

# The country wife, william wycherley, set against the backdrop of the restoration

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William Wycherley's great comedy, *The Country Wife* has received voluminous, yet curiously mixed assessment. Macaulay, with characteristic exaggeration, branded it as 'one of the most heartless and profligate of human productions'. Undoubtedly it is an extremely, witty play, but coarse and indecent, at the same time. However it remains popular with readers and teachers of English Literature and what it cannot be separated from is its relationship to the high culture of the Restoration period.

The continuity of drama in England, which had found its greatest manifestation during the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline periods was broken 1642, when the theatres were ordered closed under the rule of Oliver Cromwell and his Commonwealth government. The reaction against Puritan manners and morals was inevitable. It almost forcefully changed the course of English drama because many of the returned Cavaliers had spent their exile in France and become expert in French wit and French gallantry, and because the King Charles II himself, "an indolent sensualist" began to encourage an atmosphere of hedonistic liveliness at Court.

He set the tone for the Court Wits, who owed much to the brilliant dramas of writer Moliere, based on the 'comedy of manners'. William Wycherley's play is a 'comedy of manners', and it clearly reflects in *The Country Wife*. The characters of the play stand as a mirror to the Restoration society. Although character is secondary to the play its significance is obvious because characters are type rather than individuals. All characters seem to be subordinated to this main purpose.

Even the dialogue, the cut and thrust of wit and repartee, the word-play and double entendre, serve only to heighten the savage satire of characters like Jasper, Lady Fidget, Mrs. Squeamish, Mr. Pinchwife and Sparkish. All episodes in the play are but part of an over-all design to expose the ways of a heartless world, where most men are fops and coxcombs, and most women fickle and faithless. The type characters are significant in influencing the action of the play.

Mr. Pinchwife represents the typical jealous husband (Pinchwife), who at forty-nine, lately given up whoring for the security of marriage, but he must now work hard to protect his artless young wife from the cuckold-makers of sophisticated London. The other one being the credulous lover (Sparkish), who doesn't know the true meaning of marriage and wants to marry Alithea only for financial gains. True wits like Horner and Harcourt, manage to cuckold men and woo their women. And pseudo wits like Pinchwife, Sparkish who in their attempt to be witty end up being fooled.

The names given to the characters, Pinchwife, Squeamish, Horner and Sparkish are indicative of their role in the play. Horner, 'the sign of man' as referred to in the play, is the 'moral emasculation of man in genteel company'. Mr. Horner still has some honor in him; he takes Margery shopping instead of bedding her. Horner does not just cuckold men but is a kind of nemesis, when his goal seems to be punishing jealous husband. He's punishes Sir Jasper for his smugness and Pinch for being such a jealous man.

In the context of Restoration England, the word country denotes lack of refinement, gullibility, naivete, coupled with a native shrewdness. When set

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in opposition to what the town London represents, namely artificiality, fashion, theatre, and a veneer of culture, these attributes become even more pronounced and Wycherley exploits the contrast and the conflict fully, Lady Fidget, set against Mrs. Pinchwife, for instance. She is the only genuine character in the entire play, is perhaps, the country wife herself, Mrs. Margery Pinchwife.

Wholly free from the pretensions and sophistications of town life, she appears to be a true daughter of nature, a creature of instinct. Margery turns her back on Mr. Pinchwife and uses asides to mock him. She pursues her innocent love for Horner by fooling her fooling her husband into believing that she is innocent. Even after he has read the letter which she sent to Horner, he still thinks that she is innocent, " For she's an innocent creature, has no dissembling in her. " To him Margery, the country girl, appears to be honorable, virtuous and chaste, but she is subterfuge and deceitful.

She is largely self-taught through the mannerisms of London city, her husband and Althea. She uses everything that she has been taught by her husband against him. In scene two she fools him into delivering a love letter to Horner in Althea's name and later she fools him to such an extent that she makes him give her away as a bride to Horner. Selfishness and sexual aggressiveness create frequently satiric symbols and images and they also vigorously explore sexual innuendo. In the scene in which speaking in ' asides', Jasper mocks Horner for his apparent loss of manly hood.

He says, " So, the report is true, I find, by his coldness or aversion to the sex; but I'll play the wag with him. " Then he says to Horner, " Pray salute my

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wife, my lady, sir" When he understands that Horner doesn't know his wife he argues as to how he isn't acquainted with his wife. But Horner being the wit he is calmly replies back saying, " I do know your wife... she's a woman, sir, and consequently a monster, sir, a greater monster than a husband sir. " By calling her a " monster" he is implying that she is a monster in bed, and that she like a monster has devoured many men sexually.

Now that Horner has proclaimed to everybody his impotency, he mocks other men as to how difficult it is for them to get women. He says, " Ask but all the young fellows of the town, if they do not lose more time, like huntsmen, in starting this game, than in running it down' Also what we see over here is the sexual innuendo in his speech. ' Starting this game' refers to the entire act of sex, from wooing the woman to having intercourse with her. However Horner mocks these men, whom he calls ' huntsmen', because when they are hunting, his prey has come herself come walking to him and only thing left to do is kill it(have sexual intercourse)

The ' china' that Lady Fidget refers to in, " For we women of quality never think we have china enough" is actually means sexual pleasure. When Jasper see's Horner's arms around lady fidget, initially he feels jealous but he realizes that Horner is but impotent. Also to what should be observed is Lady Fidget's behavior as soon as she is caught by her husband she in Horner's words, starts, " throwing my (Horner's) things about, and rifling all I have. But Horner adds saying that, " But I'll get into her the back way, and so rifle her for it. The sexual innuendo in Horner's speech is so vivid here, what he is

referring to when he talks about “ getting into her the back way” is nothing but sodomy.

Even lady fidget plays second fiddle when she replies saying “ let him come, and welcome, which way he will. ” The affectation of the restoration society is also revealed when Lady Fidget is extremely upset with Horner’s unpleasant remarks about her and wants to desperately leave the place but Sir Jaspas asks her to wait for a while till the ‘ chairs’ come. The chairs in here refer to the sedan chairs that carried the upper class people from one place to another.

Although his wife is being insulted he still insists on wanting her to stay so that they can move about as per their classes’ standards. At the end of the play Horner is left free, thanks to some fast moving perjury, cheerfully to pursue his amorous dalliance as long as it suits him, and to expose or ridicule hypocrisy and affectation. The Country Wife is mostly a period drama, as it can exist only as long as the society whose conventions it depicts prevails. Nevertheless because of savage and realistic depiction of the Restoration age and witty satire it will always remain one of the masterpieces of the ‘ comedy of manners’ genre.