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William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*: A Maze of Complicated Relationships

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The present study attempts to analyse William Wycherley's restoration comedy *The Country Wife* (1675) in terms of portrayal of a complicated maze and web of relationships - of Pinchwife and his wife Margery, Pinchwife and his sister Alithea, Alithea and her fiancé Sparkish, Harcourt's professing of true love for Alithea despite her engagement to Sparkish and Horner's relationship with various town women. Pinchwife's relationship with his wife is marked by doubt and insecurity and even his relationship with Alithea is marred because of his prejudiced and low opinion of her and all women in general. Sparkish is more concerned with his wit rather than Alithea and it is Harcourt rather than Sparkish who courts her and shows an implicit trust in her like a sincere lover. Horner's relationship with the women of the town is shallow and based on mere satiation of physical urges. All these relationships keep on intermingling with each other in the play and make the plot a rich one.

The Country Wife (1675) is William Wycherley's third and the most famous restoration comedy of manners. Like all restoration comedies, this comedy moves around the stock themes of wit, love, extra marital affairs, keeping appearances, hypocrisy, scandal-mongering, cuckolding and male dominance over women. According to W. Gerald Marshall, it displays a society similar to that described in Wycherley's poem, "To Nath. Lee, in Bethlem,":

Heroes and Lovers, stark mad are
Mad likewise is each Crack'd brain'd Prodigal
Heroe, like a Tom of Bedlam too
antic Courtier, mad for pride, we hold
fine, the whole World's giddy, running around
Light- Heads in it only can be found (quoted in Marshall 410).

This comedy can be basically divided into three plots - the married life of Pinchwife and Margery, Horner's pretence of impotence and Harcourt's wooing of Pinchwife's sister Alithea. The comedy depicts a complicated maze of relationships - relationship of Pinchwife and Margery, Pinchwife and Alithea, Alithea and Sparkish, Alithea and Harcourt, Horner and married women of the town. All these relationships keep on intermingling with each other at many points during the duration of the play. Pinchwife's relationship with his wife Margery is characterised by doubt and distrust. He is so afraid of being cheated that he goes to the extent of marrying a simple country girl Margery because he is convinced that such a girl would not be able to deceive him. The play is written and is set against a backdrop where keeping appearances is more important than reality. The social and cultural scenario is clearly not conducive for natural impulses and behavior. In contrast to the other women characters in

the comedy like Mrs. Fidget and Mrs. Squamish who though craving men's company and outwardly deny it, Margery in her innocence frankly admits her physical desires and needs. She is a character shown to be moved from the simple world of countryside to the artificial world of London. Naive that she is in the world of London, she asks Margery the meaning of jealous and being in love with another man.

Margery: Pray, Sister, why my husband looks so glum here in and keeps me up so close and will not let me go a walking nor let me wear my best Gown yesterday?"

Alithea: Oh he's jealous, Sister.

Margery: Jealous, what's that?(*The Country Wife* Act I 10)

Though Alithea evades the question and simply tells Margery to be faithful to her husband. Deborah C. Payne avers:

Despite Alithea's early attempt at social tutelage, Margery considers the actors "the goodlyest proper'st Men," mainly because of her inability to distinguish between their personated roles as gentlemen and their social roles as what Lady Fidget might call "little inconsiderable Fellows"(Payne406).

Pinchwife's entire personality is so controlled by his fear of getting cuckolded that he virtually talks about it in almost all his conversations:

Tis my maxim. He's a Fool that marries, but he's greater that does not marry a Fool. What is wit in a Wife good for but to make a man Cuckold?(*The Country Wife* Act I 8)

Well, well, I'll take care. My wife shall make me no Cuckold, though she had your help Mr. Horner(*The Country Wife* Act I 9).

(Aside) Treat me! So he uses me already like his Cuckold(*The Country Wife* Act I 10).

He denies his wife any male company and tries to make her a slave snatching away her freedom and even her femininity. Pinchwife's attitude is of complete domination over his wife as he is aware of the ways of the world which is evident from his conversation with Horner and Harcourt:

Horner: Well, I heard thou wert married.

Pinchwife: What then?

Horner: I did not expect marriage from such a whoremaster as you, one that knew the Town so much and Women so well.

Pinchwife: Why, I have married no London wife.

Horner: Pshaw, that's all one, that grave circumspection in marrying a Country Wife. Come, come, but she's handsome and young?

Pinchwife: No, no she has no beauty but her youth, no attraction but her modesty. Homely and housewifely that's all. She's too awkward, ill favored and silly to bring to Town.

Harcourt: Then methinks you should bring her to taught breeding.

Pinchwife: To be taught. No, Sir, I thank you. Good Wives and private Soldiers should be ignorant (*The Country Wife Act I 7-8*).

Ironically enough it is his jealousy that makes Margery indulge in breaking the vow of loyalty and constancy. The more he tries to chain her, the more she tries to break the shackles of patriarchal control. In the beginning, she was upfront and candid about her feelings and passions in front of her husband. But she too learns to manipulate things and mask her feelings eventually. Pinchwife has stereotyped all men as cuckolds and all women as of loose character waiting for an opportunity to cuckold their husbands. He even views his own sister Alithea in the same light and calls her 'An errant Jilflirt, a gadder, a Magpie and a mere notorious Townwoman' (*The Country Wife Act I 11*) who keeps 'the men of scandalous reputations Company' (*The Country Wife Act I 11*). Protecting and safeguarding Margery's honour becomes an obsession with him which is crucial to maintaining his position in the society as a man who can control his wife and her sexuality. Aspasia Velissariou avers:

That his symbolic emasculation, though "performed" by another man, can only be effected through Margery's body, renders the guarding of her chastity the precondition for the maintenance of his own sexual "integrity". Insofar as her "honor" overlaps with his own, it becomes his obsessive concern (Velissariou 119).

Horner's complex relationship with married women who come to him for sexual gratification is the second set of relationships in the play. Horner's rumored impotence is the organizing principle of the play. He is a typical Restoration rake and undoubtedly the most complex and intriguing of Wycherley's characters. He chooses to deny his masculinity and sexuality publicly to enjoy it privately. This provides him a vantage point as it includes him in the inner circle of trust not only of the ladies but also their husbands. As Jasper, Lady Fidget's husband tells Dorilant: '... Master Horner is a privileged man among the virtuous Ladies, heh, he, he! He is my Wife's Gallant, heh, he, he!' (*The Country Wife Act II 20*) Quite in contrast to Pinchwife whose public image as a man is of utmost importance to him, Horner is ready to live with the blot of emasculation if it enables him to have illicit affairs. The ladies Like Mrs. Fidget, Lady Squeamish and Margery are drawn towards Horner for their sexual fulfillment when they are unable to get it from their husbands. The infamous China Scene is quite illustrative of this mutual arrangement. Lady Fidget insists on continuing her passionate meeting with Horner even after the unexpected arrival of her husband. Peggy Thompson opines:

But throughout the scene, the emphasis is not on Horner's "seduction"; it is on the lust of Lady Fidget, who responds heartily, "Let him come, and welcome, which way he will"... Mrs. Squeamish impatiently tries the door behind which Horner and Lady Fidget "admire china". Sexual energy animates these women as they crash through the lies and locks designed to control that energy. Complexly self-deluded or incredibly naïve, Wycherley's women are essentially and aggressively sexual (Thompson 103-104).

The plot concerning Pinchwife and Margery's relationship gets entwined with that of Horner when Margery also gets involved with Horner to fill the vacuum in her conjugal life. Her husband is too busy in guarding himself against being cuckolded to pay any attention to his young wife. Ironically he fails to understand the simple fact that love, trust and not doubt would surely stop his wife from adultery and thus protect him from being disgraced. Quite contrary to this, he adopts foolish means like prohibiting her from entertaining any male

company, keeping her locked inside, and taking her out in the guise of a boy to keep a check on her sexuality. W. Gerald Marshall here observes:

...Pinchwife is so unsure of his sexuality, of his appeal to women – probably because of his age and negative experiences with the opposite sex – that he cuts Margery off from any normal associations with men, thus depriving his wife of her femininity. In this sense, Margery represents a female counterpart to Horner : in one way, she too is “castrated,” unable to function in any normal way as a woman (Marshall 414).

Margery too learns to manipulate things and mask her feelings when she starts understanding the social scenario. On being caught, she gives Pinchwife the impression that it is actually Alithea who is involved with Horner. His reason clouded by jealousy, he goes to the extent of thinking about a possible match between Horner and Alithea. He would rather have him as his brother-in-law than as the licentious lover of his wife. That all his endeavors in curbing Margery prove futile becomes quite evident when she crosses the boundaries of her marital bond and becomes involved with Horner. What makes Margery more tempting and irresistible for Horner is Pinchwife always hiding her from the gaze of other men and Horner in particular. When Pinchwife comes to know of their illicit affair, he forces her to write a letter to Horner professing her dislike for him against her will :

Pinchwife: Once more write as I'd have you and question it not, or I will spoil thy writing with this. I will stab out my eyes that cause my mischief.

Mrs. Pinchwife: Oh Lord, I will.

Pinchwife: So---So--- Let's see now. (*Reads*). Go on... “though I suffered last night your nauseous, loathed kisses and embraces.” Go on “yet I would not have you presume that you shall ever repeat them”---So---

Mrs. Pinchwife: (*She writes.*) I have writ it. (*The Country Wife ActIVsceneII 44*)

Pinchwife in a typical male chauvinistic manner threatens to write ‘whore’ on her forehead with a knife if she refuses to write the letter. He is completely at a loss to understand the fact that his labelling Margery as a whore would automatically lead to his being labelled as a cuckold, a title which he is frantically trying to avoid from the onset of the play. Margery keeps on fooling Pinchwife and continues being involved with Horner, a character who is interpreted as shallow and one who is governed by his sexuality who stands for physical love as opposed to eternal love. He has also been interpreted as one who frees women sexuality from the confines of societal and patriarchal control. Irrespective of the interpretation, Horner is one of the most enigmatic creations in the whole range of restoration comedies. The third set of relationships in the play concerns Alithea, Harcourt and Sparkish and is also connected to that of Margery and Pinchwife as Alithea is Pinchwife's sister. Some critics like Anne Richter insist that, “Alithea and Harcourt stand formally at the centre of the play... it is by their standards that Wycherley wants other characters including Horner to be judged” (Quoted in Beauchamp 324). As the play starts, we see that Alithea is betrothed to Sparkish, a character who unlike his name, fails to sparkle or dazzle. He wrongly considers himself a wit as the conversation between Horner and Harcourt clearly brings forth:

Horner: His Company is as troublesome to us as a Cuckold's when you have a mind to his wife's.

Harcourt: No, the Rogue will not let us enjoy one another, but ravishes our conversation.

Dorilant: And to pass for a wit in Town, shows himself a fool every night to us (*The Country Wife* Act I 6).

Being a wit and spending time in the company of other wits is an idea which completely possesses him so much so that he is incapable of talking about anything else. (No, Sir, a wit to me is the greatest title in the World - *The Country Wife* Act I 7), Pshaw, with your fooling we shall loose the new Play, and I would no more miss seeing a new Play the first day than I would miss setting in the wits' Row. Therefore I'll go fetch my Mistress and away (*The Country Wife* Act I 7). But quite in contrast to the qualities of intelligence, sharp-mindedness a true wit displays, Sparkish is a fool and an idiot. His idiocy is clearly brought forth when he refuses to see that Harcourt has fallen in love with Alithea at the first sight. Instead he chooses to be in a state of illusion regarding the whole scenario.

Sparkish: Harcourt how dost thou like her, Faith? Nay, Dear, do not look down. I should hate to have a Wife of mine out of countenance at anything (*The Country Wife* Act I 13).

...Harcourt: So infinitely well that I could wish I had a Mistress, too, that might differ from her in nothing but her love and engagement to you (*The Country Wife* Act I 14).

Even Harcourt's confession of love for Alithea is insufficient to convince Sparkish who himself proceeds to justify Harcourt's behavior (Pshaw, pshaw to show his parts---we wits rail and make love often but to show our parts - *The Country Wife* Act I 16). Harcourt who isn't very inclined towards marriage, candidly admits that there is no harm in getting married to a pure angelic woman like Alithea whom he values 'above the World, or the most glorious part of it, her whole Sex' (*The Country Wife* Act I 14). Thus Margery is engaged to be married to Sparkish but Harcourt who is a friend of Sparkish claims to be truly in love with her. Harcourt tells Alithea :

Harcourt: Truly, Madam, I never was an Enemy to Marriage till now, because Marriage was never an Enemy to me before.

Alithea: But why, Sir, is Marriage an Enemy to you now? Because it robs you of your Friend here?

Harcourt: 'Tis indeed, because you marry him. I do confess heartily and openly, I wish it were in my power to break the Match, by Heavens I would (*The Country Wife* Act I 14).

Pinchwife, Alithea's brother tries to stop him from making a fool out of himself but Sparkish remains undeterred towards that end and tells Harcourt to 'Go, go with her into a corner and try if she has wit. Talk to her anything, she's bashful before me' (*The Country Wife* Act I 15). Harcourt takes full advantage of the situation to profess his ever-growing love for Alithea and Alithea is equally adamant in rejecting his love and proposal as he is in confessing it. True to her pious, virtuous self, she tries to defend Sparkish and the constancy of his feelings for her.

Alithea: The writings are drawn, Sir, settlements made. 'Tis too late, Sir, and past all revocation.

Harcourt: Then so is my death.

Alithea: I would not be unjust to him.

Harcourt: Then why to me so?

Alithea: I have no obligation to you (*The Country Wife* Act I 15).

She tells Harcourt that her loyalty lies with Sparkish because she is betrothed to him and also because he trusts her implicitly and has given her no reason to despise him. Harcourt tries his utmost to convince her that Sparkish has never loved her passionately and that his readiness to marry her is merely an indication of interest not steadfast love but to no avail:

Alithea: Love proceeds from esteem. He cannot distrust my virtue, or he would not marry me.

Harcourt: Marrying you is no more sign of his love than bribing your Woman is a sign of his generosity. Marriage is rather a sign of interest than love, and he that marries a fortune covets a Mistress.

Alithea: Now you have put a scruple in my head. But in short, Sir, I must marry him, my reputation would suffer in the World else (*The Country Wife* Act I 15).

It clearly indicates that she would like to get married to Sparkish as it is something she is also expected to do according to the societal norms. In a heart to heart conversation with her maid Lucy, she pours her heart out and says that she was cruel to Harcourt out of her growing love for him and not because of her indifference.

Lucy: Nay, Madam, I will ask you the reason why you would banish poor Master Harcourt forever from your sight? How could you be so hard-hearted?

Alithea: 'Twas because I was not hard-hearted.

Lucy: No, no; 'twas stark love and kindness, I warrant.

Alithea: I would see him no more, because I love him...

Lucy: No, Madam, marrying to increase love is like gaming to become rich. Alas you only lose what little stock you had before (*The Country Wife* Act IV scene I 38).

It is only when Alithea faces the charge of being a loose woman, a cuckold - maker having an illicit relationship with Horner that destiny gives her an opportunity to see through the sham promises of Sparkish and genuine love of Harcourt. As soon as Pinchwife informs Sparkish of Alithea's love letter to Horner, he goes mad with rage and jealousy not trusting Alithea's virtue for even a moment:

Sparkish: But who would have thought a woman could have been false to me, by the world.

Pinchwife: You are a frank person, and so is she, you see there.

Sparkish: Nay, if this be her hand, for I never saw it.

Pinchwife: 'Tis no matter whether that be her hand or no. I am sure this hand at her desire led her to Mr. Horner, with whom I left her just now to go fetch a Parson to them to deprive you of her forever, for it seems yours was but a mock marriage.

Sparkish: Indeed she would needs have it that 'twas Harcourt himself in a Parson's habit that married us, but I'm sure he told me 'twas his Brother Ned... Nay, I'll to her and call her as many Crocodiles, Sirens, Harpies, and other heathenish names as a Poet would do a Mistress who had refused to hear his suit... Come Madam, no more dissembling, no more jilting (*The Country Wife Act V Scene III 62.*)

Even after his alleged cuckolding, Sparkish thinks and speaks of Alithea's supposed disloyalty in terms of wit and doesn't seem much concerned with the fact that he is going to lose her. Marshall rightly remarks, "In his obsessive preoccupation with the single idea of wit, Sparkish has lost not only a fiancée but also any real sense of self; indeed, his attitudes go far beyond any neglect of a mistress thought fashionable at the time"(Marshall420).

Sparkish: Could you find out no easy Country Fool to abuse? None but me, a Gentleman of wit and pleasure? But it was your pride to be too hard for a man of parts, unworthy false woman! False as dice who undo those that trust all they have to them.

Alithea: You have been too merry, Sir, at your wedding dinner sure.

Sparkish: Have you the confidence to stand my just reproaches? You did not write an impudent Letter to Mr. Horner? Who I find now has clubbed with you in deluding me with his aversion for women, that I might not suspect him for my Rival?(*The Country Wife Act V Scene III 62*)

Alithea is shocked as to how she could be so wrong in her judgement about a man. And in marked contrast to Sparkish disappointing behavior towards Alithea, first of indifference and then distrust, Harcourt stands firmly by her side as he had professed earlier. Payne comments:

At the end of *The Country wife*, Harcourt wins Alithea not by words, those conventional signs, nor by jealousy, "the only infallible sign" of love but by championing her honor in the face of all contrary evidence. Harcourt performs, in effect, the same sort of silent devotion which Fidelia displays for Manly throughout *The Plain Dealer*, and the same sort which Harriet will require of Dorimant at the end of *The Man of Mode*. Wycherley seems to suggest here that silence and unreasonable acts alone "prove" love in a society governed by elaborate systems of meaning (Payne 410).

Thus in *The Country Wife*, Wycherley has indeed depicted an entangled web of relationships-relationships of husband and wife, of friends, of siblings, of lovers each of which contributes to the comic element and enlivens the plot of the comedy.

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