

A Way of Working

**An individual and comparative examination of the functional elements
of *Tartuffe*, *The Country Wife*, and *Arms and the Man***

Introduction

The neoclassical comedies of Molière greatly influenced the playwrights of English Restoration comedies who developed the Comedy of Manners style, which in turn, influenced the late 19th and early 20th century playwrights like Wilde, Shaw, and Coward. By tracing the thread of comic theory and the modes of social commentary that each period of playwriting shares, as well as examining their individual deviations, the theatre artist gains a framework of knowledge that they can apply to the major question of production: how does the play and all its elements (comedy, character, action, social critique, etc.) function? This paper will compare, contrast, and examine the functional elements of Jean-Baptiste Molière's *Tartuffe*, William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, and George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* from the perspective of a producing theatre artist who must identify the major dramatic action and the characters' function in that action, the source of the comedy, and the potential message of play to the audience. The ultimate objective of this paper is to give a basic and practical breakdown of each play for the purpose of illuminating for the theatre artist, specially the actor/director, a way of working; in so doing, also revealing some general approaches to language-based, comedies of style from this wide-ranging period.

I

Tartuffe, or, *The Imposter*, written in 1664, was banned in Paris and not allowed a public performance until 1669, which is just one indication that Molière's comedy attacking religious hypocrisy had struck a nerve in French society. During this period, the Paris Parliament was struggling to suppress Catholic secret societies that were infiltrating the government and starting a puritanical war condemning all human instincts as inherently evil. The comedy of *Tartuffe* functioned as a healthy satire of this behavior which Molière perceived as a dangerous deviation from societal norms. A romantic comedy doesn't *structurally* support social commentary from the playwright. A playwright like Shakespeare, who wrote in this romantic comedy form, would

instead insert or embed commentary within the story, often using certain characters as mouthpieces. For a neoclassical comedy of character like *Tartuffe*, the substance and subject of the play *is* society and the problems within it. Molière adheres to the neoclassical formula of abstracting an essentially human quality or flaw and presenting it as a character type, with no specific past history, physical descriptions, or details beyond that general essence. This type interacts with other types in a highly organized situation designed to expose the human flaw and its deviation from the norms of society.

Molière exposes the actions of the professionally pious by presenting the character of Tartuffe, the religious hypocrite, as essentially a hustler or con man. And every con man needs an easy mark, and Orgon fits the bill as the gullible new convert. The two types exist only in combination. The character of Orgon is also vital to the comedy of the play. Comedy requires a certain intellectual detachment for the audience to laugh. The threat of religious hypocrisy was too serious in French society to laugh at directly. By making Orgon and Madame Pernelle the only members of the family that buy what Tartuffe is selling, their gullibility weakens the threat of Tartuffe's deceptions enough for the comedy to emerge.

Understanding the comedic purpose of Orgon suggests that the major dramatic action for the play involves a struggle between Tartuffe and the Pernelle family over the trust of Orgon. One possible major dramatic action statement is: This is the day that Tartuffe runs a con game on Orgon and his family, but the family finally reveals him to Orgon as a fraud. With this dramatic action, the family supplies the normal point of view on Tartuffe. They are the norm and Tartuffe and Orgon are the deviation from it. The audience can more clearly see and laugh at the incongruity of Orgon's and Tartuffe's behavior when set against that of the family. The gap created by their deviation from the norm is the major source of comedy and the primary delivery device of social comment, because the gap reveals and highlights the absurdity of the human foibles represented in the types.

The actor can tie each scene (excluding perhaps, the Act 5 *rex ex machina*) into the major dramatic action and choose actions and tactics consistent with the telling of the story. For Tartuffe, his tactical maneuvers are plucked from the con man's guide book. The action of a con man is: get confidence by giving it first. In Act 3 scene 3, Tartuffe reveals his passion and lust to Elmire, throwing himself at her mercy, giving her the power to destroy him, all the while hoping that his gesture of confidence in her mercy will inspire her to risk returning his advances. When

Damis reveals to Orgon the advances Tartuffe made on his wife, Tartuffe gambles once again. He urges Orgon to recognize all his sinfulness and believe every bad report that Damis gives because, he says, “they are my just reward” (Act 3, sc. 6). In one emotional plea for punishment he simultaneously solidifies Orgon’s confidence in him and discredits his accuser. In order for these actions to be funny, the actor’s choice of point of view for Tartuffe must account for the fact that only the most gullible (Orgon and Madame Pernelle) fall for his schemes. If Elmire and the audience know that Tartuffe is a hypocrite, and he tries his story on her, then the comic gap is created by the difference between how convincing and effective Tartuffe *thinks* he is and how much Elmire is just toying with him in order to reveal his hypocrisy. Essentially, the Tartuffe and Elmire scene is two people trying to con each other, and the audience can laugh because they, like Elmire, are smarter than Tartuffe. He thinks he is winning, the audience knows he is not.

Molière’s implementation of various elements from *commedia dell’arte* provides another source of comedy in Tartuffe. Dorine, the surly and insightful maid, is patterned after one of the *zani* characters in *commedia* (like Columbina). Mariane and Valere, the lovers, are fashioned after the *innamorati*. The whole story for the lovers is sampled from *commedia* scenarios. Like Molière’s two lovers, the *innamorati* often run up against some obstacle to their love, and characteristically, they are completely incapable of solving it without outside help from a *zani* character like Dorine. Mariane and Valere are the essence of lovers – completely clouded by their emotions, easily hurt, and utterly irrational. These qualities are exposed for comic effect in Act 2 scene 4, just after Valere has heard offstage that Orgon has broken their engagement and has promised Mariane to Tartuffe instead. Valere opens with, “Madame, a piece of news is going about, / Unknown to me, but very fine, no doubt,” which sets the tone for the scene. (Act 2 sc. 4) The forced casualness of the language belies a great fear that Mariane has given up her love and now prefers Tartuffe. Out of hurt and a sense of propriety, their pride covers this fear, and neither one will admit they love the other first. They both need reassurance from the other, but instead they fight their way into accepting (begrudgingly) their ill fate. Dorine is somewhere in the middle shaking her head, just waiting to see how far it will go. Dorine shares the audience point of view that sees two lovers pushing each other away when they are really just too scared to risk screaming out, “I love you, I’m scared, and I’ll fight for you.” The audience laughs at the gap between the human impulse and the contradictory behavior.

The lovers' quarrel escalates to a physical bit of comedy, what is known in *commedia* as a *lazzi*. *Commedia* troupes would throw in a *lazzi* to maintain or revive the audience's interest. For a similar effect, Molière has written in *lazzi's* to pace his play. Valere begins a series of false exits. He invents upon each exit a new reason to quickly return. On first return, Valere "dispassionately" clarifies, "At least remember that it's you / Who's driving me to what I'm going to do." The audience knows that Valere is really just begging for her to stop him. Valere exits again and quickly returns pretending to have heard her call. Then, neither one will budge as they make "small talk" about him exiting for a final time (an obvious form of stalling from the audience POV). Valere makes his "final" exit and at this point, Dorine has had enough. She jumps in to remind them of their love and rally them together against their problem. But this does not prove to be easy. Instead, the *lazzi* expands as Dorine chases down one lover, only to lose the other lover that she had just secured. The tried and true comic types, scenarios, and physical comedy from *commedia* that Molière has adapted and woven into his play demonstrates one of the basic functions of neoclassical comedy – exposing how the lovers' sense of pride and propriety squelched their natural human impulse.

II

While the plot for a comedy of character is a specifically crafted situation designed to expose the human foibles personified in the main characters, the Restoration comedy of manners develops a more distant relationship to plot. At the pinnacle of Restoration comedy – Congreve's *The Way of the World* – a wildly intricate plot was used primarily as an excuse for some characters to display wit with ease and for other characters to try in vain. As with Molière's, Wycherley's characters in *The Country Wife* are also neoclassical types that depict a certain universal human essence, but now they are often given names that allude to this essence: Horner – the rake character, gives "horns" when cuckolding; Pinchwife – extremely jealous and over-protective of his new country wife; Sparkish – a fop character whose wit never quite sparks; Fidget and Squeamish (a.k.a. "the virtuous gang") – ladies that guard their public reputation, but have no sense of private morality – squeamish in public, lusty in private. When set against straight characters like Harcourt and Alithea that establish the norm, these abstracted types give the audience an unambiguous and critical perspective on human impulses and the social rules through which they are expressed.

Wycherley had a specific audience comprised primarily of a privileged class. The court of Charles II, which introduced many French cultural influences and established a new appetite for theatre, was both the subject and the audience in the theatre. Wycherley, a courtier himself, in some ways is reaffirming the status of this class by punishing in his play characters like Pinchwife and Sir Jasper who represent a new rising business-class. But the main social commentary of *The Country Wife* resembles a common action of Restoration comedy, which is to pit marriages of love and affection against those marriages arranged for dynastic or mercenary reasons. Recognizing this repeating theme helps the artist extract a major dramatic action from a dense plot comprised of three interwoven plots.

The first plot deals with Harry Horner and his trick of pretending to be impotent. His goal is to seduce as many respectable ladies as possible. The false report of his impotence serves two functions. Jealous husbands that are well aware of his reputation now see him as harmless and allow him unlimited access to their wives. And “respectable” ladies who react in disappointment or disgust at the news of his impotence reveal themselves as women secretly looking for an affair. The hypocrisy revealed on all sides by this trick is a continual source of comedy from this plot line.

The second plot, partially borrowed from Molière’s *School For Wives*, involves the marriage of Pinchwife and his country wife, Margery. Pinchwife, a middle-aged man, has chosen an ignorant, unworldly country wife in the hope that she will not be sophisticated enough to cuckold him. Once in the city, Margery’s curiosity about the “shady elements” of town life torments Pinchwife. The ongoing joke of this plot line is that Pinchwife’s insane jealousy invariably provides for Margery the very information and opportunities he wishes to keep from her.

The third plot is a rather conventional love story. Harcourt, a reformed rake, courts Alithea, who is engaged to the fop character, Sparkish. Alithea, the only absolutely pure and virtuous character in the play, respects her engagement to Sparkish, despite the fact that he constantly reveals himself as an opportunistic, self-serving ass. Alithea finally reveals her love for Harcourt when Sparkish breaks his engagement with her based on a false suspicion of her infidelity with Horner. Sparkish provides the comedy for this plot line. His self-centered motives blind him to the fact that he constantly helps Harcourt woo his own fiancé right in front of him.

Just as Molière sets the extremes of Tartuffe and Orgon against the family, Wycherley uses straight characters like Harcourt, Alithea, and Lucy as a social reference point. Their self-

awareness as characters provides a norm. The gap created by the other character's deviation from that norm provides both the comedy and the commentary. These straight characters are also another clue to extracting the major dramatic action. In Act 4 scene 1, Lucy touches on the theme of so many Restoration comedies as she tries to convince Alithea to break with Sparkish and embrace her love for Harcourt: "Can there be a greater cheat or wrong done to a man than to give him your person without your heart? I should make a conscience of it... The woman that marries to love better will be as much mistaken as the wencher that marries to live better... marrying to increase love is like gaming to become rich; alas, you only lose what little stock you had before."

Recognizing this thematic statement on love and marriage organizes the play and the characters in it. Then the producing artist must add up the clues: Harcourt has rejected his rakish past for true love. Alithea is the only virtuous woman – and the only one Horner does not touch. Sparkish loses Alithea because he was foolish enough to believe she was false with Horner. Pinchwife's jealousy backfires. He treats Margery as if she were stupid and she, in turn, plays stupid to deceive him. The jealous Pinchwife is cuckolded by Horner. The arrogant and complacent Sir Jasper is cuckolded by Horner. And at the end of the play, there is no punishment for Horner in sight. In fact, he is left to flourish with his lie of impotence still intact, ready to go on cuckolding. The only man that is safe in Wycherley's world is Harcourt because his marriage to Alithea is based in love. Horner's actions are not necessarily condoned. Instead, Horner represents this society's answer or punishment for loveless marriages. These thematic clues provide the glue that binds the three plot lines together and shows how they interrelate and support each other. With one final clue taken from the title, *The Country Wife*, the artist can find a major dramatic action that will serve as a spine through this very dense plot. One possible phrasing is: This is the day that Pinchwife struggles to keep Horner from his wife, and his wife deceives him to seek out Horner. The producing artist can then use this distilled statement to ask the major dramatic question, which unfolds and expands the play back out to all the thematic clues, character functions and other details used above to support the main action.

For a Restoration comedy of manners like *The Country Wife*, the comedy and social comment exist in the same gap. The artist in production cannot tell the story sufficiently without clearly identifying and bringing to the stage those moments when a gap exists in either of the two forms: 1) a gap between a character type's deviant behavior and the social norm; and 2) a gap between the human impulse and the social rules through which a character must express

themselves.¹ The actor's responsibility to the telling of the story (and comedy within it) is to commit to playing their character's essence only. Pinchwife must be the embodiment of jealousy. Sir Jasper's arrogance and self-importance must be embraced in its single dimension. Only then can the audience enjoy Horner's machinations and the come-uppance he serves them.

Pinchwife's need to protect his own honor as it pertains to the chastity of his wife must be pursued to irrational proportions. Of course, from the character's paranoid point of view, he believes all his actions are completely necessary. But any attempt by the actor to inject a multi-dimensional interpretation of these characters would only muddy the waters, resulting in both the loss of comedy and the playwright's social commentary. There is no sub-textual information to be discovered or played by the actor. With Molière, Wycherley, and Shaw alike, the text is the actor's first and only source. The language carries the comedy, the point of view, and the action.

In Act 1, Sir Jasper falls for the impotence trick and in his immense gloating, he offers up his wife to Horner as a form of torture. Horner "acts" the part of the bitter eunuch to suck Sir Jasper in. The audience knows something that Sir Jasper does not and his response of gloating reveals a human weakness that justifies and allows the audience to enjoy the trick being played on him. Later, in Act 2, Sir Jasper continues to push his wife, Lady Fidget, to spend time with Horner. Despite her respectable public reputation and her protests against Horner's character, she actually refuses his company because he cannot service her sexually. After Horner reveals to her that he is, in fact, quite sexually potent, she is able to tell her husband with all honesty, "Master Horner is a thousand, thousand times a better man than I thought him." The double-meaning in the language reinforces the comic premise that the audience knows something that Sir Jasper does not. Again, the audience is free to laugh as Sir Jasper proclaims with no awareness of the irony, "Well, well, that your ladyship is as virtuous as any she, I know, and him [Horner] all the town knows – he, he, he!"

Just as Sir Jasper cannot be aware of the irony of his words, characters like Sparkish require an actor to embrace a point of view completely at odds with how other characters see them. The audience can laugh because Sparkish clearly considers himself a sharp wit, when in reality, as his name suggests, he is rather dull. Again, the audience laughs at the gap and this gap is discovered in the language. Upon his exit at the end of Act 1, Sparkish gravely asserts, "I think wit as

¹ In the first form, the playwright is attacking the deviant social behavior. In the second, the playwright is attacking the social rules.

necessary at dinner as a glass of good wine, and that's the reason I never have any stomach when I eat alone." The actor playing Sparkish can never sway from his pompous, unshakable belief in his own wit. Without this belief, those abuses and tricks others play on him would turn cruel and kill the all the laughs. In Act 3, Harcourt plays upon his pride and appeals to Sparkish to be the "dear friend" that will help him reconcile with Alithea. Harcourt begins wooing her right under his nose. Alithea protests against Harcourt as an enemy to her engagement to Sparkish. But Sparkish insists, wishing to be considered the ultimate friend and thoroughly enjoying that the beauty of his fiancé makes him the envy of other men. Alithea begins testing her fiancé's generosity with her honor and Sparkish remains oblivious. Again, Sparkish is the only one who isn't in on the joke. The audience is given extra permission to laugh because Sparkish tried just before this scene to ditch his fiancé in order to go curry favor with the King.

Wycherley's greatest object of ridicule and the character he uses most to warn his audience is Pinchwife. Pinchwife is his own worst enemy. He continually invites cuckoldry through his great fear of it.² His demeaning, condescending attitude toward his new country wife also facilitates his undoing. The tighter he grips her, the more she slips through his fingers. This opposite effect to his extreme actions is the comic collision of yes and no. Wycherley most masterfully manipulates this comic premise in Act 3. Pinchwife witnesses Harcourt wooing Alithea while Sparkish remains oblivious while standing before them. Pinchwife is baffled by the loose leash Sparkish has on Alithea. He rails at Sparkish for his foolishness in allowing Harcourt such liberties. In contrast, Pinchwife has resorted to the severe tactic of dressing Margery up like a boy to protect her from unwanted advances. Horner sees through the disguise and begins to praise Margery to Pinchwife and the boy in her "absence". Horner is able to woo Margery and torture Pinchwife at the same time. Pinchwife can't stop it without revealing the disguise, so he is forced to watch as Horner expresses his love and attraction for his wife directly to his wife. Pinchwife now finds himself in the same position that Sparkish was in only moments before; the very situation for which Pinchwife had just violently scolded Sparkish. The only difference is that Sparkish was completely oblivious while being made a fool and now Pinchwife is both present and conscious for the whole excruciating ordeal.

² One can draw a line connecting Agnes from Molière's *School For Wives*, Margery Pinchwife in *The Country Wife*, and Lady Teazle in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*. They share the tried and true comic premise of a country wife's curiosity about the big, bad city driving their jealous husbands crazy.

Perhaps the most famous scene and the one that best demonstrates the relationship between language and comedy is the “china” scene of Act 4, scene 3. Horner finally has the opportunity to prove to the doubtful Quack the success of his impotence trick. Quack retreats behind a screen to listen and observe as Lady Fidget embraces Horner. They are soon interrupted by her husband, Sir Jasper, whom she assures that she is just trying to tickle Horner. When Sir Jasper questions why she is not at the china-house, she pretends to be angry with Horner for not showing her the china she has come to buy from him. Horner picks up the cue and feigns anger with the whole situation of babysitting other men’s wives during the day with no chance of sexual satisfaction at night. Lady Fidget storms off into his bed chamber and locks the door. Horner marches off to the bedroom through another door under the guise of angrily fetching her back to Sir Jasper. This sets up the joke. Sir Jasper innocently shouts, “Wife, my Lady Fidget, wife, he is coming into you the back way.” The double entendres continue:

Lady Fidget: Let him come, and welcome, which way he will.

Sir Jasper: He’ll catch you and use you roughly and be too strong for you.

Lady Fidget: Don’t trouble yourself; let him if he can.

When Lady and Mrs. Squeamish arrive on the scene and Lady Fidget finally emerges with a piece of china, this code word for sexual satisfaction remains handy for Horner by both keeping Sir Jasper in the dark and squelching the jealous tendencies of the ladies competing for his services.

III

The sustained sexual punning of scenes like Wycherley’s “china scene” and the skewed morality of a privileged class that the bulk of Restoration comedy represented led to a moral backlash for many years to come. Stories of sentiment appealed to the morals of a rising middle class. George Bernard Shaw completely dismissed the whole of Restoration comedy for its vileness, but he did not share the desire of the masses for sentimental melodramas. Unlike the neoclassical plays of Molière and Restoration comedy, Shaw’s plays operate within a specific reality. And the characters are unique and detailed beyond abstracted, neoclassical types. But he did use comedy for its inherent social commentary. With comedy he attacked the rigid morals and ideals of Victorian society that he felt kept the human race from evolving.

Shaw created his own form. His plays resemble Realism in the sense that Shaw organizes selected facts for an ideological purpose. His plays also resemble comedy of manners in the way Shaw observes human nature in its social context and points out incongruities. Shaw's plays are categorized under their own heading – comedy of ideas. Shaw's use of comic techniques is unlikely to engender the same laughs as Molière and Wycherley, but, like them, he uses comedy for its power to correct culture. As in comedy of character and comedy of manners, language is the primary carrier of action in Shaw's comedy of ideas. All subtext is spoken as each character, representing their own point of view on a social idea, spars with other characters. The result is a didactic attack on social paradigms that Shaw deems harmful to human progress.

Because each character in Shaw's plays represent different approaches to an issue, the major dramatic action and Shaw's own didactic message are very closely related. *The Arms and the Man*, written in 1894, is what Shaw subtitled, "The Anti-Romantic Comedy." Shaw is attacking the romanticized notions associated with war: patriotism, heroism, self-sacrifice. Shaw even tears away at the very idea of romantic love. The Victorian period was a time when the English culture embraced these romantic ideals and tied them to their unshakable belief in the British Empire and nationalistic institutions like the Royal Navy, even while signs of decay went unacknowledged. Shaw sought to rip away these delusional ideals. With such an agenda, it is no surprise that one possible phrasing of the major dramatic action is: This is the day that Raina abandons her romanticized love for Sergius and embraces her true love for Bluntschli, the chocolate cream soldier.

The main character, Raina Petkoff, experiences the greatest paradigm shift. The young Bulgarian woman is in her bedroom when her mother, Catherine, comes to tell her the glorious news of the Bulgarian victory over the Serbs. She listens with ecstasy as her mother reveals that her fiancé, Sergius, is the "hero of the hour, the idol of the regiment." Catherine paints the ultimate picture of heroism as she describes to Raina how Sergius defied the Russian commanders and led a cavalry charge against the Servians that won the battle. Raina takes the news as proof that all her ideas of heroism and patriotism were real after all. Shaw inflates the delusional bubble even further when Raina proclaims, "Oh, to think that it was all true – that Sergius is just as splendid and noble as he looks – that the world is really a glorious world for women who can see its glory and men who can act its romance! What happiness! What

unspeakable fulfillment! Ah!” The man who will burst all her bubbles is about to come through the balcony door.

The man is Bluntschli, a Swiss professional soldier fighting for the Serbs. Shaw uses this fourteen year mercenary soldier to begin this collision of ideas. For Bluntschli, war is a business and his job is to survive it. Bluntschli represents everything that Raina holds as cowardly and weak in a soldier and a man. The ensuing debate between her fantasies and his realities is the comic collision of yes and no. The setting for this debate resembles the kind of “compromising position” one would find even in modern romantic comedies. He is in her bedroom, she is clothed in a revealing night gown, and he ditches his gun and holds her robe as collateral for his security. For the audience, a gap between her words and her behavior is slowly being revealed. The romantic ideals she spouts say that Bluntschli is a worthless coward, but her decisions to hide him, feed him, prove to him she is from a noble family (with a library!), and to ultimately sneak him safely out of the house betrays a compassion and growing affection for the chocolate cream soldier.

One by one, Bluntschli shatters Raina’s illusions about war, heroism, and her fiancé. In the profession of war, “There are only two kinds of soldiers: old ones and young ones.” Bluntschli shares with her that the quickest way to tell the difference is to look in their holsters and cartridge boxes – “The young ones carry pistols and cartridges; the old ones, grub.” When Raina discovers that he witnessed her fiancé’s great cavalry charge she enthusiastically asks him to describe it. Again, Bluntschli cuts her expectations of glory to the quick. He says that a cavalry charge is a funny sight, “It’s like slinging a handful of peas against a window pane: first one comes; then two or three close behind him; and then all the rest in a lump.” Raina dismisses the language of his assessment until he delivers the damaging blow with his description of Sergius leading the charge:

He did it like an operatic tenor – a regular handsome fellow, with flashing eyes and lovely moustache, shouting his war-cry and charging like Don Quixote at the windmills. We nearly burst with laughter at him; but when the sergeant ran up as white as a sheet, and told us they’d sent us the wrong cartridges, and that we couldn’t fire a shot for the next ten minutes, we laughed at the other side of our mouths...Of course, they just cut us to bits. And there was Don Quixote flourishing like a drum major, thinking he’d done the cleverest thing ever known, whereas he ought to be court-martialed for it.

Raina’s illusions of heroism and self-sacrificing patriotism are beginning to crumble, and although she probably would not admit it, so is her love for Sergius.

With the war over in Act II, Sergius arrives at the Petkoff's home announcing his intention to resign from soldiering upon the advice of a certain Swiss soldier. Sergius is genuinely baffled to have discovered that whole secret to successful fighting is to "...get your enemy at a disadvantage; and never, on any account, fight him on equal terms." The practical realities of warfare are too grim for his romantic view of the world. With great bitterness, Sergius relates the Swiss soldier's story of how he escaped the cavalry charge through help of a young Bulgarian woman and her mother, who supplied him with her husband's coat for a disguise. Raina and Catherine squirm all the while and finally feign outrage to change the subject. Of course, this plot complication is set up to pay comic dividends later when Bluntschli comes to return the coat.³

Major Petkoff and Catherine excuse themselves to leave the two lovers alone. Shaw now goes to work destroying idealized notions of romantic love. Sergius and Raina put on flamboyant and ostentatious displays of a "higher love," which are immediately undercut by Sergius making a move on the servant, Louka. Sergius admits that higher love is "...a very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time." As with Raina in Act 1, a gap between the proclaimed ideal and the human impulse is revealed for the audience. The language Sergius uses acknowledges that his attraction for Louka is easy and his "love" for Raina is work. The audience laughs because Sergius continues, oblivious to the significance of his own words.

Shaw repeatedly finds the comedy in the anti-climactic clash between idealism and realism. Characters like Raina and Sergius inflate a monstrous bubble of unsustainable romantic ideals, and Bluntschli steps in to pop it. But in the third Act, as Raina and Sergius find themselves lost and disillusioned in the aftermath of their collision with reality, Shaw turns his comic formula on its ear. Bluntschli, who always functioned as the voice of realism, proclaims that his chances in life were always spoiled by "an incurably romantic disposition." This is where Shaw delivers his final message. The rigid idealism of Sergius can all too quickly descend to cynicism. Bluntschli admits to always desiring and aspiring to something greater, but when life does not deliver, then, like the servant Nicola, a person must adapt and make the most of it. In the closing moments, the final pretensions are chipped away and thrown aside in a flourish of revelation and quick,

³ The comic business that arises from Catherine's attempt to keep Major Petkoff in the dark about the coat turns into pure farce. This physical comedy is not unlike the *lazzi*'s Moliere wrote into his scripts.

straight-forward bargaining – and somehow (miraculously or practically) everyone gets what they really want.

Conclusion

The unifying qualities of Molière's *Tartuffe*, Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, and Shaw's *Arms and the Man* are not surprising. They all sought to give their varied audiences perspective on social issues through the power of comedy. Each writer possessed the vision to evaluate their respective social realities. With a keen eye they could extract the abnormalities and harmful agents of a society and elevate them on a stage, passing on to their audience both clarity and joy. Of course, their many differences rest in the details. But if the producing artist has a clear way of working and organizing the play for themselves, the details are not so scary.