

Role of women in the restoration period



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

There are many texts that deal with the role of the individual male in society; their positions are discussed politically, socially and personally. However, in-depth discussion of the individual female role in society is often lacking during the Restoration period. Women are props, background objects, prizes. They are often viewed simply as aesthetically pleasing, sexual beings. In William Wycherley's play *The Country Wife*, men discuss women as sexual objects to be won, shared, or used. The perfect contrast to the themes regarding women in this play is Mary Astell's essay, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. In the portion of the essay found in the DeMaria anthology, Astell praises women's abilities and encourages them to rise above and become equal to men in every way. The two texts provide an interesting contrast with one another on a theme that was lost during the period amongst political treatises and industrialization. Mary Astell speaks directly to women about their advancement and position in society, which will also lead to their placement in heaven. Straightaway, she seeks to "improve [women's] Charms and heighten [their] Value by suffering [them] no longer to be cheap and contemptible" (Astell 423). She states that the things women are involved in now are "flitting and fickle as that Chance which is to dispose of them" (Astell 422), and she proposes a "Proposition that comes attended with more certain and substantial Gain" (Astell 422). Essentially, Astell uses her essay to convey to women that in order for their beauty and lives in general to amount to something "lasting and permanent... from a corruptible Body to an immortal Mind" (Astell 423) they must become equal to men in every way. She believes there is too much value placed on men, while women are "respected" for matters that lack real worth, such as empty physical beauty. Women should not only "be as lovely, but as wise as

<https://assignbuster.com/role-of-women-in-the-restoration-period/>

Angels” (Astell 423) and begin “ennobling [their] minds with such Graces as really deserve [them]” (Astell 423). Astell writes that women should be respected and known for their minds and thoughts, not only for inane things such as their dress or dancing skills. Women are not just for show, as “Tulips in a Garden... good for nothing” (Astell 424). According to Astell, women during the Restoration period can and should amount to more than showpieces and sexual prizes. William Wycherley uses humor to discuss the subjects of sexuality during the Restoration in his play, *The Country Wife*. Through the characters’ actions and words, Wycherley creates a world for the viewer or reader in which women are objects, owned or exchanged by men. Women are purely sexual conquests to men, and defined in terms of sexuality and their connection to men. Thus, it is established by Wycherley that a woman’s role in society is to keep men (specifically her husband) content, whether that be by remaining faithful and loyal only to the man she is married to, or by remaining pure if she is not committed to any man. What is perhaps the most telling evidence of the role of women in society is what the play is centered around; Horner and his lies about being a eunuch to get into the lives of women and then sleep with them. The fact that women can be tricked into trusting him shows that they are not seen as creatures of wit within the society. This notion fits in perfectly with what Mary Astell wrote, because she disliked the way women’s intelligence (or lack thereof) was viewed and the way some women even played into the idea that women are too simple to be as smart as men. Although there are some men in the play that are also blatantly and stupidly unaware of certain things, such as the fact that they are being cuckolded, the depiction of women is still unbalanced because they are seen as one-dimensional beings in regards to

their role in the social order. The objectification of women is clear in many scenes of the play. One of the subtle ways Wycherley works it into characters' discussion is in the conversation between Alithea and Mrs. Pinchwife in Act 2. 1. The scene begins with the women discussing how Mr. Pinchwife does not permit his wife to see certain people or go certain places Alithea then says that a wife "requires as much airing as her husband's horses" (Wycherley 2. 1, line 26). Her statement, seemingly innocent as it may be, actually speaks volumes of the objectification of women by comparing them to horses. One of the topics Astell does not really bring up but is rampant throughout *The Country Wife* is that of reputation as an identifying force. Men in society can be identified by their economic status, among other things, but it appears that in the play the opinion of a woman is based not only on her loyalty and connections to a man, but on her reputation, specifically her sexual reputation. Mr. Pinchwife fails to see his own wife's betrayal but accuses Alithea of being a "notorious town-woman" (Wycherley 2. 1, line 39) and "keep[ing] the men of scandalous reputation company" (Wycherley 2. 1, line 49). The fact that Alithea is in fact the most innocent and loyal woman in the play only furthers the fact that a woman's reputation is important to defining her role as an individual as society; she is judged by her reputation, whether it be correct or false, and is thus placed in society in regard to how she treats men, in essence. Almost all of the women in *The Country Wife* are hypocritical, putting on a front of purity and loyalty to their husbands but involving themselves with Horner. Wycherley's play is a satire, however, and so all characters and characterizations are not to be taken too seriously and some are even meant to display the opposite of the truth. Comparatively, Astell also writes about some women in a somewhat

negative sense. That is to say, she speaks of those that fill their heads with “ what Colours are the most agreeable, or what’s the Dress becomes [them] best” (Astell 423) when they should be looking into their “ own Minds, which will discover irregularities more worthy your Correction” (Astell 423). She believes that women should focus on the “ Beauty of the mind” (Astell 424) rather than “ the mean Case that encloses it” (Astell 424). Interestingly enough, this same concept is brought up in *The Country Wife*. In a discussion with Mr. Pinchwife, Horner actually makes a statement Astell would agree with: “ But methinks wit is more necessary than beauty, and I think no young woman ugly that has it, and no handsome woman agreeable without it” (Wycherley 1. 1, lines 395-7). This is a surprising statement to find in a play in which the women don’t seem to be very intelligent, and any intelligence they do have does not appear to be of value to the men anyway. The comparison of these two texts is interesting in that it brings up many differences in ideas of woman’s role in society, but also many unexpected similarities and connections. Both the play and the essay show a reality in which women are viewed as either objects or beings solely concerned with vanity and folly. However, Astell’s intentions are to write on this subject so that women will see the mistake in behaving as such and improve themselves. Wycherley, on the other hand, uses his play as a satire on typically aristocratic people, and plays upon stereotypes and exaggeration of both character and plot. Both texts, in different ways, provide accounts and opinions on how women fit into society.