**William Wycherley**

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| **William Wycherley** |
| William Wycherley by Sir Peter Lely.jpg |
| **Born** | 1641[Clive, Shropshire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clive%2C_Shropshire), England |
| **Died** | 1 January 1716London, England |
| **Occupation** | poet; playwright |
| **Notable works** | [*The Country Wife*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Country_Wife); [*The Plain Dealer*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Plain_Dealer_%28play%29) |

**William Wycherley** (*c.* 1641 – 1 January 1716) was an [English](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England) [dramatist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dramatist) of the [Restoration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Restoration) period, best known for the plays [*The Country Wife*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Country_Wife) and [*The Plain Dealer*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Plain_Dealer_%28play%29).

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**Biography**

He was born at Clive near Shrewsbury, Shropshire and baptised on 8 April 1641 at [Whitchurch, Shropshire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whitchurch%2C_Shropshire)[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley#cite_note-ODNB-1) where he probably spent his youngest days before being settled in Malappuram, India where his family was settled on a moderate estate of about £600 a year. Like [John Vanbrugh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Vanbrugh), Wycherley spent some years of his adolescence in [France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France), where he was sent, at fifteen, to be educated on the banks of the [Charente](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charente).[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley#cite_note-:1-2)

While in France, Wycherley converted to [Roman Catholicism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholicism). He returned to England shortly before the restoration of King [Charles II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_II_of_England), and lived at [Queen's College, Oxford](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Queen%27s_College%2C_Oxford) where [Thomas Barlow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Barlow_%28bishop%29) was provost.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley#cite_note-:1-2) Under Barlow's influence, Wycherley returned to the [Church of England](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_England).

[Thomas Macaulay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Macaulay) hints that Wycherley's turning back to Roman Catholicism once more had something to do with the patronage and unwonted liberality of the future [James II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_II_of_England).[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley#cite_note-:0-3) As a professional fine gentleman, at a period when, as the genial Major Pack says, "the amours of Britain would furnish as diverting memoirs, if well related, as those of France published by [Rabutin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_de_Rabutin%2C_Comte_de_Bussy), or those of [Nero](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero)'s court writ by [Petronius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petronius)", Wycherley was obliged to be a loose liver. However, his nickname of "Manly Wycherley" seems to have been earned by his straightforward attitude to life.

Wycherley left Oxford and took up residence at the [Inner Temple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inner_Temple), but gave little attention to the study of law. Pleasure and the stage were his only interests. His play, *Love in a Wood*, was produced early in 1671 at the [Theatre Royal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_Royal%2C_Drury_Lane), [Drury Lane](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drury_Lane). It was published the next year. Though Wycherley boasted of having written the play at the age of nineteen, before going to Oxford, this is probably untrue. Macaulay points to the allusions in the play to gentlemen's [periwigs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Periwig), to guineas, to the vests which Charles ordered to be worn at court, to the [Great Fire of London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Fire_of_London), etc., as showing that the comedy could not have been written the year before the author went to Oxford.

That the writer of a play far more daring than [George Etherege](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Etherege)'s *She Would if She Could* — and far more brilliant too — should at once become the talk of the court was inevitable; equally inevitable was it that the author of the song at the end of the first act, in praise of harlots and their offspring, should attract the attention of the king's mistress, [Barbara Villiers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Villiers), Duchess of Cleveland. Possibly Wycherley intended this famous song as a glorification of Her Grace and her profession, for he seems to have been more delighted than surprised when, as he passed in his coach through [Pall Mall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pall_Mall%2C_London), he heard her address him from her coach window as a "rascal" and a "villain", and the son of a woman such as that mentioned in the song. His answer was perfect: "Madam, you have been pleased to bestow a title on me which belongs only to the fortunate." Seeing that she received the compliment in the spirit in which it was meant, he lost no time in calling upon her, and was from that moment the recipient of those "favours" to which he alludes with pride in the dedication of the play to her. Voltaire's story (in his *Letters on the English Nation*) that Her Grace used to go to Wycherley's chambers in the Temple disguised as a country wench, in a straw hat, with pattens on and a basket in her hand, may be apocryphal, for disguise was superfluous in her case, but it shows how general was the opinion that, under such patronage as this, Wycherley's fortune as poet and dramatist was now made. King Charles, who had determined to bring up his son, the Duke of Richmond, like a prince, sought as his tutor a man as qualified as Wycherley to impart a "princely education", and it seems clear that, if not for Wycherley's marriage, the education of the young man would actually have been entrusted to him as a reward for having written *Love in a Wood*.

Whether Wycherley's experiences as a naval officer, which he alludes to in his lines "On a Sea Fight which the Author was in betwixt the English and the Dutch", occurred before or after the production of *Love in a Wood* is a point upon which opinions differ, but probably took place not only after the production of *Love in a Wood* but after the production of *The Gentleman Dancing Master*, in 1673. Macaulay claims that he went to sea simply because it was the "polite" thing to do so — because, as he says in the epilogue to *The Gentleman Dancing Master*, "all gentlemen must pack to sea". This second comedy was published in 1673, but was probably acted late in 1671. In *The Gentleman Dancing Master* the mingling of discordant elements destroys a play that would never in any circumstances have been strong.

It is, however, on his two last comedies — [*The Country Wife*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Country_Wife) and [*The Plain Dealer*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Plain_Dealer_%28play%29) — that sustain Wycherley's reputation. *The Country Wife*, produced in 1672 or 1673 and published in 1675, is full of wit, ingenuity, high spirits and conventional humour.

Wycherley's efforts to bring to [the Duke of Buckingham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Villiers%2C_2nd_Duke_of_Buckingham)'s notice the case of [Samuel Butler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Butler_%281612-1680%29) shows that the writer of even such plays as [*The Country Wife*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Country_Wife) may have generous impulses, while his defense of Buckingham, when the duke in his turn fell into trouble, show that the inventor of so shameless a fraud as that which forms the pivot of *The Plain Dealer* may in actual life possess that passion for fair play which is seldom believed to be an English quality. But among the "ninety-nine" religions with which Voltaire accredited England there is one whose permanency has never been shaken — the worship of gentility. To this Wycherley remained as faithful to the day of his death as Congreve himself. And, if his relations to that "other world beyond this", which the [Puritans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puritans) had adopted, were liable to change with his environments, it was because that "other world" was really out of fashion altogether.

It was after the success of *The Plain Dealer* that the turning point came in Wycherley's career.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley#cite_note-:0-3) The great dream of all the men about town in Charles's time, as Wycherley's plays all show, was to marry a widow, young and handsome, a peer's daughter if possible — but in any event rich, and spend her money upon wine and women. While talking to a friend in a bookseller's shop at Tunbridge, Wycherley heard *The Plain Dealer* asked for by a lady who, in the person of the countess of Drogheda (Letitia Isabella Robartes, eldest daughter of the [1st Earl of Radnor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Robartes%2C_1st_Earl_of_Radnor) and widow of the 2nd [Earl of Drogheda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earl_of_Drogheda)), answered all the requirements. An introduction ensued, then love-making, then marriage — a secret marriage, probably in 1680, for, fearing to lose the king's patronage and the income therefrom, Wycherley still thought it politic to pass as a bachelor.

He had not seen enough of life to learn that in the long run nothing is politic but "straightforwardness". Whether because his countenance wore a pensive and subdued expression, suggestive of a poet who had married a dowager countess and awakened to the situation, or whether because treacherous confidants divulged his secret, does not appear, but the news of his marriage oozed out — it reached the royal ears, and deeply wounded the father anxious about the education of his son. Wycherley lost the appointment that was so nearly within his grasp — lost indeed the royal favour for ever. He never had an opportunity of regaining it, for the countess seems to have really loved him, and *Love in a Wood* had proclaimed the writer to be the kind of husband whose virtue prospers best when closely guarded at the domestic hearth. Wherever he went the countess followed trim, and when she did allow him to meet his boon companions it was in a tavern in [Bow Street](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bow_Street) opposite to his own house, and even there under certain protective conditions. In summer or in winter he was obliged to sit with the window open and the blinds up, so that his wife might see that the party included no member of a sex for which her husband's plays had advertised his partiality.

She died, however, in the year after her marriage and left him the whole of her fortune. But the title to the property was disputed; the costs of the litigation were heavy — so heavy that his father was unable (or else he was unwilling) to come to his aid; and the result of his marrying the rich, beautiful and titled widow was that the poet was thrown into the Fleet prison. There he remained for seven years, being finally released by the liberality of James II. James had been so much gratified by seeing *The Plain Dealer* acted that, finding a parallel between Manly's "manliness" and his own, such as no spectator had before discovered, he paid off Wycherley's execution creditor and settled on him a pension of £200 a year.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-%3A0-3)

Other debts still troubled Wycherley, however, and he never was released from his embarrassments, not even after succeeding to a life estate in the family property. In coming to Wycherley's death, we come to the worst allegation that has ever been made against him as a man and as a gentleman. At the age of seventy-five he married a young girl, and is said to have done so in order to spite his nephew, the next in succession, knowing that he himself must shortly die and that the jointure would impoverish the estate.

Wycherley died in the early hours of 1 January 1716, and was buried in the vault of the church in [Covent Garden](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covent_Garden%22%20%5Co%20%22Covent%20Garden).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-ODNB-1)

William Wycherley may have coined the expression "[nincompoop](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nincompoop%22%20%5Co%20%22Nincompoop)" (certainly, the word occurs in *The Plain Dealer*). The *[Oxford English Dictionary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_English_Dictionary%22%20%5Co%20%22Oxford%20English%20Dictionary)* also cites Wycherley as the first user of the phrase "happy-go-lucky", in 1672.

[Voltaire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voltaire%22%20%5Co%20%22Voltaire) was a great admirer of Wycherley's plays, and once said of them:

Il semble que les Anglais prennent trop de liberté et que les Françaises n'en prennent pas assez (It seems that the Englishmen take too much liberty and the Frenchwomen don't take enough).[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-4)

**Bibliography**

* *William Wycherley* Edited with an Introduction and Notes by W C Ward, part of [*Mermaid Series*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mermaid_Series) Includes biography of Wycherley, together with the following written in play format *Love in a Wood or St James's Park*, *The Gentleman Dancing Master*, *The Country Wife* and the *Plain Dealer*.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wycherley#cite_note-5)

**Footnotes**

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| https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/4c/Wikisource-logo.svg/38px-Wikisource-logo.svg.png | [Wikisource](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikisource) has original works written by or about:[***William Wycherley***](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Author%3AWilliam_Wycherley) |

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| https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/4/4a/Commons-logo.svg/30px-Commons-logo.svg.png | Wikimedia Commons has media related to [***William Wycherley***](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category%3AWilliam_Wycherley). |

 *Bennett, Kate (2004). ["Wycherley, William (bap. 1641, d. 1716)"](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30120).* [*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_Dictionary_of_National_Biography) *(Online ed.). Oxford University Press. [doi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_object_identifier%22%20%5Co%20%22Digital%20object%20identifier):*[*10.1093/ref:odnb/30120*](https://doi.org/10.1093/ref%3Aodnb/30120)*. Retrieved 2015-08-04.* (subscription or [UK public library membership](https://global.oup.com/oxforddnb/info/freeodnb/libraries/) required)

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  *Shaw, Thomas B. (1867). A Complete Manual of English Literature. New York: Sheldon & Company.*

  Biography incorporates text from the Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition, a publication now in the public domain.

* 1.  Detail from a copy of the book published by Fisher Unwin [London](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London) with no date (c1950) with no ISBN

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*  This article incorporates text from a publication now in the [public domain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_domain): *Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "[Wycherley, William](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/1911_Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica/Wycherley%2C_William%22%20%5Co%20%22wikisource%3A1911%20Encyclop%C3%A6dia%20Britannica/Wycherley%2C%20William)". [Encyclopædia Britannica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclop%C3%A6dia_Britannica_Eleventh_Edition%22%20%5Co%20%22Encyclop%C3%A6dia%20Britannica%20Eleventh%20Edition).* ***28*** *(11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.*
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