

# Wycherley's presentation of lady fidget as a 17th century woman

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Wycherley's play *The Country Wife*, like many restoration literatures are often seen as a reflection of the writer's outlook on society at the time of writing because it includes characters that denotes vulgarity, foppishness, sincerity and debauchery and thus mirroring everyday people. The presentation of the role of women in 17th century England in *The Country Wife* is particularly interesting as Wycherley is able to fully explore characters as they really are and character as they like to be seen.

Lady Fidget is a prime example because on the surface she is presented as being the embodiment of the subordinate female; she is a wife who is loyal, supportive and obedient to her husband, however, covertly, she is a cunning, devious cheat who uses her sexuality to cover all that she is and to do what she wants. Lady Fidget as her name suggests is someone who lacks control and is somewhere a busybody. In fact this is exactly what she is, but not how she would want to be perceived by people.

She like the rest of the Virtuous Gang is obsessed with the idea of being perceived as virtuous, the words 'honour' and 'virtuous' are forever coming out of her mouth but in actual reality, she is anything but. This is because she desires for her husbands to feel secure in leaving her in the presence of men whom she can have affairs with without her husband becoming jealous.

When Sir Jasper is taken in by Horner's feigned impotence, it is almost as if her prayers have been answered because as Horner states 'now I may have the reputation of a eunuch, the privileges of one; and be seen in a lady's chamber in a morning as early as her husband... (1. 1. 169-172), she is now literally able to have an affair with him, without anyone, notably her ignorant

husband, becoming suspicious. This not only illustrates to the audience the two-facedness of Lady Fidget's character, but also draws attention to her ability to be scheming and devious despite common stereotypes attached to her sex, which requires her to be passive and detached from society.

Wycherley deliberately uses this device to both challenge society's assumptions about the innocence of women and also to confirm what men like Pinchwife thought, "if we don't cheat women, they'll cheat us" (4. 3. 203). Although Wycherley often presents Lady Fidget in unfavourable light, as a whole, the audience are not encouraged to dislike her because she is an epitome of a spurned wife.

Her husband Sir Jasper Fidget is the representation of the modern-day businessmen who never put pleasure before business and treat his marriage as matter of convenience rather than love "business must be always preferred before love....". When he finds out about Horner's 'impotence', he doesn't question the validity of the claim but instead goes straight to him and plead with him to 'be acquainted' with his wife, more or less implying that he is free to do whatever he likes with her.

Wycherley's presentation of Sir Jasper is that of a very sad picture because even though he is considered a noble man and an important member of the society, he is incredibly stupid and has allowed his obsession with 'Whitehall and the king' to blind and shield him from reality, even to the point that in the 'China scene', Lady Fidget and Horner are able to explicitly discuss their sexual liaison right in front of him (using sexual innuendos) without him having a clue. 'Well, Sir Jasper, plain dealing is a jewel.

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"If ever you suffer your wife to trouble me again, she shall carry you home a pair of horns" (4. . 117) This is an example of the many speeches that Horner makes to Sir Jasper containing sexual innuendos and insinuating that he and Lady Fidget is having a sexual relationship, but yet he is oblivious of them. The 'horn', which suggests the image of a lecherous animal such as a goat, a bull or a satyr is also associated with the devil who is traditionally presented as being horned, however and more likely, the horn is popular symbol for a cuckold (which Sir Jasper in doubt would have been aware of) but yet, he do not pick on this and ignore the warning signals.

From the character of Sir Jasper, Wycherley could be both reflecting on his failed marriages and societal attitude to marriage and thus saying that in a sense Lady Fidget's infidelity can be excused because a marriage without love, no matter how virtuous both partners are is always doomed to fail hence the loveless relationship between Alithea and Sparkish. In conclusion, Lady Fidget does fulfil her role as Wycherley's presentation of 17th century woman because she is used Wycherley as a tool to explore the alternative image of femininity that existed during the 17th century-the 'masculine' type woman that would not be beaten nor cheated.