William Wycherley (1641–1715), the eldest of six children of Daniel and Bethia (née Shrimpton) Wycherley, was born in the town of Clive, north of Shrewsbury, just one year prior to the English Civil War. Daniel Wycherley, a gentleman by birth with a genealogy reaching back to the reign of Henry IV and a landowner of considerable property, had served as High Steward (land steward) to the Marquis of Winchester, and when the latter was imprisoned by the Puritans during the war, Daniel continued to manage his estates, acquiring property for the marquis as well as himself and in turn building a considerable sum of money for his family. With his father’s means and wealth, young William received an excellent education, beginning with a classical curriculum that included Greek and Latin. At age 15, William completed his pre-university education, as was the custom among young gentlemen, by sojourning at his father’s expense in France where he spent four years in Angoulême – a southwest, provincial town, home to the school of préciosité – studying culture, manners, and language with Jesuit tutors and members of an elite circle of nobility and ultimately converting to Roman Catholicism. Prior to the restoration of Charles II, William
returned to England and in October 1659 enrolled as a student in the Inner Temple, one of the Inns of Court in London, but by July 1660, he had left London for Oxford, where he studied and took up residence with the eminent Thomas Barlow, provost at Queen’s College, librarian at the Bodleian, and a staunch Anglican, who was probably instrumental in Wycherley’s reconversion to Protestantism. Wycherley did not matriculate at Oxford, however, and by November 1660 he was once more on the move, returning to London and enrolling again in the Inner Temple to continue his law studies, which, in all likelihood, he did not complete.

Wycherley’s activities during the first decade of the Restoration are sketchy, but his residence in London, a city now lifted from its austere Puritan trappings and newly rejuvenated by Charles’s return, no doubt afforded him myriad diversions from his law books. His residence in the Inner Temple gave him convenient access to the fashionable society and its favourite venues to patronise (viz., the coffeehouses, taverns, theatres) and preferred places to promenade (e.g., St James’s Park, Covent Garden, the galleries of Whitehall Palace), and the well-to-do young student, who had spent a good deal of time consorting with the cultivated society in France, must have gravitated toward these popular London haunts, which catered to the sophisticated and urbane. In fact, Wycherley set each of his comedies either completely or partially in locales situated in this general area known as ‘the Town’, which suggests not only his familiarity with this region and its inhabitants but also his personal sense of affinity with those who populated and played in London’s elite cultural centre. In 1662, Wycherley’s name appears on the army roster for a summer tour of duty in Ireland, a brief diversion for a gentleman wishing for adventure and the opportunity to demonstrate his mettle, but by December he was back in London and presiding as ‘controller for the Christmas’ at the Inner Temple. No other evidence of Wycherley’s activities surfaces until 1664, when in January he took a post as attaché to Sir Richard Fanshawe, Britain’s new ambassador to Spain. Wycherley’s apprenticeship in diplomatic service lasted approximately one year, and by February 1665 he had returned from Spain to join the British navy in the Second Dutch War (1664–7), engaging in the June 1665 attack with the victorious Duke of York (Charles’s brother, James, and successor to the throne in 1685)