

# The country wife and reversal of power dynamics



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Throughout Wycherley's play *The Country Wife*, characters reverse the time period's normal power dynamics of reputation and gender to create power from a state of powerlessness. While certain characters appear to be powerful due to their status, honor and reputation, other seemingly powerless characters are able to gain power over these characters through trickery. The protagonist Horner deliberately places himself and his reputation in a situation seen as powerless and deceptively manages to gain power over many of the other characters. The women of the play, in a less powerful position due to the time period's unfortunate gender roles rather than by choice, similarly use deception to gain power over their apparently more powerful husbands by using Horner's treachery to their advantage. Wycherley, in showing that the play's women are only able to gain power by taking advantage of Horner's improbable situation, may have been ridiculing the period's gender roles and suggesting that they were unjust.

While it may seem more likely that one would gain the most power from a strong reputation and good status, the protagonist Horner purposefully tarnished his own reputation in order to gain more power in an unexpected way. Power in *The Country Wife* tends to consist of the ability to threaten another character, usually in a sexual nature. Husbands fear that they will be made cuckolds if their wives sleep with other men. Horner spread a rumor that a botched surgery had left him impotent, leaving his friends and acquaintances with the perception that he has lost power, and is even less of a man. At the end of a drawn out joke concerning store signs, his friend Sparkish delivers the punchline " Did you never see Master Horner? He lodges in Russell Street, and he's a sign of a man, you know, since he came

out of France!” (Wycherley 1. 1. 273-5). Sparkish suggests that, since Horner is now apparently “ impotent,” he is no longer truly a man, just an indication of one. A store sign is a physical representation of what the store holds, but offers nothing else beyond that. Similarly, Horner is now seen as a representation of a man who is incapable of enacting manly activities, such as reproduction. By losing his ability to reproduce, he loses the one power he would otherwise have over other men that they appear most concerned about; the ability to threaten other men with the prospect of becoming cuckolds.

Now that he is seen as a eunuch, he is granted freer access to his friends’ wives. Another friend of his, Sir Jaspar, after affirming for himself the rumor that Horner is now practically a eunuch, tells him “ Pray come and dine with me, and play at cards with my wife after dinner; you are fit for women at that game yet,” (1. 1. 106-7). He first shows that he has been deceived by Horner enough to trust him in the company of his wife by inviting him into her presence. He then compares Horner to a women. Women, in the time of the play, still lacked most forms of power, which shows that he perceived Horner as less powerful because of his physical state. The phrase “ fit for women at that game” also carries the implication that he is not fit for women at other “ games,” namely, sexual intercourse, another indication that he no longer sees Horner as a threat who holds any form of power over him. Ironically, his confidence that Horner will not be able to make him a cuckold is exactly what turns him into a cuckold. Horner, by making himself seem less powerful and less of a threat, gains more power over the husbands than they are able

to perceive by taking advantage of his allowed proximity to the play's married women, many of which become his lovers.

The play's women, too, gain power over their husbands, power being defined as the ability to threaten. Whereas Horner acted deceptively to alter his public perception so he would be seen as less powerful, the play's women are intrinsically less powerful simply due to their gender. While Horner acted to augment his power over the play's men, the women act deceptively in order to gain power over men which they never had to begin with. Their power is the ability to use trickery to secretly subvert the wishes of their husbands and, like Horner, to turn husbands into cuckolds. The most restricted of the play's women, Margery Pinchwife, is frequently locked up by her husband so she will not leave the house and have an affair, particularly with Horner. When her husband finds her writing a letter to Horner, however, she makes it seem as if she is doing a favor for Alithea. Concerning Alithea, Margery's husband says " Well, I resolve it; Horner shall have her. I'd rather give him my sister than lend him my wife, and such an alliance will prevent his pretensions to my wife" (5. 1. 64-6). This is another statement heavy in dramatic irony. Margery disguises herself as Alithea, so Pinchwife is, in truth, " lending Horner [his] wife," and the " alliance" created when the disguised Margery and Horner meet is exactly the one Pinchwife was trying to avoid. Margery here gains power over her husband by tricking him into allowing her to make him a cuckold.

The power wielded by Horner and his lovers is shown to the audience most explicitly in the way they talk to each other in front of the husbands.

Particularly in the notorious " china scene," Horner and the wives speak in

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ways that make it clear to the audience that they are having an affair, but that the husbands believe are innocent conversations because they, still believing Horner to be impotent, are ignorant of the implications. The china scene begins with Horner and Lady Fidget locked in a room while her husband Sir Jaspar and their friend Squeamish stand outside. When they exit, Fidget says that she has “ been toiling and moiling for the prettiest piece of china” (4. 3. 87-8). The word “ china” in this play has already been given sexual connotations, though they were subtle and may not be picked up on until Squeamish also requests that Horner give her china. Fidget tells her “ to my certain knowledge he has no more left” (4. 3. 197-8), insinuating that she finished him off and he no longer has the energy to have sex again. Squeamish persists, so Horner tells her “ I cannot make china for you all, but I will have a roll-wagon for you too, another time” (4. 3. 203-4). A “ roll-wagon” refers to a cylindrical china vase, clearly a phallic symbol, indicating that Horner is offering to satisfy her sexual needs as well once he is physically able to. (4. 3. footnote 204).

It is still possible to interpret the scene as innocent until Fidget asks Horner, regarding what he had just told Squeamish, “ What do you mean by that promise?” and Horner responds “ Alas, she has an innocent, literal understanding” (4. 3. 206-7). Said as an aside, Horner’s claim that Squeamish understands this conversation literally is an admission to the audience that he and Fidget have been speaking metaphorically. Depending on how Squeamish’s character is acted, the audience could interpret her actions as an innocent request for decorative china, or, if she asks suggestively, a request for sex. Horner’s offer of a phallic symbol suggests,

however, that he and Squeamish also have an agreement and that she too is speaking metaphorically. Here, Horner is the only person in the room who knows the entirety of the situation. Sir Jaspar believes that Horner is still speaking innocently. His statement that Horner's kisses "have no more hurt in't than one of my spaniel's" (4. 3. 231) shows that he believes Horner has no more power to make him a cuckold than the lick of a dog. Here, again, a character displays a belief that Horner is now less powerful due to his physical state, this time comparing him to an animal. While Horner said that Squeamish "has an innocent, literal understanding," this line applies much better to Jaspar, as he is the only person in the room who does not make the connection between china and sex. In this scene, Horner, Fidget and Squeamish flaunt the power they have gained over Jaspar and the other men of the play by openly talking about their affairs using metaphors that are obvious to the audience but are not understood by Jaspar. Horner, who, as a man, began the play with more power, still has the most power in the room, as he is still deceiving both women into believing that they are the only ones he is having an affair with. The women, however, still managed to raise themselves into a position of power over their husbands by making them cuckolds without their realizing, giving themselves sexual freedom.

Despite the misogyny that appears in certain moments of the play, Wycherley portrays the women as actual human beings who are just as complex and flawed as the men, and are frequently cleverer than their husbands. The playwright may have been calling attention to the unnecessary restrictions of women's freedom by showing that the only way the play's women could gain any sort of power from their powerless status

was through the highly absurd situation with Horner and his own manipulation of power. Wycherley was likely not entirely altruistic due to the prevailing views of the time period, seeing as the male Horner still had the most power. However, the fact that his female characters were unable to gain agency or power in any way other than taking advantage of a man pretending to be a eunuch may have been an indication that there was something horribly wrong with gender roles and norms. He may have been suggesting that there should be easier ways for women to gain power and freedom.