

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

***The Country Wife* (1675)**

William Wycherley (1641-1716)

OVERVIEW

The writer

William Wycherley was born in 1641, not long before the restoration of the British Monarchy, and the accession of King Charles II (1660-1685), whose deep admiration for the playwright, who was famed for his wit, was to prove of advantage to Wycherley, resulting in specific emoluments but in particular with a familiarity with the court itself, where Wycherley was to prove his wit among the finest gallants of the Kingdom. The lavish birth of Restoration Comedy, which was bathed in the free and often licentious life style of the royalty, owed much to the view of life congenial to the monarchy, and often readily absorbed by those to whom the monarchy—with its wealth—served as a lodestone for ambitions and hopes.

Theatrical career

To this royal matrix, where Wycherley will in time play a conspicuous role, the future playwright brought a background of no great distinction or wealth. His father was a business agent for a local gentry, the young man was a straightforward Shropshire lad—known throughout life, in fact, for his personal integrity and straightforwardness—and except for three educational years in France, in his teens, Wycherley led an unexceptional middle class youth, enrolling finally in Queen's College, Oxford. In the following years he served as an officer in the British Army, fighting on several occasions in the Anglo-Dutch Wars. He exploded to attention with his first play, *Love in a Wood*, the first act of which concluded with a song in praise of harlots and their offspring.

Success

To understand why this first play drew uproarious attention is to slip, for a moment, into the gossip texture of the Restoration Monarchy. The mistress of the King, Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, spoke loudly for the world of the harlot, and endorsed Wycherley as a fellow wit in the new tell-all world Charles II was making possible. From the occasion when the Duchess of Cleveland and Wycherley passed one another by carriage, and exchanged vulgar witticisms, the playwright felt empowered to introduce himself at court. His wit and daring of speech quickly endeared him to the finer sort. It was not until the theatrical world had seen Wycherley's mature achievements, *The Plain Dealer* and *The Country Wife*, that he became a truly establishment figure in London cultural life.

Prominence in London life

There are several reasons to give, for the extraordinary popularity of Wycherley's mature drama. These were plays seizing on aristocratic life, and representing aristocratic values—in which all shared that sense of entitlement the theatre goers hoped to share plays in which the boundaries of polite conversation were pushed to the limits of innuendo, and in which topics like impotence and cuckoldry, which were dear to the Royalists eager to impute such values to the Puritans, were sources of hilarity, gossipy humiliation, and intrigue. The issue of impotence, and faked impotence, led into the vulnerability of the aspiring housewife, who could find no easier pathway to status than an affair with a gentleman, whose mouth would be sealed by the action.

First Marriage

Wycherley's first marriage proved the undoing of his fruitful relation to the royal court. Married in secret, the playwright thereby lost the favor of the king, who felt abandoned by this congenial wit, and immediately withdrew the stipend on which Wycherley had grown dependent. Wycherley fell accordingly into serious debt and was thrown into prison, until released by the generosity of King James II. The rest of the writer's declining story involves Wycherley's return to Shropshire; ample dispute with his father over still unpaid debts. In 1715 Wycherley married Elizabeth Jackson. He died the following year and was buried in the vault of St. Paul's in Covent Garden.

What did Wycherley write about in The Country Wife?

Closing on the text, we hit reality fast. But we need stage history background. The eighteen year Puritan stage ban—the strictest possible rules against immoral speech or behavior; words like *adultery* or *fornication* or *cuckold* were strictly banished from the stage, not to mention the working concepts accompanying those words—ended with the Restoration of the Monarchy, in 1660. At that point the theatre awakened from its moralistic slumber, and gave open passage to one of the freest comedic developments in modern theatre. *The Country Wife* is a good sample of the kind of liberty freed by change in government—change micro symbolized by the joyful pronunciation, on stage, of the first syllable of the word *Country*.

Anatomies of The Country Wife

The eunuch

Three sets of events encapsulate the presentation of *The Country Wife*. The first scenario involves Mr. Horner, a prominent resident of the City of London, who has recently been traveling in France, and who, as he claims, has become the victim of a French sexual disease, to cure which it has been necessary to undertake a serious operation on 'his manhood.' The resultant impotence, as he explains to his close friend Harcourt, has left him a freedom of movement, among the many ladies of quality who now believe that they can freely consort with the 'eunuch' Horner. Intricate intrigues, misunderstandings, and exploited opportunities unfold from this state of affairs. Horner makes hay while he can, many ladies get a free ride, and the audience has ample to titillate them.

The Country Wife

A second set of events, which is woven into the first, involves the married life of Mr. Pinchwife, and his wife, a country woman who is innocent of the big city and its charms—and whom Pinchwife would like to keep in just that ignorance. The tricks of Mrs. Pinchwife, to deceive her husband, are for the most part borrowed from Moliere—*L'Ecole des Maris*; *L'Ecole des femmes*—though borrowed with a more sexual twist, which was just what his audience wanted. Margery Pinchwife, fresh in from the countryside, is fascinated by the handsome young London men she meets, while Moliere plays this lubricious angle with great subtlety.

Mrs. Althea

The third scenario involves Mr. Pinchwife's sister, Althea, and her affair with Horner's close friend Harcourt. Thanks to her patience with Harcourt, who must endure the lady's affection for her brainless boyfriend Sparkish, and thanks to her own appreciation of true personal value, as it turns out in the end, Althea is able to make of herself a model for that personal integrity none of the other principals seem able to sustain.

The juxtaposition of these three scenarios enables Wycherley to activate a wide-lens portrait of gallant cultural life in the London of his moment. He is also a master of revealing miniatures, as we see in the episode (Act 4, scene 3) in which Horner, entertaining two fine ladies with repartee and innuendo, notices their spouses within hearing distance, and shifts the gallant conversation to Horner's own fine collection of china, to which, as he puts it, he has invited the ladies to 'come have a look.'

Where does this Restoration comedy fit in the long stream of western comedic tradition?

Two different drivers seem to lie behind the comic impulse, in literature and life. There is the driver of contempt, or of scorn for the human condition; the driver motivating Puck to cry out, 'What fools these mortals be!' Is that not the same outcry we hear in Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*. or Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* These writers are mockers of humanity. Is that not the outcry of Henri Bergson, in *Le Rire*, which he opens with a vignette of humor--the man walking briskly down the sidewalk, only to slip on a banana peel, and go down on his butt? There is little room, in any of these perspectives, for compassion. Literary compassion 'for mankind' is in fact hardly to be found, unless it would be in some vast novel, like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which tamps down the pain of existence with a global sense of the human condition. It could be argued that Dante's *Divina Commedia* belongs to this same elevated genre, seeing so broadly that the ridiculous converts itself into the divine?

So much for one driver of the comic. Etheridge and Wycherley, in plays we have considered here, simply turn to the follies of ordinary social life, as thriving grounds for the banal and self-indulgent. *The Country Wife* packs ample venom, when it comes to the simple hubbub and self-sustenance of unreformed human beings at play on the stage of life. Revenge, innuendo, lust all froth on the surface of this kind of social comedy. George Meredith, a later English critic—*An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* (1877)—puts a point on this social theory of the birth of comedy, by stressing the importance of woman, in the mix that breeds comedy from society. The urbanity of a woman-sensitive culture seems to Meredith inseparable from effective social comedy, both in England of the eighteenth century and in the theatre of France, where Moliere, like Wycherley, exploits the charms of ladies to disarm the plots of seducers.

The PLOT.

The plot of *The Country Wife* falls into three fairly distinct units. There is the ruse of Horner's impotence; the married life of Pinchwife and Margery; and the courtship of Harcourt and Alethea.

Horner is successful in convincing many wives, the aristocratic portion of town, that he is impotent and of no danger to them or their husbands. The fact is, however, that Horner gets the pick of the beauties, who are eager to have sex with a gentleman who is, as the rumor goes, beyond reproach. Behind this tale, at a distance, lies the theme of Terence's play *The Eunuch*. This part of the play rests on the general readiness to believe that high society is full of many women hypocrites, who will abandon their husbands at the twinkle of an eye. Three ladies are especially prominent in this play for their successful assignations with Mr. Horner; Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish. For a long time Mr. Horner maintains this pretence of honorable rectitude. Until the advent of Marjery Pinchback Horner is able to maintain the façade of propriety. Margery, who knows from experience, speaks out and refuses to indict Mr. Horner for serious mischief. In the end of this element of the play, Mr. Horner comes out of it largely unscathed and happy.

The Story of *The Country Wife*, and her fussy husband, Mr. Pinchwife, is taken from Moliere's *L'Ecole des Maris*. The School for Husbands. This lady is smarter than many, and goes openly into a relation with Mr. Horner, whom she greatly admires and defends. In other words, despite her husband's terror of being cuckolded, she briskly submits him to exactly that punishment.

The third major component of *The Country Wife* involves the relation between Harcourt, Mr. Horner's good friend, and the seriously committed lady, Alethea, the sister of Pinchwife. Alethea has for some time fallen under the spell of Sparkish, a lecherous fop around town. but she eventually has evidence that Sparkish has no faith in her, while Harcourt turns out faithfully to love her. For Alethea, there is only one conclusion, that Harcourt is her man.

Is that a plot conclusion?

Alethea and *The Country Wife* herself are the stalwart characters to emerge from this urban social-slice. Pinchwife has made a disaster out of his marriage, by refusing to give his wife freedom, indeed unplanfully promoting her interest in the 'handsome horse guards' down by the Palace. *The Country*

Wife takes everything in, voraciously, and manages to sail through the socio-sexual spectrum of London without the hypocrisies and feigned assignations required of the stock married rakes who quickly learn to hate the Country Wife. In fact, by the end of the play The Country Wife has come near to being a symbol, of the lusty, cool sexy lady around town who takes the word Country, as Wycherley apparently intended it in at least two senses.

It is Alethea, though, who wins a prize for moral success. We might say that she is the victim of her own integrity. From the start of the play she finds herself engaged to the nauseating Sparkish, who is clearly her inferior in every way. It is true Alethea, however, that she will not give up her engagement commitment, even when the stakes become high: when she has been caught in a misleadingly compromising relationship with Horner, and has been accused by Sparkish, while Harcourt totally exonerates her and readily gives her the benefit of the doubt. She is a woman of reliable personal commitment, honors that strength in others. Harcourt deserves her love and she gives it over to him.

EVENTS

Wycherley is a master of the smaller ironies of events that backfire. Mr. Pinchwife is a perfect example of an individual prone to generate such ironies. He is, for example, anxious for his wife to separate totally from the company of Mr. Horner, and he wishes her to write Horner a formal letter of dismissal from her company. Pinchwife declares to his wife that 'I will write the word whore with this penknife in your face'. What he achieves is to his downfall, because the letter that Mrs. Pinchwife writes, while seeming to be a valedictory, is in fact a covert love letter, precisely what Mr. Pinchwife does not want. This is the typical result of Mr. Pinchwife's interventions.

The 'virtuous gang'. A band of classy but horny women, who have been enjoying Horner's favors around town, meet at Horner's lodgings to carouse and let out their emotions, which seem mostly to spring from developments in their love lives. It happens that as each lady has her say, about her own emotional life they all have one thing in common, that each of them has thoroughly enjoyed the favors of Mr. Horner. Their only solution, now that their secret is out, is to keep that secret quiet, and above all not to let the broader society know the facts about Mr. Horner.

The 'china scene,' in Act IV, scene 3, involves a *double entendre*, which is standard Wycherley. The husband of Lady Fidget and the grandmother of Mrs. Squeamish are seated stage front, watching and approving, by nods, what is being said—but not heard-- center stage: Horner appears from that distance to be discussing his fine *china* collection—a common source of pride in eighteenth century upper class London—which the ladies have asked him to show them-- the fact being that *china* is a prearranged code word for a good screw, which is being carefully scheduled in the covert conversation taking place center stage. Ever after the widespread presentation of this scene, Wycherley later said, 'china' was a dirty word in London.

CHARACTERS

Harry Horner, notorious London rake, who feigns impotence so he can gain access to the sex starved of the London female elite. Far from the sharpest of the wits who surround him, Horner brings not much more than ingenuity and bedroom-daring to the play.

Jack Pinchwife, a middle aged Londoner, a rake before his marriage, but after it a tyrant ruling over Mrs. Pinchwife, whom he forbids even to speak to other men. He keeps his wife locked in her room, but in the course of imposing tyranny naturally builds his own downfall.

Margery Pinchwife, wife to Jack, a naïve country women when she comes to London, but on arrival there discovers her libido, and following her husband's advice to admire the 'handsome horse guards at the Palace,' she takes him up on its with a vengeance.

Alethea Pinchwife, the younger sister of Jack Pinchwife. She gradually falls for Harcourt, one of the brainiest and most reliable figures in the cast of characters, Alethea herself is a jewel of honesty and directness.

Frank Harcourt, good friend of Horner from whom he differs by being a straight shooter. His good moral sense is confirmed by his growing affection for Alethea.

Mr. Sparkish, a quite witless man about town, who captures the affection of Alethea, until she realizes that he wants her only as a trophy.

Lucy is the clever maidservant of Alethea. She warns against Sparkish, and urges her mistress to stick with Harcourt.

Sir Jasper Fidget, a business man quite willing to let his wife go to Horner, on the grounds of his impotence.

Lady Fidget, much younger wife of Sir Jasper, a friend of virtue in her public speech, but a hypocritical letch, in real life practice.

The Quack, the doctor whom Horner enlists to support his claim of innocence.

THEMES

Deception Horner's deceptive pretence of impotence drives the behaviors of many of the sex starved matrons of London, sharply affects the lives of many cuckolded men, and underlies the corrupt and mendacious social mood of a small sector of British society.

Self-delusion Horner convinces himself falsely, that he is The object of love, which he is not. Sparkish convinces himself that he is God's gift to women, while the gang of 'virtuous women,' who make whoopee at Horner's house, convince themselves, each one separately that she is the only lover of Mr. Horner.

Jealousy Jealousy is the launchpad of all the males who want to make themselves cuckoldry free. Mr. Pinchwife locks his wife in her room. Mr. Fidget, viewing his wife as an asset, does not feel much jealousy if others enjoy his asset. This is his form of jealousy for money, rather than dread of seeing his wife on the marketplace.

Loyalty Loyalty is the trademark of Alethea. She remains true to Sparkish, because she is not the kind of person to break an engagement. For the same reason, though, she recognizes the special virtue of Harcourt, who shares with her a mutual respect for reliability and dignity.