus would be generally uneducated in fan gesture. She cannot communicate effectively because she does not know the language, both verbal and physical. Jennifer L. Airey examines the relationship between antitheatrical writings in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and Pinchwife's attempt “to regulate Margery's access to and use of language,” the idea stemming from the fact that both believe female spectatorship in the playhouse can only lead to learned deceitful behavior (5). She locates Pinchwife's motives for “attempting to regulate his wife's presence as spectacle” in the horrific fact that “he can neither prevent her from admiring the actors, nor shield her from Horner's view” (4-5). Thus, at the heart of Pinchwife's paranoia is “uncensored language” (5). Airey, however, only considers the verbal language of the text, and while she does acknowledge to dangers of “uncensored imagery” to antitheatricalist writers, a consideration of fan gesture—or the absence of it—will extend her argument (5). If Margery does not have a fan, she is kept away from learning the language of fan gesture which physically mirrors her verbal subjugation. Yet Airey asserts that audiences hear how Pinchwife ironically arms Margery with the very knowledge he wishes to keep from her, such as when Margery appropriates “loathed” (a word

she learned from Pinchwife) to describe her husband to Horner (6). Similarly, Margery is completely objectified and a victim of the gaze without means of defense; without a fan, she can neither facilitate the male gaze nor engage in the same visual double-speak as Alithea or the other women of the play. Without the tools necessary to protect her body, Margery can only stand as a spectacle and an object. Margery, with her lack of a fan, lack of awareness, and lack of agency, functions as a foil for Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, Mrs. Squeamish, and Alithea as they are more experienced in the ways of circumventing the “wicked censorious world” through fan gesture (4.3:56). Thus, Margery cannot effectively participate in either the verbal or physical conversation as she has neither the language nor the prop to express herself.

Wycherley also relies on the visual representation of masculine weaponry set against the feminine fans. He plays Pinchwife’s ineffectual and tyrannical phallo-centric prop list against his female characters’ implied fans as seen most clearly in the dinner scene. Lady Fidget relates to Horner the sexual frustration that comes from keeping one’s private pleasures out of the public life, labeling London life as a “wicked censorious world” (4.3.56). Fortunately, through her fan, Lady Fidget can maneuver around the censorious world, and finds space to do so in the female-dominated stage during the dinner party. Harold Weber, in a very illuminating assessment of the dinner party’s function in *The Country Wife*, reveals how Wycherley crafts a space in which Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish can speak freely; Weber writes, “[T]hey achieve a harmony between social masks and natural desires denied to most of the other characters” (108). Through the honest communication, “the three women gradually strip away the barriers which men and women normally erect between one another in the course of the play” (Weber 111). In Weber’s reading, this solely “functions as a scene of revelation” (114) where “at least for the moment [the women] need not isolate themselves or deceive those around them in



order to express and satisfy their natures” (115). Weber, however, is not quite right; while this scene does provide the characters with more room to express themselves, the scene is still made visually fluid through the actresses’ fans. He does acknowledge that the scene expresses anxiety about removing the tools of dissimulation:

Even when talking to her friends, Lady Fidget fears to admit the inadequacy of the conventional social mask, the approved image of the chaste and honorable female. In this case, the asides must bear the weight of the truth, while the public masks that obscure the real personality dominate the stage. (112)

Although addressing asides, Weber does not notice that the dinner is framed by asides, and thus, fan gesture. Before she sings, Lady Fidget draws Horner into an aside, presumably with her fan, and before Sir Jasper and Old Lady Squeamish interrupt the dinner, each of the women on stage make asides with their fans. Thus, Weber’s reading is complicated by the framework of the duplicitous aside as facilitated by the actresses’ prop. Furthermore, Weber focuses on how the scene promotes social interaction free from “barriers”:

[T]he characters on stage succeed in communicating without the barriers imposed by the deceptions of others or self that so consistently define the play’s action. The play presents these barriers in its use of double language, conversations whose true meaning is known to only some of the participants. [...] The confidences of the dinner party for once render such deceptions unnecessary. (115)

Unfortunately, the barriers are far from removed; the unfurled fans visually represent the barriers, and literally frame the dinner party. Weber’s argument is limited in its examination of only the language, yet still inadvertently exposes the power of the fan to undermine the text. While concerned with decorum and reputation, the characters have the ability to provide a

constant, fluid, and dissembling sub-text through their hand props. Lady Fidget and the others' props move in silence, giving voice to private desires in a public sphere, thereby blurring the boundaries between them. When compared to Pinchwife's more overt weaponry, the ladies' fan gestures gain more power through destabilizing the visual patriarchal domination. Thus, through the contrast of masculine and feminine props, Wycherley illustrates how men and women interact with each other in public society while navigating their private urges.

## II. Teaching and Tearing: The Fan in *The Man of Mode*

Fans and fan language also serve to illustrate inward desire. The fan is a crucial hand prop for lovers, as both Wycherley and Etherege suggest. In *The Country Wife*, Sparkish remarks with flippancy that men writing songs for women is "as common with lovers as playing with fans," which implies that courtship, gender roles, and ultimately communicating are intertwined with Restoration fans (3.2:33). Audiences see what Sparkish's lovers with fans do more clearly in Etherege's *The Man of Mode* as Mrs. Loveit heavily relies on her fan, both with flourishes, or more dramatically, in tearing it apart. Through her, character and prop become inextricably tied. Furthermore, Harriet and Young Bellair illustrate the power of fan gesture in communication between sexes as the young lovers direct each other's bodies.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, in *The Man of Mode*, the actress is threatened by the male-dominated society, as illustrated by Loveit's relationship with her fan, yet can also find agency in properly gesturing, as suggested through Harriet's understanding and control of her prop.

First, Etherege hints at the future importance of this hand prop as Dorimant claims, "I have not had the pleasure of making a woman so much as break her fan, to be sullen, or forswear herself, these three days" (1.1:94). Sofer reports that in the Restoration, "rakes were known as

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<sup>2</sup> This scene has been well researched by dramaturges and critics. I will be interacting most with Sofer's interpretation of the scene; however, for further reading, look at Styan, who asserts that it is the "*locus classicus* for the use of the fan" (111).

‘fan-tearers,’ perhaps to express their ability to make women tear their own fans, or perhaps in order to suggest the association of fans with female genitals” which would give Dorimant an air of sexual sadism or rape (123). Dorimant’s juxtaposition of the act of breaking a fan and a woman’s emotional well-being also reveals how the physical state of the prop mirrors the internal state of the actress. Medley reinforces the eroticized frustration behind breaking fans when describing the relationship between Dorimant and Loveit, proclaiming, “She could not have picked out a devil upon earth so proper to torment her. H<sup>e</sup> has made her break a dozen or two of fans already” (2.1:104). In fact, breaking fans almost becomes a comic gag with Loveit; the first scene in which Loveit appears, she “*tears her fan in pieces*” because of the frustration caused by Dorimant’s spurning (109). Although certainly a melodramatic convention of the Restoration stage, Loveit’s stage business of tearing her fan also works on a more emotional and symbolic level; she is using her prop to mirror her internal torment. Loveit, after begging Dorimant to stay only to be humiliated, cries, “I could tear myself in pieces” (112). Loveit’s exclamation echoes the stage direction, thus connecting the state of the prop with the state of the actress. In a way, Loveit is made into a prop as her fan is “eroticized and feminized in order to render the woman who wields it an object of male sexual attention” (Sofer 123). Dorimant is further constructed as a sexual sadist as Loveit, without her fan, is now in a state of “undress.” Styan reports that “for some two hundred years a lady indoors or out without her fan was ‘undressed’” (107). Thus considered to be undressed (in terms of a fashionable society), Loveit is further victimized and exploited as a vulnerable sexual object without her hand prop. Props, therefore, signify important moments where internal conflict and external performance interact.

Etherege is obviously conscious of how actresses would use props in his plays, and yet there are no other stage directions about how a fan would be used. This does not mean, however,

that the performer would not incorporate fan language in order to create ironic subtext. Sofer believes that “the actress used her fan to magnify her agitation and gradually build up to the scene’s climactic moment” (138). Sofer’s reading, or rather imagining, does not consider Loveit’s overpowering sexual desire. Based on the text itself, audiences can discern Loveit’s agitation as she calls Dorimant “faithless” and “inhuman,” and her body language is suggestive of struggle as she “*flings away*” (2.2:109). Yet is it possible Loveit’s fan could be sending different signals? Readers know that no matter what Loveit might be doing on stage, on the page she begs Dorimant to stay, urging, “Stay! Oh stay” (112) and even “*pulls him back*” (112). Both Loveit’s words and suggested stage action contradict her earlier hostility to Dorimant, so it would not be unreasonable to imagine her using her fan to undermine her anger with sexual desire; as Dorimant remarks, “Spare your fan, madam. You are growing hot and will want it to cool you” (109). The performance of this scene, then, is made more complex as Loveit both conceals and reveals her inner state using her prop. Furthermore, the audience is brought into the cruel comedy through the dramatic irony created by fan language. Etherege potentially further develops Loveit and Dorimant’s dramatic tension through fan language later in the last act when Dorimant taunts Loveit about how fops love “[p]laying with your fan” (5.1:152). Etherege references fans again in a scene which involves Loveit denying Dorimant only to end with her pleading, “Stay!” (154). Thus, through verbal hints, modern readers can guess how performers might create an ironic subtext which undercuts the poses Etherege establishes through their props.

Although there is no way to know for certain how Loveit would have used her fan on stage, readers can discern, however, the importance of Restoration body (and fan) language in flirting, as evidenced by Harriet and Young Bellair. Bellair, in hoping to dupe his father in order



to marry Amelia, suggests to Harriet that they feign flirting as their guardians watch them from across the stage: “Now for a look and gestures that may persuade ‘em I am saying all the passionate things imaginable” (3.2:116). During this highly engaging and entertaining exchange, Bellair directs Harriet, saying, “At one motion play your fan, roll your eyes, and then settle a kind look on me” (116). The phrase “play your fan” almost makes the fan a musical instrument requiring quick fingers and finesse. The fan also becomes an extension of Harriet’s body. Next, Bellair tells Harriet, “Now spread your fan, look down upon it, and tell me the sticks with a finger” (116). Bellair’s direction is, as Harriet notes, “very modish,” thereby implying that the flirtatious fan language is quite in style and is another way in which the performance captures the attention of the sometimes distracted audience; they participate in both the verbal and prop conversations on stage. Bellair’s final suggestion as director in this wonderful moment of metatheatricality heavily blends the body and the prop as he says,

Clap your fan then in both your hands, snatch it to your mouth, smile, and with a lively motion fling your body a little forwards. So! Now spread it, fall back on the sudden, cover your face with it, and break out into a loud laughter. –Take up! Look grave and fall a-fanning to yourself. Admirably well acted! (116)

Bellair directs Harriet’s fan so as to accentuate the eroticism of the female body, highlighting her hands, her mouth, and her torso. Bellair is also strikingly familiar with women’s fans, which means that both men and women understood this unspoken language; the man must equally be versed in fan talk in order to gage his romantic pursuit. Bellair’s familiarity, and the guardian’s willing acceptance of Bellair and Harriet’s gesture, further reinforces the popularity and common usage of fan language.

The physical spectacle of both ingénues is not only put on display for their guardians, but for the audience as well. Sofer imagines that because Harriet and Young Bellair are “out of earshot of the older couple but not of the audience, [they] must be downstage of the others—presumably on the apron or forestage thrusting out in front of the proscenium” (141). This does seem like a practical place for their staged flirtation, thereby giving Harriet and Young Bellair’s gestures an air of didacticism; the performers are almost teaching the audience how to display their bodies as well. Sofer, however, maintains that “Etherege’s fan lesson thematizes the male attempt to script the fan’s eloquence—a situation that occurs on a metatheatrical level, between the playwright’s script and the actress who is paid to perform it” (142). Sofer’s reading and reimagining, which may perhaps be too concerned with exposing misogynistic undertones, mistakenly relies on an imbalance between Young Bellair and Harriet—an imbalance which, frankly, is not there. Sofer suggests that Bellair attempts to control Harriet’s prop, and thus, her body, but Harriet has equal control in her own directions for him; they are equal in their attempts to “script” each other’s bodies for both the onstage audience (Old Bellair and Woodvill) and the audience in the playhouse. Furthermore, Sofer contradicts himself as he asserts that Etherege attempts to limit textually the actress’ prop and body, for earlier in his work he makes it explicitly known that playwrights avoided scripting fans into the stage directions “presumably because the playwright would have expected the actress to incorporate her own fan business into virtually every scene” (129). Therefore, the student-teacher relationship (which Sofer would map onto Bellair and Harriet and have audiences read as female subjugation) is that of the actors and audience. The body language serves to trick Old Bellair and Woodvill while simultaneously illustrating to the audience an equally understood sub-textual relationship between the sexes. Thus, fans do not function solely as hand props, but rather they provide a running form of

communication between men and women, as well as extending and accentuating the staged body in order to foster the relationship between audience and actor, implicating both in the subversive behavior.

### III. Sword, Pistols, and Politics: Masculine Hand Props in *The Rover*

Aphra Behn scripts a total of twelve instances of drawing swords, most of which commence swordplay and staged violence between men. Behn's emphasis on the masculine sword constructs a space in which the female characters find their props rather ineffectual, thus causing characters such as Angellica Bianca and Hellena to strive to undermine the limits of their gender roles by appropriating masculine hand props. But Behn's swords do not function solely as visual metaphors for masculinity; Willmore's sword is an example of how a prop carries with it implied, un-staged, history, and in this case, political implications. Masculine props, then, become loaded objects through which audiences discern aspects of performative masculinity as well as political anxiety in Charles II's court; furthermore, Behn's comedy provides two instances of possible subversion of patriarchal control as Angellica and Hellena trade their feminine hand props for masculine ones, ultimately illustrating how props either visually establish or destabilize gender roles on the Restoration stage.

Behn visually establishes male dominance most commonly through the sword. With the number of actors on stage outweighing the actresses, the playing space is filled with phallic props. The twelve instances of swordplay signify instances of power derived from masculinity, whether it is in the context of competing for a woman, objectifying a woman, or homosocial displays of sexual competency. For instance, three fights in Act II erupt in violent competition for purchasing rights of Angellica, all of them involving Willmore. When Florinda is pulled away by Pedro after the dual, Belvile claims, "Nay, touch her not. She's mine by conquest, sir; I

won her by my sword” (4.2:216). Clearly, Florinda’s body is made into an exchange, very similar to Angellica’s. Florinda’s body is once again placed into a position of potential ownership as Willmore, Belvile, Frederick, Blunt, and Pedro draw their swords, not to fight, but to discern who gets to “discover” the disguised Florinda; as Willmore phrases it, “Come, the longest sword carries her” (5.1:234). The sexual implications are quite clear as the men draw their weapons to see how each of them measure up. Earlier, Willmore also brings himself into the fight for Florinda’s ownership, answering Belvile, “Didst thou so? And egad, child, we’ll keep her by the sword” (4.2:216). Yet there is no reason for Willmore to insert himself enthusiastically into the conflict, which suggests that Willmore’s excessive swordplay is representative of his promiscuity. In fact, Behn introduces audiences to Willmore’s sexual appetite coupled with his affinity for violence early in his entrance. After Willmore is teased by a woman who leaves with her man, Belvile has to caution, “By all means use no violence here” (1.2:178). Willmore can neither contain his sexuality nor his weapon, thereby revealing the intrinsic relationship between prop and body.

Furthermore, Willmore’s sword, and by extension, his body, carry political resonances. Although first performed in 1677, *The Rover, or the Banished Cavaliers* takes place during Cromwell’s control of England and Charles II’s exile, signifying the political undertones; the second half of the title should also alert readers that although the action takes place in Naples, the politics are still distinctly English. Pearson highlights the potential for political implications, writing, “Even sex has a strong political significance in Behn’s plays. In *The Rover*, for instance, which is set in the Interregnum, Willmore’s promiscuity is at least partly political, marking his allegiance to the ‘Rover of Fortune’ [...], the exiled Charles II” (152). Pearson’s assertions can be solidified by examining how Willmore’s prop shapes his politicized sexuality. For instance,



Moretta associates Willmore's costume with his military past: "I believe those breeches and he have been acquainted ever since he was beaten at Worcester" (2.2:192). The actor's body cannot escape a politically charged history, and thus it constantly reminds audiences of Charles II. Most telling is the history of Willmore's sword, ostensibly the most used prop on stage. In trying to impress the disguised Hellena, Willmore boasts, "Faith, child, I have been bred in dangers, and wear a sword that has been employed in a worse cause than for a handsome kind woman" (1.2:179-80). He explicitly calls attention to the unstaged history of the prop, namely its role in the political battles during the Interregnum, which thus intertwines Willmore's sword with the political instability of the mid 17<sup>th</sup> Century. In reminding audiences of the Commonwealth and the monarch's exile, Behn, through Willmore's prop, calls attention to the Stuart court. Willmore is in Naples because Charles II's ship is nearby: "[Charles is] well, and reigns still lord of the wat'ry element. I must abroad again within a day or two, and my business ashore was only to enjoy myself a little with this Carnival" (1.2:177). The monarch is in the periphery and without his direct authority, Willmore's role as a cavalier is degraded; he becomes a force of promiscuity, disruption, and violence.

Thus, Charles II's lack of authority is at the heart of the staged chaos in *The Rover*. Furthermore, while the onstage violence, facilitated through the masculine sword, occurs in the play ostensibly because of the displaced monarch, readers cannot forget Behn is writing in 1677, a time also filled with anxiety concerning the king's authority. One such way in which authors express this anxiety is through images of the monarch's body. Charles II's sexuality was believed to be harming the nation as the monarch's body is simultaneously representative of the body politic. A properly functioning body for the king translates into a properly functioning political system for the nation, and Charles' mistresses represent a clear threat to both. Poets and

dramatists of the time express the anxiety of the monarch's body—corrupted by its closeness with the mistresses'—through fairly seditious remarks. For instance, John Wilmot, the second Earl of Rochester received a blow to his courtly career after giving a wrong poem to Charles II around 1673 or 1674. The poem, "A Satyr on Charles II," conflates the lusty monarch's sexuality with his government through such lines as "His scepter and his prick are of a length; / And she may sway the one who plays with th' other" (11-2). This conflation ultimately undermines Charles II's power as Rochester pointedly asserts that the mistresses have more control than the monarch, thereby destabilizing the structure of court. In giving his physical body to his mistresses, Charles II creates a distribution of power that not only disrupts the unity of the body politic but also destabilizes male authority as women control the monarch. In Behn's comedy, Willmore's prop then becomes a locus for this gender and politic based anxiety as his sword not only reflects his promiscuity and political affiliations, but also the monarch's as Willmore serves as part of Charles II's body politic. Thus, Behn not only conflates sexual energy and swordplay with Willmore's weapon, but also it as a vehicle to implicate Charles II's two bodies, thereby staging the problems of both masculinity and the English court.

Ultimately, Behn overwhelms the stage with instances of masculinity performed through prop gesture in order to firmly construct male dominance, a necessary establishment which she then seeks to complicate through the actresses and their props. For examples, Angellica Bianca attempts to subvert gender roles through hands props, specifically in replacing her fan with a pistol. Sofer establishes a separation between men and women's roles on stage as defined by their props, asserting that "the visual opposition between fan and sword (or pistol) helped the audience fix the sexes into separate spheres" (123). Behn breaks down Sofer's dichotomy with Angellica Bianca. In the first private scene among Angellica, Willmore, and Moretta, modern

readers can only imagine what an experienced actress playing a very experienced courtesan could do with her fan. Behn does provide, however, verbal hints which would most likely accompany Angellica's fan flourishes. First, Angellica gives a very punctuated, "Ha! Ha! Ha! Alas, good captain, what pity 'tis your edifying doctrine will do no good upon me" (2.2:192). The laugh is the same technique employed by Harriet and Young Bellair as a standard means of Restoration flirting, and would likewise be accompanied with some fan gesturing. Angellica's line then becomes an aside, which she would frame with her fan as well. Clearly, the sensuality, subtext, and audience interaction in this scene revolves around Angellica's feminine charms as gestured through her fan.

Audiences can compare Angellica's initial use of her prop with both Harriet and Loveit's relationship with their fans. Sofer asserts that "Harriet's fan in *The Man of Mode* [...] strives to demonstrate female agency and control; yet [...] Loveit's fan in the same play [...] always risks congealing into a symbol of female helplessness and panic" (164). Sofer imagines only two options for how the actress would navigate power and powerlessness with her prop, but Behn's courtesan employs a different tactic. Unlike both women, Angellica, after failing to keep Willmore in a monogamous commitment, trades her fan in for a pistol, thereby exchanging her femininity for masculinity. By replacing her fan with a pistol, Angellica arms herself with a phallus meant for penetration, and seeks to regain the power she lost when her feminine charms failed to keep Willmore. Furthermore, the setting of Angellica's appropriation of the pistol (and by extension, phallus), is quite intimate as it happens inside a private chamber. But Angellica's overpowering of Willmore in the bedroom remains incomplete; although Behn emphasizes Angellica's handling of the pistol by marking it in the stage directions six times, the courtesan can never fire. She makes a rather impotent man. Furthermore, Antonio interrupts and re-claims

Angellica's prop penis, thereby reinforcing the gender appropriate prop usage. Thus, Behn visually explores and questions gender roles through her actors' use, misuse, and replacement of hand props in *The Rover*.

As previously discussed, the potential for the female transvestite role to subvert the male hegemony over the actress' body is problematic; however, as with Margery Pinchwife, imagining how Hellena is able to perform masculinity through gestures illustrates a visual effort to undermine the phallo-centric playing space. Where Angellica fails to control Willmore through the ineffectual use of her appropriated pistol, Hellena succeeds—and does so in breeches. The actress first appears in Act IV, scene ii, and evidently stays in her disguise until the end of the play; Behn explicitly reminds audiences that Hellena is still in men's clothing for the last act: “*Enter HELLENA, as before in boy's clothes*” (5.1:242). If an actress spends two acts dressed as a man, it is reasonable to assume that she would be skilled in carrying herself, and her prop, as a man. After all, Hellena easily convinces the entire stage that she is a man. Although Hellena is called such things as “too young sir,” “pretty advocate,” “young prater,” and “sweet youth,” she is never once suspected of being a woman until she forces Willmore to study her face (4.2:220-3). Perhaps one way in which Hellena dissembles her gender is through her gesturing, adapting her gestures without a fan in order to fit into the patriarchy. She succeeds in earning her place within the male-dominated society through the contract of marriage. At the end of the comedy, Hellena and Willmore make it known that they will be married because of Hellena's active pursuit and deceit; Willmore compliments her, saying, “Egad, thou'rt a brave girl, and I admire thy love and courage. Lead on; no other dangers they can dread, / Who venture in the storms o'th' marriage bed” (5.1:246). Thus, in ending with the promise of marriage, it seems that Hellena, dressed as a man, can use her feigned masculinity to keep Willmore in a monogamous



contract; with a convincing performance of masculinity, Behn provides an opportunity for the actress to use the transvestite role to complicate traditional gender roles in order to destabilize acceptable performances of femininity.

Ultimately, Behn's comedy focuses on the inherent tension as actresses attempt to and sometimes successfully move between firmly established gender roles. By first overwhelming the stage with phallic symbols, Behn constructs a space in which the male hegemony demands that the actresses must appropriate masculine weaponry in order to gain agency. Audiences see this play out with failure and success through Angellica and Hellena, respectively. The stage also becomes politicized through Willmore's sword, thereby alerting readers to the political anxiety surrounding gender roles and courtly power. Thus, Behn not only subverts gender roles on stage through the actress and her prop, but also highlights the growing concern about the king's two bodies and their relationship to gender and power.

#### IV. Penetration and Disruption in *The Way of the World*

*The Way of the World* by William Congreve establishes a playing space in which the fan, as representative of the female voice, dominates the stage; however, he also laces the play with the threat of intrusion from masculine hand props, such as the pistol, sword, or more unsettling, the legal document in order to stage the power struggle between men and women.

Out of the four plays examined, Congreve's piece is arguably the most aware of the relationship between fans, gestures, and the female body. There are many references to and incidents of blushing, a gesture which, as Sofer notes, the fan both hides and accentuates. For example, in the first interaction between Mrs. Marwood and Mrs. Fainall, both women exchange blushes:

MRS FAINALL: Would thou wert married to Mirabell.

MRS. MARWOOD: Would I were!

MRS. FAINALL: You change color.

MRS. MARWOOD: Because I hate him.

The use of fans in this interaction is crucial, as the audience's understanding of the two women's relationship hinges upon physical gesture. Marwood's rumored previous love for Mirabell colors the other characters' perception of her, and it appears that Marwood's obsession for Mirabell is a likely motive for trying to keep him away from Millamant's fortune, as well as her marriage bed. Thus, the actress playing Marwood—originally, Elizabeth Barry—could certainly highlight the more tragic aspects of a formerly betrayed and heartbroken lover in Marwood's character through a physical subtext of fan gesturing. Marwood also calls Mrs. Fainall on her blushing as she remarks, "Methinks you look a little pale, and now you flush again" (2.267). Mrs. Fainall replies with a nonchalant, "Do I? I think I am a little sick o' the sudden," perhaps mirroring the same flippancy through her gesture. Furthermore, the surface text appears polite, if not a bit forced, but on a subsequent reading of the play, readers know that the two women constantly work against each other. On stage, Barry and Leigh may have brought out this animosity through fan gesture to reinforce the kind of blushing duel that the text reveals.

Lady Wishfort, however, makes use of her gesturing to attract her "suitor," Sir Rowland, and thereby subtly tries to subvert the patriarchy with her feminine charms. Similar to Young Bellair and Harriet's flirtation tutorial in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, Wishfort relies on her hand prop to signify her desire which is superficially hidden behind a sense of propriety; she claims, "I shall never break decorums" (3.280). Clearly, Wishfort is not earnest as she proceeds to demonstrate the various ways to present her body to Sir Rowland, as well as the audience. Wishfort questions, "How shall I receive him [Sir Rowland]? In what figure shall I give his heart

the first impression?" (292). This idea of Rowland taking in her first impression mirrors the new Restoration stage convention of discovering actresses in position on stage hidden behind moveable shutters, thereby commenting upon not just the character's impression of Wishfort, but the audience's as well. Congreve also explores the way in which actresses choose to present their bodies as Wishfort runs through various positions: walking and turning around or lying down on a couch with a "loll and lean" (4.292). Ultimately, she decides to start from the couch to a semi-flustered position, stating, "[A]s soon as he appears, start, aye, start and be surprised, and rise to meet him in a pretty disorder—yes—oh, nothing is more alluring than a levee from a couch in some confusion. —It shows the foot to advantage, and furnishes with blushes, and recomposing airs beyond comparison" (4.292-3). The blush and the "recomposing" would naturally incorporate the actress' fan, which illustrates the connection between presenting the actress' body through discovery while accentuating it through fan gesture.

As previously seen through Dorimant in *The Man of Mode*, fan-tearing implies male domination and the suppression of the female voice. Also, there is an intrinsic connection between actress and prop, where the prop visually illustrates the emotional state of the actress. Like Etherege, Congreve presents fan tearing juxtaposed with moments of intense emotions, thereby intertwining bodily harm and fan tearing. In Act I, Congreve introduces the idea of conflating actress and prop as Mirabell reflects on Millamant, stating, "I'll tell thee, Fainall, she once used me with that insolence, that in revenge I took her to pieces; sifted her and separated her failings" (1.258). Mirabell's diction is suggestive of a fan as Millamant is spread apart and torn. It is also telling that Mirabell, in talking about Millamant's inner characteristics, conflates her and her prop. The phrase also parallels Loveit's cry in *The Man of Mode*, "I could tear myself in pieces" after tearing her fan apart (2.2:112), thereby illustrating the connection between body

and prop. Mirabell again closely ties together the actress and the prop as he announces Millamant's entrance in St. James' Park, proclaiming, "Here she comes, i'faith, full sail, with her fan spread and her streamers out, and a shoal of fools for tenders" (2.272). Finally, "took her to pieces" becomes even more telling as Millamant is the only actress in the play to tear her fan. Mrs. Marwood is also under threat of bodily harm. During a confrontation with Fainall, Marwood, in trying to leave, cries, "I care not, let me go. Break my hands, do! I'd leave 'em to get loose" (2.270). Throughout the scene, readers must question what Marwood has been doing with her hands as Fainall pressures her on her love for Mirabell:

FAINALL: That I have been deceived, madam, and you are false.

MRS. MARWOOD: That I am false? What mean you?

FAINALL: To let you know I see through all your little arts. Come, you both love him [Mirabell]; and both have equally dissembled your aversion. [...] I have seen the warm confession reddening on your cheeks" (2.268-9).

Dissembling and discovery are integral aspects of Restoration theatre, as evidenced by the ironic underplaying or witty exaggeration of speech, as well as the new stagecraft technique of literally "discovering" actors and actresses on stage, and it is no surprise that fan gesture functions in a similar way. Although Mrs. Marwood adamantly denies any love for Mirabell—emphatically stating, "You do me wrong. [...] I hate him" (2.269)—her assumed fan, while trying to cover up her body, emphasizes that which she would hide. Fainall, making use of the gaze as a form of subjugation, is thereby able to see through her "little arts" and sees her accentuated blushing, thus making fans a meager defense for Marwood against the patriarchal structure of *The Way of the World*. In trying to escape the gaze of Fainall, Marwood would have him break off her hands, her means of unspoken communication through her prop. Instead of harm to her prop as with

Millamant, Marwood's danger is more carnal, yet functions in the same way; in destroying either hand or hand prop, the staged female voice is subjugated.

The fan is also tied with the social class of the actress. Sofer briefly implicates class division in his argument as filtered through a sort of prop tutelage where a woman of a lower class is taught how to wield her fan by someone of a higher class. First, he suggests that those of lower social standing learned mannerisms of the upper class by watching such performers as Betterton (133). He also cites Mary Pix's *The Beau Defeated* commenting on how a "pretentious middle-class social climber Mrs. Rich tells her niece" how to gesture with her fan (135). Aside from Sofer's suggestions, audiences see instances where social class signifies agency of the fan, and by extension, an actress' body. In Act III of *The Way of the World*, as Millamant and Mincing enter, Mrs. Marwood remarks to Millamant, "You have a color, what's the matter?" (3.283). Millamant replies, "That horrid fellow, Petulant, has provoked me into a flame. I have broke my fan. Mincing, lend me yours" (3.283). As articulated by Sofer, the fan is such a personal property, a unique tool supplied by each individual actress. For Millamant to so easily borrow Mincing's fan illustrates a complete ownership of prop and, by extension, body. In fact, Mincing leaves the theatrical space entirely without reclaiming her fan; she is ordered to announce that Petulant and Witwould may come up and leaves her fan with Millamant. Audiences know Millamant is still in possession of the appropriated fan as indicated by the text. The actress playing Millamant, clearly flustered, must be using her prop in such a way to cause Mrs. Marwood to tease, "Indeed, my dear, you'll tear another fan, if you don't mitigate those violent airs" (3.284). Millamant displays ownership and abuse of Mincing's former prop, and can do so because of her higher social class. As Millamant's woman, Mincing's body is subject to Millamant's whims, and so is her fan. Thus, as evidenced through this instance of appropriation,



fan usage is dictated not solely by gender appropriateness (as Sofer argues), but by the character's social class.

Women were not the only actors to use fans; men playing fops would use them as well. Sofer reports that "fashionable Restoration society, which is largely what the plays of the period reflect, was characterized by rigid adherence to class- and gender-appropriate bodily codes of behavior" (Sofer 121). Informed by this generality, Sofer reads this as a need to perform gender correctly on stage, a need to "do-gender" properly, which means that gendered props in the wrong hands spell failure (145). For instance, in his interpretation of *The Man of Mode*, he notes how Loveit, in breaking her fan, fails as a woman and how Sir Fopling's probable, effeminate "stage business" leads to his failure as a man (144). He asserts that "Loveit and Sir Fopling are punished for their inability to 'do gender' correctly, while Dorimant, Harriet, and Young Bellair are rewarded with spouses for their appealing performances" (145). Sofer's argument seems valid. Although he does not include Angellica's failed appropriation of the pistol in *The Rover* in his argument, Behn's stage business indeed supports the need to separate the sexes through their hand props. However, there may be more fluidity for the men than Sofer imagines. Witwould is not punished by the end of the play for his feminine role as his affected femininity is not a threat to normality. The stock fop would be expected to play against the "gallants" of the piece, namely the more masculine men. Witwould would might be armed with a fan, an "accouterment solely of women and effeminate fops" (Sofer 123). As his brother, Sir Wilfull, surprisingly reports, Witwould is "so be-cravated and be-periwigged" that he is almost beyond recognition (3.288). Wilfull plainly states, "You're a fop, dear brother" (3.288). With the audience's recognition of Witwould as a standard fop, it is easy to imagine him performing gender in a similar way as Millamant, especially considering both Millamant and Witwoud share repeated pointed laughter

in the text. Witwoud's first scene is laced with verbal cues which suggest a need for prop gesturing. To Mirabell, he flippantly jokes, "Truths! ha! ha! ha! No, no, since you will have it, I mean he never speaks truth at all, that's all" (1.262). Moments later, with Petulant, he remarks, "Ha! ha! ha! I had a mind to see how the rogue would come off. Ha! ha! ha!" (1.263). Though Witwoud's laughter stems from a sense of self-amusement, this vocalization connects him, at least textually, to Millamant, whom he may also mirror physically. Millamant's laughter reveals anxiety and a need to distract from her emotional vulnerability. For instance, while flirting with Mirabell, she misleadingly states, "Well, I won't have you, Mirabell—I'm resolved—I think—you may go.—Ha! ha! ha!" (2.275). The intrinsic beats in the line would certainly be accentuated with actress' fan gesturing, as would the laugh. She continues to verbally tease Mirabell, saying, "Ha! ha! ha!—Well, I won't laugh, don't be peevish—Heighho! Now I'll be melancholy, as melancholy as a watch-light" (2.275). While she shifts from laughter to affected sadness, Millamant, played by the experienced Bracegirdle, would have incorporated her fan into shifts of the line. Thus, there is a blurred line between performing gender, yet there is no consequence as Sofer would suggest. Witwoud remains the self-amused, would-be comic. The fan is then a hand prop with the power to move between the sexes, an ability lacking in the sword or pistol.

Another possibility is that Witwoud is not flourishing with a fan at all. Although Sofer reports a use of fans among fops, Styan does not include a fan among the list of props that would accompany a male actor: "In his pocket or sleeve was always a handkerchief awaiting his proper attention, and indoors or out he might carry a cane, his gloves or his muff" (59). Some aspects of the handkerchief's "proper attention" function in a similar way to the actress' fan. Styan asserts:

[A ] graceful arch of the wrist when plucking, flicking or waving his gloves or his handkerchief took not a little skill, and such items afforded his hands a kind of extra

vocabulary by which their owner could express himself more eloquently, emphasizing one point or demolishing another. (59)

I question the idea of the handkerchief's ability of "demolishing" a point using other than a flippant twirl of the wrist, leaving Witwoud with the power to solely accentuate the text.

Ultimately, the handkerchief cannot stand up against the versatile fan. While Witwoud's laughter is accompanied only by a lackluster flair for telling jokes, Millamant's vocalizations are misleading constructions, most likely bolstered or subverted by her fan, a prop which, as already stated, can unfurl, snap, titillate, or block. Witwoud's handkerchief, however, droops in his hand. Thus, Witwoud's hand prop is a rather flaccid attempt at mimicking the feminine voice, as much as Angellica's appropriated pistol is an impotent attempt at masculine authority. In this regards, Witwoud does fail and remains an object of farce, comically caught between male and female.

Overall, *The Way of the World* explores the power struggle between men and women in Restoration society, and as such, seeks to enact that struggle visually through the conflict between hand props. Specifically, in Lady Wishfort's home, a space inhabited by the feminine charms of the fan, there is a constant threat of penetration or violation from masculine hand props such as the sword or, more disconcertingly, the legal document. First, it is clear that the male characters of the play find the fan a subversive and thus dangerous tool. In negotiating his future with Millamant, Mirabell lists, "*Item*, I shut my doors against all bawds with baskets, and pennyworths of muslin, china, fans, atlases, etc" (4.297). Mirabell seeks to remove the subversive prop from his future union with Millamant, thereby controlling her voice. Without fans on stage, the playing space would be dominated by masculine hand props, namely the sword. Styan places a great deal of importance on the sword. He notes, "Certainly, what an actor did with his hat and sword in those days mattered far more than how an actor manages his teacup

and saucer, or his cocktail and cigarette, today” (59). Audiences first discern the possibility of drawn swords on stage as early as the first act. In attempting to keep information away from Mirabell, at least for a moment, Petulant proclaims, “If throats are to be cut, let swords clash! Snug’s the word; I shrug and am silent” (1.264). Of course, as two men discussing a woman, the actors threaten to draw their phallic props and compare, yet they do not. Another threat comes from Waitwell, posing as Sir Rowland, as he, in performing an overly masculine lover, exclaims, “I saw there was a throat to be cut presently. If he were my son, as he is my nephew, I’d pistol him!” (4.305). This time, the threat of masculine violence has moved into Lady Wishfort’s home, a distinctly feminine space, but as in the first instance, the masculine stage props remain holstered—that is, until the final act. While the audience hears the threat in the first act and the fourth, it is not until the fifth act that Congreve finally stages male authority as represented through hand props. First, Fainall’s diction suggests that the legal document he is drawing up—the plan for keeping Lady Wishfort single, receiving his wife’s fortune, and six thousand pounds of Millamant’s fortune—is connected to his genitals. Fainall states, “[T]he *instrument* [the document] is drawing, to which you must set your hand till more sufficient deeds can be perfected; which I will take care shall be done with all possible speed. In the meanwhile, I will go for the said *instrument*” (5.312 emphasis mine). According to Eric Partridge, the word “instrument” is a euphemism for “penis” in early modern vocabulary, and no doubt its colloquial meaning carried into 1700 (164). Also, the use of “drawing,” as well as the phallic overtones, connects the contract to the sword and pistol. This connection is furthered as Fainall, in returning with the contract, announces, “Here is the instrument” (5.314). Sir Wilfull stands up against Fainall’s manipulations, challenging,

And, sir, I assert my right; and will maintain it in defiance of you, sir, and of your instrument. ‘Sheart, an you talk of an instrument, sir, I have an old fox by my thigh shall hack your instrument of ram vellum to shreds, sir! [...] Therefore, withdraw your instrument, sir, or by’r Lady, I shall draw mine. (5.314-5)

The repetition of “instrument” in lieu of “contract” or “document” alerts readers to the double entendre which Congreve plays upon. Wilfull’s juxtaposition of his “instrument” against Fainall’s also establishes a competition between masculinity, a competition heightened by the threat of castration as Wilfull will “hack” Fainall’s prop phallic symbol. In fact, when Fainall’s plot is foiled and his legal “instrument” made useless, he seeks to regain his authority with his sword. In the stage directions, Congreve writes that Fainall “*offers to run at Mrs. Fainall*” (5.317). Fainall, however, does not get to use his sword to silence Mrs. Fainall. Much like Wycherley’s Pinchwife, Fainall’s phallic prop never penetrates his wife, thereby revealing his impotence. Thus, the masculine hand props of *The Way of the World* threaten to disrupt the action throughout the play, but ultimately lose to equally witty lovers (Mirabell and Millamant) and clever women (Mrs. Fainall).

#### V: From Things to Kings: Implications for Charles II’s Court

Clearly, props add a crucial level to the interpretation of the plays. In a time when gender on stage shifts to a dialogue between men and women, gendered props visually reinforce and simultaneously subvert gender roles. Women find power, but paradoxically vulnerability, in their fans, as evidenced by Etherege’s Harriet, Behn’s Angellica, and Wycherley’s Lady Fidget. Men, however, forcefully dominate the acting space with their swords and pistols, as demonstrated by Antonio or Pinchwife. Ultimately, the tension across the comedies concerning gender appropriateness and the staged bodies mirrors a similar tension in Restoration politics. As



previously discussed, Behn's *The Rover* reminds the readers of the sexualized nature of Charles II's court, and ostensibly, it is the monarch's displacement and the banished cavaliers that allow Helena and Angellica to move between disguises and genders. Similarly, the displacement of Charles II's body out of government and into the bedroom complicates the staged female body in the theatres. Thus, the anxiety surrounding gender as a whole in Restoration comedies, as evidenced through stage props, stems from an unease of women gaining political power from Charles II's sexual promiscuity. Hand props reflect a need for stable gender roles, as evidenced by the inadequacy which ensues when women use pistols or men use fans, yet the fan also placed the actress' body into a tenuous space classified by both presentation and subterfuge. This tension mapped onto the actress' staged body is also indicative of the national tension produced by Charles II's sexuality and the body politic. As Charles II gives his physical body to his mistresses, in a way, he gives away part of the monarch's second body—the body politic.

As mentioned in examining the political resonances in *The Rover*, Rochester's work provides solid contemporary context for suggesting the political importance of the four comedies previously explored. In taking a brief look at Rochester's drama, audiences discern that although in a slightly different genre, Rochester's work highlights Wycherley, Etherege, Behn, and Congreve's possible concerns over gender roles in Charles II's court. Sentiments concerning Charles' sexuality subverting the country emerge in both of Rochester's closet dramas, *Valentinian, A Tragedy* and *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery*.<sup>3</sup> Critics believe *Valentinian* was written after "A Satyr on Charles II" in early 1675, and similar to the poem, the

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<sup>3</sup> As a critical caveat, it is not certain whether or not Rochester definitely wrote *Sodom*; early manuscripts were anonymous, and although early print editions were attributed to him, critics remain undecided about the authorship of *Sodom*. For the intents of this argument, *Sodom* is read as Rochester's work because of the similar political themes, namely the criticisms of Charles II's court, which are in conversation with both "A Satyr on Charles II" and *Valentinian*.

drama juxtaposes the monarch's disruptive and immoral sexual conquest—the rape of the chaste Lucina—with the destruction of the state. Anne Hermanson also reads political tension in the unstaged drama<sup>4</sup>, asserting that his “condemnations of Valentinian make implicit comparisons with Charles II and the common anxiety, expressed in contemporary writing and satirical verse, that Charles's immoderate sexual desires were taking him away from the important matters of state” (17). Hermanson's argument is certainly valid, and the conflict between private pleasure and public state clearly interest Rochester as he also explores it in *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery*. First, *Sodom* presents an image of a court and a kingdom in chaos due to the sexual voraciousness of the monarch. Bolloximian proclaims, “My Pintle only shall my scepter be; / My laws shall not more pleasure than command / And with my Prick. I'll govern all the land” (I.i). Like in “A Satyr,” Rochester connects the king's penis with his emblem of ruling—and ostensibly, his textual, dramatic prop. Even though the piece is not performed, audiences are still explicitly called to blend penis and scepter, body and prop. Rochester's farcical attacks also implicate Charles II in violating the country; Rochester's version of Charles, Bolloximian, proclaims, “I have fuckt and bugger'd all the land” (99). Furthermore, Bolloximian is blind to “the tortur'd pains [his] nation doth endure” because of his sexual appetite. Clearly, the king's conflated body and royal prop become a locus for anxiety concerning the state of the nation as funneled through sexuality. While expressing political concern, Rochester's comedy still finds its humor in the bedroom, as do the comedies explored earlier, thereby revealing the connection between bodies, sexuality, and props in a political conversation.

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<sup>4</sup> Hermanson reports that *Valentinian* was successfully produced and received “in February, 1684, several years after Rochester's death. It appears, however, that Rochester wrote the manuscript for the play early in 1675, a timeframe on which Larry Carver and Harold Love agree” as well as included a cast in the manuscript version suggestive of the same theatre season (16). This evidence would strongly suggest intent for performance, but the fact remains that the play remained in manuscript form during Rochester's life, implying either societal or self-censorship.

The theatre, connected to the court, stages the anxiety of the political repercussions of the female body through the actress and her hand props. As evidenced, actresses had the ability to subvert the text through their fans, thereby staging otherwise hidden voices. This new power and voice implicates Charles II and the body politic because of his connections to the playhouse. Literally, the theatre housed his body—and the body of his court—as he and his court were prized audience members (Powell 13). As an audience member, Charles II is implicated in any asides made by the actress and also participates in the optical erotics directed by the actress' fan. Furthermore, Charles II promoted the theatre by giving his support to Davenant, and more notably, Killigrew, the “king's friend and Court Jester” (Powell 8). Besides granting permission for performances to both managers, Charles II also lent his name to Killigrew's performers, the King's Company (Powell 8). The connection between the king's body and the actress' body is made more carnal as it was common knowledge that Nell Gwyn, an actress in the King's Company, was Charles II's mistress. Thus, the anxiety surrounding gender as a whole in Restoration comedies, as evidenced through stage props, stems from an unease of women gaining political power from Charles II's sexual promiscuity.

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