

VICTIMIZATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN WILLIAM WYCHERLEY'S *THE COUNTRY WIFE*

Dr. Adil M. Jamil
Amman Arab University
Amman, Jordan

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the attitude of William Wycherley, the ferocious moralist, to the victimization of women by the elite of aristocratic society during the Restoration era. To attain his goal, Wycherley casts the characters of The Country Wife into four distinct groups, the victimizer, the victimized, the self-made victims, and the exemplary characters. Horner and other rakes stand for the first group; in the second group stand Margery and fine ladies, the third group comprises the self-made cuckolds, Pinchwife, and Sir Jasper Fidget; and in the fourth group stand the mouthpiece of Wycherley, Alithea and Harcourt. The study thrusts the idea that the playwright demonizes the conduct of the cruel victimizers, as well he burlesques conduct of self-made cuckolds. To the playwright, both types stand behind the failings of female character. By contrast, Wycherley expresses notable sympathy to all victimized females. Margery is depicted as a victim of an overprotective and possessive husband, and corrupt society. The same is meant for the fine ladies. For being completely neglected by husbands, they drifted into the road of adultery and extramarital activities. Despite the sympathy Wycherley shows toward the victims, he endorses not the flirtation of victims, but he wishes to see the conduct of exemplary characters prevail.*

KEYWORDS: *Wycherley, the country wife, the rake, the self-made cuckolds, the virtuous gang.*

INTRODUCTION

Wycherley, a Puritan and a ferocious moralist, in Wilson's words, was also known as a straightforward person who is overly critical of the established societal norms and mores (Wilson 1969). He *began in the vein of Etherege, but developed a darker and more severe kind of satire* (Stone 1975, p. 197). His controversial play *The Country Wife* was a great success on its first performance, but soon kept off stage by the pressure of moralists who took its sexual explicitness and its explicitly risqué language and double entendre as grounds for dismissal (Macaulay 2005). It was kept off stage for long centuries, yet replaced by an adapted revised version of David Garrick's. Nowadays the original version receives more attention and becomes a stage favorite to theatric groups and liberal audiences. Academic critics of the 21st century show notable fascination in its linguistic energy, sharp social satire, and openness to different interpretations (Ogden 2003). *The Country Wife* can be read as an intellectual condemnation of the masculinity, possessiveness, duplicity, and affectation of its aristocratic society. Both genders, man and women, are portrayed as totally corrupted, except very few of course, yet the sentiments of playwright go to female characters, the victims of a masculine society. Male characters are either self-defeating persons, or misanthropes who take advantage of the failings of others. Furthermore, female characters are introduced as victims of both the self-defeating characters and cruel rakes.

Literary Sources

Critics have cited a number of sources that Wycherley possibly drew upon in shaping his play. As agreed upon, Wycherley took the idea of a rake who pretends to be emasculated in order to have access to fine ladies, from Terence's play, *Eunuch*. Other than that, similarity ends, except that both plays have witty servants, with different functions however. The second cited sources are Moliere's plays, *The School for Wives* and *The school for Husbands*. Margery, the country wife, owes several things to Agnes of the French play, but Agnes never outrages her girlish innocence. Wycherley borrowed more from *The School for Husbands*. The portrayal of Mr. Pinchwife is approximately similar to that of the tyrant Sganarelle, in Moliere's play. Both mistrust women and think they should be closely watched, both have excessive pride in themselves, and both fooled by the women they lock up. Furthermore, Isabel, Sganarelle's fiancée, uses a letter in much the same manner as Margery does to arrange an assignation with a lover. In additions, other critics cited Ben Jonson's play *Every Man in his Humor*, as another source of *The Country Wife*. Like Pinchwife, Kately is excessively jealous because of his gorgeous wife. In comparison, Pinchwife is terribly obsessed by his humor, and lives under the fear of being deceived by wife and friends. (See Miles 1910; Sedgwick 1985; Dixon 2002, and Ogden 2003). Finally, one may daresay while Wycherley might have drawn much from some plays, his main source was his age.

In *The Country Wife*, Wycherley registers strong condemnation of the moral corruption of the elite during the Restoration era. To dramatize his condemnation, the playwright introduces four sets of characters: self-defeating or self-made cuckolds, Jack Pinchwife and Sir Jasper Fidget; the victimized group: Margery and fine ladies, Lady Fidget, Lady Dainty, and Lady Squeamish; the exemplary characters, Alithea and Harcourt; and the victimizers, Horner, Sparkish, Dolirant, Quack, and other rakes.

Self-defeating Self-Made Cuckolds

The first character type that receives the brunt of Wycherley's dark satire and mockery is the self-made cuckold that is fully developed in *The Country wife*. Wycherley sees this type accountable for the corruption of respectable wives, and in turn helps rakes prevail. A cuckold is a man whose reputation is smeared by the flirting of his wife with other men, usually labelled with *the sign of horns*, the sign of dishonor and indignation (I. i. 86). Mr. Pinchwife and Sir Jasper Fidget represent this type. Both are introduced as the makers of their own fortune (III. ii. 55-60), and in turn the plight of wives as well. A wife of a cuckold, out of revenge, not only indulges in intrigues behind husband's back, but sometimes before his very eyes as Sir Jasper and other cuckolds do. On many occasions, the cuckold husbands encourage their wives to accompany Horner, the bawdy rake, to theatre, possibly misled by Horner's pretense of impotency. Ironically encouragement as such overwhelms even their sexually repressed wives. Battered wives soon take it as an opportunity to revenge the neglect and misconduct of husbands. They grow overjoyed especially when Horner whispers to Lady Fidget that the rumor spread about his impotency is untrue. Though they find in Horner an outlet for repressed desire, the blame husbands for

their own flirtation. Lady Fidget overly puts the blame on the indifference and neglect of husbands, *Who for business from his wife will run/ Takes the best care to have her business done* (II. i. 619-620). A repressed wife would naturally look for an outlet elsewhere when a husband completely neglects marital duties. On another occasion, even Pinchwife, a cuckold himself, rails at the indifference of Sparkish, *Great kindness to you, indeed. Insensible, fop, let a man make love to his wife to his face* (II. i.194-195).

Jack Pinchwife, another cuckold, is explicitly the maker of his own fortune. He is pathologically jealous over his wife, and soon his excessive jealousy brings undesired effects, for it eventually drives his wife to fall into the snares of rakes. Pinchwife is excessively afraid of being made a cuckold, to the point of not letting others know that he is married. He picked a country woman as a wife, believing that she doesn't know enough of the fashionable world, so she would not think of taking a lover, beside her husband. He is brainlessly convinced that a country wife surpasses others in her attributes, *at least we are a little surer of the breed there, know what her keeping has been, whether foiled or unsound* (I. i.402-403). Unlike city women, a country wife is assumed to be thrifty; she won't squander money lavishly as *a London baggage would be to spend hers* (I. i. 435-436), and always remains devoted to her husband. Out of fright, Pinchwife keeps his wife locked in, away from the city gallants, to avoid the possibility of being cuckolded. And worse, Pinchwife is convinced that a wife must be kept ignorant in the dark. Knowledge, he believes, is source of corruption to the wife, as evident in his response to Harcourt's supposition that Margery is brought to the city *to be taught breeding*. Pinchwife protests, *To be taught? No, Sir. I thank you, good wives and private soldiers should be ignorant*. Further, his fear of knowledge tops off in his aside, *I'll keep her from your instructions* (I. i. 415-418). Sparkish, the fop, mocks the fright of Pinchwife and warns of the consequences it may bring about,

Lord, how shy you are of your wife; but let me tell you, brother, we are men of wit have amongst us saying that cuckolding, like small pox comes with fear. (IV. iv. 71-74)

In truth, Sparkish's advice eventually holds true. The precautionary measures Pinchwife takes avail nothing but unleash a wife's curiosity to tread into the world of fashion and soon learns how to frustrate husband's tyranny and unbearable lookout. By time, Margery grows fond of the virile handsomeness of town gallants, rakes, and players, and plainly keeps her husband Pinchwife in a state of continual horror with her unrefined sexual vitality and naturalness. Ironically, every step Pinchwife takes to preventing cuckolding brings him one step closer to it. Once he disguised Margery as a boy, a brother of his wife, and takes her to Horner's lodging, where the latter easily penetrates her disguise, and teases the jealous husband by kissing the disguised young *gentleman* and telling him the kiss is for his sister. Even the farewell letter Pinchwife forces Margery to send to Horner, in hope to discourage the latter's attention, goes against his wishes. It misfires and gives Margery instead an opportunity to write a love letter to Horner. Learning the art of masquerade from Pinchwife, Margery later uses it to frustrate her husband's foolish tricks and to meet her lover incognito. In the portrayal of Pinchwife, Wycherley mocks all husbands who mistrust their wives, and consequently cuckolding becomes a just reward for them, as noted by critics,

The Country Wife has a moral, and a sound one, that the Husband who mistrusts his wife and tries to keep her from other men will merely stimulate her desire and teach her to deceive him, however ill-equipped she is with natural cunning. This is in accord with the Rationalism of the period. (Pott. 55).

Both Jasper and Pinchwife are portrayed as victims of their own making, and thus become targets of the playwright's mockery. The predicament of Pinchwife is made a logical consequence to his possessiveness, hostility, distrust, and tyranny. His freight of being cuckolded breeds suspicion and distrust not only in his wife but also in all married women as such: *that love instructs her how to deceive me, ...all idiots as she is Love, 'twas he gave women first their craft, their art of deluding.* (IV. ii. 54-57)

His hostility and unbearable lookout drive his wife into debauchery. After forcing Margery to write a reproaching letter to Horner, he locks her up in her chamber and boasts, *If you do not cheat women, they'll cheat us; and fraud may be justly used with secret enemies, of which a wife is the most dangerous* (IV. iii. 213-215). His insane hostility rounds off when he draws on his wife and threatens to flay her visage with a penknife. His threat, however, avails nothing with Margery; to the contrary, it creates further situations that increase his fears and failure, as Holland notes:

Pinchwife-his name is significant- fears and distrusts women; these fears create a hostility that tends to make him inadequate lover; unconsciously he satisfies his aggressive instincts by frustrating and disappointing women he makes love to. Disappointing women, in turn, create further situations that increase his fears. Thus he falls into the typical self-defending spiral of neurosis. As Pinchwife himself puts it, free of the cumbersome jargon of psychology, 'The jades would fit me, I could never keep a whore to myself. (Holland. 84)

Pinchwife often humiliates, despises, and abuses Margery. *Fool, whore, and idiot* are only a few of the offending expressions with which he addresses his wife. He is convinced that keeping her ignorant and broken would keep her loyal to him. *To be taught? No, sir, I thank you, good wives and private soldiers should be ignorant,* he says to Harcourt once (I. i. 416-417). He also warns his sister Alithea of teaching Margery where to meet gallants,

Hold, hold, do not teach my wife where the men to be found; I believe she's the worst for your town documents already. I ask you keep her in ignorance, as I do. (II. i. 58-60)

His irrational fixation to manipulate his wife and keep her ignorant and blindly obedient to his commands reaps only undesired effects. He corrupts his wife and arouses her interest in other men, and soon she learns to lie, to scheme, and to carry letters, and finally she knows the way to Horner's bed. Instead of keeping her in check, he unintentionally unleashes her desire and raises her curiosity to see the other side of the world beyond her domestic imprisonment.

Being partly a country booby or *a country gentleman* (I. i. 385), Pinchwife displays a number of attributes different from those held by city people, and thus becomes an appropriate butt of mockery. Citified people look down to any country booby for being excessively jealous, as Sparkish notes, *Why do ye' think I'll seem to be jealous like a country bumpkin* (II. i. 226-227). Not only jealous, but also he

is credulous and gullible. Pinchwife, for instance, is easily fooled by his seemingly guileless wife and treacherous rakes. Once Margery puts on Alithea's clothes pretending to be Alithea. Pinchwife, unsuspected, takes her to Horner's lodging and then goes out to find a clergyman to bless their marriage, without knowing that the disguised lady is actually his wife, not Alithea. Puzzled by the foolishness and credulity of Pinchwife, Horner wonders, *What means the fool* (V. ii. 76). In additions, city people embrace the idea that the country produces only wild, unsociable and thrifty specimen like Pinchwife as evident in the words of Horner:

What, I see a little time in the country makes a man turn wild and unsociable, and only fit to converse with his horses, dogs, and his herds (III. ii. 394-396).

In practice, the beau mode takes the country booby a source of occasional laughter; he can be tolerated momentarily and soon neglected. After being used, he becomes a tiresome, dull, and tedious companion, as Horner relates to Quack:

A pox, keeping a cuckold company after you have had his wife is as tiresome as the company of a country squire to a witty fellow of the town when he has got all his money. (V. ii. 10-14)

Like Pinchwife, Sir Jasper, a cuckold, suffers the same ordeal for holding another wrong attitude toward his wife, and consequently cuckolding becomes a just reward for him. The tyrannical close lookout of Pinchwife is counterbalanced by Sir Jasper's complete neglect of his wife. Inasmuch as the aggressive lookout of Pinchwife does, Sir Jasper's indifference brings about the same effect. Sir Jasper is always on the run for his own business, leaving his wife behind sexually repressed and frustrated. He gives a blind eye to whatever his wife, Lady Fidget, does, even flirting with other men. Openly he says to Horner, *Business must be performed always before love and ceremony with the wife, Master Horner* (I. i. 125-126). Such words echo Lady Fidget's remark, *Who for business from his wife run/ Takes the best care to have her business done* (II. i. 619-620). She and other fine ladies resentfully protest the indifference of Husbands, *Indeed, as the world goes, I wonder there are no more jealousy, since wives are so neglected*, says Lady Fidget to Squeamish (II. i. 360-365). She vocally protests and holds her husband at fault for her flirting with other men. Regardless of her unhidden flirtation, Sir Jasper shows no concern whatsoever. He constantly escapes her company, going off to Whitehall, and leaves her behind shopping freely for pleasure with other men. It could be said that her flirting is only a natural reaction to husband's frigidity and neglect, something she repeatedly complains of. It could be taken also as a painful retaliation to the indignation she endures at the hand of an indifferent husband. Even while her arms are still around another man, she reminds Sir Jasper that a husband's neglect would throw a wife into adultery,

'tis I have more reason to be angry, who I am left by you to go abroad indecently alone, or, what is more indecent, to pin myself upon such ill-bred people of your acquaintance as this is. (IV. iii. 102-105)

Victimized: Margery and fine Ladies

The victimized group includes first Margery and second the fine ladies or the so-called virtuous gang, Lady Fidget, Lady Dainty, and Lady Squeamish. Margery Pinchwife, the fresh country wife, battered and maltreated by husband, then driven into the road of adultery. She is typically naïve, and completely ignorant of the complexities of city life, upper-class, libertine marriage, and seduction. Margery's naiveté is exemplified in her exchange with her sister-in-law, the city lady Alithea,

Mrs. Pinchwife: *Pray, sister, tell me why my husband looks so grim here in town, and keep me up so close, and will not let me go a walking, not let me wear my best gown yesterday.*

Alithea: *O, he is jealous, sister.*

Mrs. Pinchwife: *Jealous? What is that?* (II. i. 5-10)

Her naiveté comes off once again when she wonders about *love and ruin, but if he loves me, why should he ruin me? Answer to me that. Methinks he should not, I should do him no harm* (II. i. 128-130). And worse her naiveté can prove fatal sometimes. She almost gives away Horner's secret when Pinchwife, Alithea, Harcourt, and the fiancé arrive to clear up the mystery of the disguised Alithea. As Pinchwife threatens Horner with the sword accusing him of double-dealing, Margery rises to defend Horner, unfortunately with a naïve remark, *Tis false, Sir, You shall not disparage poor Master Horner; for my certain knowledge...* This would add fuel to the rage of the roaring husband lest dodged by Lucy and Squeamish (V. iv. 392-395).

Margery is also portrayed as ignorant of social graces, as evident in the following exchange with Alithea:

Mrs. Pinchwife: *He says he won't let me go abroad for fear of catching the pox.*

Alithea: *Fie, the small pox you should say.* (II. i. 33-35)

Yet, she comes to town frank and honest, free of the art of lying or cunning, till she is forced by Pinchwife to catch the city infection. She frankly says to Alithea, *I liked hugely the actors; they are the goodliest properest men* (II. i. 21-23). She even expresses genuine feelings toward the actors before husband; she admits she likes the actors better than she likes him, for actors are plainly *finer folks* (II. i. 77). Even in her letter to Horner, her honesty and naiveté come off free of cunning or dissembling,

And I say, for the letter, 'tis the first love-letter that ever was without flames, darts, fates, destinies, lying, and dissembling in it. (IV. i. 36-37)

Driven by the hostility of her husband, she soon becomes capable of devising intrigues, and afterwards loses her innocence and naivety. She learns to dissemble and lie in to deceive her husband and contain his malice. Alerted by Lucy's instructions, Margery has no choice but to lie:

Lucy: *Indeed, she is innocent, Sir; I am her witness; and her end of coming out was but to see her sister's wedding and what she has said to your face of her love to Master Horner was but the usual innocent revenge on a husband's jealousy, was it not, madam? Speak.*

Mrs. Pinchwife: (aside to Lucy and Horner) *Since you'll have me tell more lies—* (To Pinchwife) *Yes, indeed, bud.* (V. iv. 434-440)

Margery is actually victimized by husband and society, not *licentious Margery* as moralist critics label her. She is rather a tragic character, destined to have her naiveté cruelly taken advantage of by the *grim, nightmare figure of Horner* (Bonamy 94).—Margery is a victim of two bad kinds of masculinity, Horner's libertinism and Pinchwife's possessiveness (See Holland 1959, and Zimbardo 1965).

The three fine ladies, or the virtuous gang, Lady Fidget, Dainty, and Lady Squeamish, are also victimized by husbands and rakes. Obviously, they feel humiliated by the neglect of husbands. In reaction, they retaliate indignation by acting as libertine as husbands are. After they get fed up with the neglect of husbands, they resort to affected honor and dissembling. They dissemble honor in public as other respectable ladies do, whereas in private they strive to fulfill their repressed desire, flirting with Horner and others. However, they seem in continuous conflict between the need for quenching physical unease, and the dictates of society. For instance, after a bawdy encounter with Horner, Lady Fidget asks her host, *How, you saucy fellow! Would you wrong my honor?* Then she repeatedly entreats him, *to promise to have a care of my dear honor* (IV. iii. 43-44). She further solicits Horner to keep her debauchery concealed especially before women,

if you should ever let other women know the dear secret, it would come out; nay you must have a great care of your conduct, for my acquaintances are so censorious—O, 'tis a wicked, censorious world, Master Horner—I say, are so censorious, and detracting, that perhaps they'll talk to the prejudice of my honor, though you should not let them know the dear secret. (IV. iii. 62-67)

In public, she is forced to assume a different role to keep terms with the norms and mores of society. She dissembles guarding her *dear, dear Honor* (II. i. 417). On one occasion, she pretends to be offended and embarrassed when Sir Jasper mentions the word *naked* before her. On another occasion, she cries out for her mask when some visitors arrive at Horner's lodging, a demand which overwhelms even her cuckold husband, *What, not when I am with you,* he protests; regardless, *No, no, my honor—let's be gone,* said she (IV. iii. 245-248). Lady Fidget, Lady Squeamish and Dainty are fully aware that the concept of honor is merely a fiction people guard only in public; they are really interested in the appearance of honor, not honor itself. They resort to dissembling and affectation just to keep public image untarnished. Out of necessity, they force themselves to abide by the common saying overriding in their corrupt society: *the crime is less when 'tis not known.* They know that extramarital affairs would be a scandal only when it is exposed, as Squeamish sums up,

It is not an injury to a husband till it be an injury to our honors so that a woman of honor loses no honor with a private person. (II. i. 411-413)

Lady Fidget, the spokeswoman of the *virtuous gang*, admits that they keep their honor intact only in public as all other people do. In truth, what they do is a common practice done by most honorable persons in society, men and women:

Our reputation? Lord! Why should you think that we women make use of our reputation as men of yours, only to deceive the world with less suspicion? Our virtue is like the statesmen's religion, the Quaker's word, the gamester's oath, and the great man's honor; but to cheat those that trust us. (V. iv. 105-110)

In brief, the flirtation of the virtuous gang, as well as that of Margery, is a natural consequence to the misconduct of husbands. To Lady Fidget, Dainty, and Squamish, flirtation is partly a form of revenge and partly a natural need for frustrated married women. To Margery, it is also a form of revenge. In flirting with Horner, she revenges the constant humiliation and inhuman lockout of husband. As being battered and frustrated, they become easy victims to the victimizers, Horner and his group.

The Victimizer Horner and Rakes

Horner the chief victimizer is introduced as another copy of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, the most notorious and repugantly indecent courtier, among the group of the court wits. Rochester was in practice, *its leader in literature and in deviltry* (Wilson 9). Rumors of the Earl's numerous mistresses, visits to brothels and an alleged rape abound were always on the tongue of townspeople (Johnson 2004). He died at thirty-three, of what Graham Green in his work *Lord Rochester's Monkey* ironically calls *old age* (Green 1989). The Earl was actually worn out of rakish pleasure, venereal diseases and alcohol (Davis: 2013). Like the Earl, Horner is given the same attributes at the same time Wycherley anticipates that Horner would soon suffer the same fate of the Earl. Both are physically attractive and true wits, yet act like ardent sexual machines insatiably preying on willing victims. Horner is wicked, merciless, obnoxious and beastly lascivious. He is insightful, but the most depraved wit in his sexual conduct. He uses any means, dissembling, affectation, and lying to take advantage of battered and neglected women and as well cuckolding husbands with no restraint. Horner begins his hunt with a ruse he and close followers spread, that a venereal disease has rendered him impotent. His impotency, as he claims, is an effect of a venereal disease he contracted in France whilst *dealing with common women*. During treatment, he claims, a surgeon drastically reduced the extent of his manly stature and therefore he would be no threat to any man's wife. With this lie, Horner seeks unsuspected access to seducing as many respectable ladies as possible and thus cuckolding or *putting horns on* their husbands, the sign of indignation and dishonor. Horner's ruse proves a great success. After spreading rumors of being impotent, he convinces many idiots or self-made cuckolds to let loose their neglected ladies goofing around him. They believe that he is now harmless and can't function like a potent man. Soon after, like a misanthrope, he launches his revenge on society, both men and women, cuckolding gullible and idiot husbands and seducing licentious and compliant women, bragging and boasting freely about his skills in driving ladies of different walks to his bed chamber. After victimizing the three fine ladies, Lady Fidget, Lady Squeamish, and Lady Dainty; he does not spare even the most naïve woman appeared in his play. He turns toward Margery the fresh country wife who arrives recently to London, taking advantage of Margery's naiveté and curiosity to see the world of fashion, meanwhile he invests in the idiocy of her extremely jealous husband, Mr. Pinchwife.

Horner targets fine ladies and Margery for two purposes in mind. First, it is to quench his unchecked lust for carnal pleasure. Second, it is to use women as a vehicle to humiliate through both indifferent and overprotective husbands. Being fully aware of the frustration and affectation of fine ladies, he complacently takes advantage of their need for extramarital affairs. He uses his charisma, physical attraction and wit to easily pull the legs of his victims to his bed chamber, especially among those women whose raw appetites for physical passion exceed the boundaries of acceptable female propriety (Cohen 1983). And worse, after any bawdy game, Horner does not show any expression of love or sympathy but only disdain to game-sharers. He mocks early in the play the affectation of Lady Fidget squarely in the face: *Your virtue is your greatest affectation, madam* (I. i. 111-112), insinuating that her carnal need is far greater than the honor she claims. After Lady Fidget and husband leave, Horner reveals to Quack his despise and aversion to Sir Jasper, *Don't you see already upon the report and my carriage, this grave Man of business leaves his Wife in my lodgings, invites me to his house and wife, who before would not be acquainted with me out of jealousy*. Further, he expresses disdain to Lady Fidget, and her group, the so-called the virtuous gang, *your women of honor, as you call them, are only chary of their reputations not their persons, and it is the scandal they would avoid, not men* (I. i. 177-180). In truth, these ladies guard their reputation in public, but ready for lecherous scandal pending the scandal remains unknown. Ironically, they might know that any rake or gallant is willing to preserve the honor of the lady during the time of infatuation, yet not necessarily after.

Horner is overconfident, yet he errs in carrying his convictions to extremes. He pursues and extends his licentious campaign to excessive lengths, underestimating the counter-forces in nature and society that would inevitably combine to confound his efforts. In the beginning, Horner exerts invincible power over willing women, taking advantage of their sexual repression and readiness for extramarital affair. As expected, Horner's power would eventually wane. This comes true after the infamous China Scene in which Horner exhausts his sexual resources, and becomes that impotent and useless object with the world publicly recognizes him to be (Cohen 1983). In Act 5, Scene 4, Horner loses his charm and is seen by the fine ladies only a *lowly eunuch*. Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget, and Mistress Squeamish talk about him as if he was not present, referring to him as a *beast, toad, eunuch, filthy, notoriously lewd*, and childish. Crucially important, the three ladies feel empowered by the exhaustion of Horner, and confidently expose with disdain the hypocrisy and duplicity of men, that drive them to affectation and dissembling: *Our Reputation, Lord! Why should you not think that we women make use of our Reputation as you men of yours? Only to deceive the world with less suspicion*, defends Lady Fidget. And in response to Horner's inquiry, *I was deceived in you devilishly. But why that mighty pretense to Honor?* Lady Fidget bluntly replies, *We have told you. 'Twas for the same reason you men pretend business often, to avoid ill company, to enjoy the better and more privately those you love*. At this crucial moment, the ladies feel triumphant, and Horner becomes a *false Rogue, Wretch, and a false villain... to whom there's no remedy to cure*. As leaving, Lady Fidget, (*Claps him on the back*), (V. iv. 3- 65) as an expression of triumph over their victimizer Horner and the like. In Cohen's words, *As the ladies grow in aggressive self-confidence... thereby revealing the altered socio-sexual roles that are now presented* (Cohen 1983).

In brief, Horner employs any means in his capacity to victimize both men and women, men by cuckolding and women by violating their honor. With no restraint or reservation, he takes pride in unmasking fashionable ladies and exposing their private affairs among others. He is savage and a sex machine seizing any opportunity to subjugate and manipulate others; yet in the final scene he exhausts his sexual resources, and thus falls victims to his own unchecked rakish pleasure and oddities, like his role model, Rochester. Ironically, the false claim of impotency in the beginning of the play comes true at the end, where Horner fails to pursue his campaign of victimizing others, and thus becomes an object of mockery for fine ladies at least.

Exemplary Characters

Harcourt and Alithea are introduced as foils to the rest of the group, and relatively prototype of exemplary characters to be developed in *Sentimental Comedy*. Unlike other rakes and the *virtuous gang*, they are free of any foibles displayed by others, such as dissembling, affectation, duplicity and hypocrisy. Alithea is always critical of the libertine attitude of fine ladies, as well she stands against the maltreatment of her brother Pinchwife to his wife Margery. By the arrangement of Pinchwife, Alithea is engaged to Sparkish, a shallow and foolish playboy who considers himself *a wit*. Despite Sparkish's vanity and possessiveness, and the real motive behind his prospective marriage, she feels obliged to keep her promise to her brother Pinchwife to marry Sparkish, and refuses the idea of breaking her match with Sparkish. For the sake of honor, she refuses to breach her *promise*. She hates Sparkish, but she is willing to marry him in order to keep her honor intact, *I must marry him* (Sparkish), *my reputation would suffer in the world else* (II. i. 246-247). She further argues with Lucy, who is clearly pulling for Harcourt: *I was engaged to marry, you see, another man, whom my justice will not suffer me to deceive or injure* (IV. i. 17-18). But such idealistic thought of honor has no place in the Beau Monde community as exemplified in Lucy's inquiry, *Can there be a greater cheat or wrong done to a man than give him your person without your heart? I should make conscience of it*. And further, Lucy laughs out Alithea's fixation to guard the idea of honor at whatever cost:

But what a devil is this honor? 'tis sure a disease in the head like the megrim or falling sickness, that always hurries people away to themselves mischief; men lose their lives by it; women, what is dearer to them—their love, the life of life. (IV. i. 31-36)

Frank Harcourt meets Alithea early in the play, and soon falls in love with her. His devotion to the meritorious Alithea bespeaks his basic good nature. He begins as a rake, but in the course of the play, he is converted to a vision of marriage based on mutual love and esteem, and finally wins the hand of Alithea. In comparison, Harcourt is the true lover, the representative of mutual trust in marriage, whereas Horner is a savage rake, manipulating through his ruse both men and women (Holland 1959). Righter holds that Alithea and Harcourt stand firmly at the center of the play; and adds that *it is by their standard that Wycherley intends the other characters, including Horner, to be judged* (111).

In conclusion, *The Country Wife* is a fierce condemnation of Wycherley to the savageness and cruelty of the masculine savage society of the Beau Monde. That morally corrupt society is accountable for the destruction of fine ladies as well the annihilation of naïve virtuous ladies as Margery. As Ann Righter

comments, *Unlike Etherege, Wycherley is not really interested in young lovers. What he is interested in is that savage vision of society which is being revealed all the time on the outskirts of the play, by the activities of a renegade from the center: Harcourt's friend, Horner* (Righter 111).

References

- Burke, Helen M. (Fall 1988). "Wycherley's 'Tendentious Joke': The Discourse of Alterity in The Country Wife," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29, 3: 227–41.
- Canfield, Douglas (1997). *Tricksters and Estates: On the Ideology of Restoration Comedy*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Dixon, Peter (1996). *William Wycherley: The Country Wife and Other Plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dobrée, Bonamy (1924). *Restoration Comedy 1660–1720*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Green, Graham (1989). *Lord Rochester's Monkey: Being the Life of John Wilmot*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Holland, Norman N. (1959). *The First Modern Comedies: The Significance of Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve*. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Howe, Elizabeth (1992). *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660–1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunt, Leigh (ed.) (1840). *The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Farquhar*.
- Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve (1985). "The Country Wife: Anatomies of male homo-social desire". In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homo-social Desire*, pp. 49–66. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington (1841). [Review of Leigh Hunt, ed. The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar](#), in *Critical and Historical Essays*, Vol. 2. Retrieved 6 February 2005.
- Ogden, James (ed., 2003.) *William Wycherley: The Country Wife*. London: A&C Black.
- [Macaulay, Thomas Babington \(2005\). The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar](#), in *Critical and Historical Essays*, Vol. 2.
- Pepys, Samuel (ed. Henry Benjamin Wheatley, 1880). *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Retrieved 14 March 2005.
- Potts, James (1975). *Comedy of Manners*. New York: Richard West Publishing.
- Righter, Anne (1966). William Wycherley, in Earl Miner, ed. *Restoration Dramatists*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Stone, George Winchester and et al (1975). *British Dramatists: From Dryden to Sheridan*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Wilson, John Harold (1969). *Six Restoration Plays*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Zimbaro, Rose A. (1965). *Wycherley's Drama: A Link in the Development in English Satire*. Yale.