

William Wycherley, The Country Wife

Theater was central to the culture of Restoration London. The restored monarch, Charles II, wanted to assert the centrality of the theater in English culture as a way of harkening back to the glory days of the Stuart dynasty in the early part of the century, when his grandfather



[King Charles II wearing a crown of laurel leaves, designed to signify his interest in literature. Painted by Antonio Verrio in 1684. (Wikimedia Commons)]

James I had been the patron of William Shakespeare's

theatrical company, and when Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones had designed extravagant "masques" for performance at court. But Charles and his courtiers brought back many of the norms of the Continental stage with them when they returned to power in 1660: proscenium arched playhouses with moveable scenery, for example, and actresses in the women's parts. These changes marked a decisive break with the norms of the professional theaters of the Elizabethan era in England, where scenery was minimal to nonexistent, and where the female parts were played by young men. During his first years in power, Charles supported the new theaters in a number of ways: he was the official patron of the company performing at the playhouse in Drury Lane where *The Country Wife* was first staged; he attended plays at both state-licensed playhouses frequently; he even occasionally suggested plots to dramatists. Even more important than this personal connection was an *ideological* alliance between the theater and the culture; this era found in the playhouse a mirror of its own highly performative character. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries found themselves confronting an issue that has haunted culture ever since: how can we know if people are real and authentic, or merely performers, acting social roles in the manner of an actor in a theater? *The Country Wife* is one of many literary works from this period that probes this question. William Wycherley became a courtier in the 1670s, and his plays are set in the world of fashionable London libertines like himself. Horner, the antihero at the center of *The Country Wife*, is a familiar type of the period: a rake, for "rake-hell," so called from the hellfire that such men seemed to be daring themselves to by their scandalous behavior. At the time, some observers thought that Wycherley had modeled Horner on the notorious libertine the Earl of Rochester. That might be the case, or it might simply be that Rochester was so famous and notorious in these years that he could readily be associated with any libertine figure. In any case, Horner is certainly following the libertine's central ethical imperative—to pursue his own pleasures wherever they may lead

him, and to use his "wit," which in this period meant simply intellect, to get what he wants. Here, he advances his desire to pursue sexual relationships with the wives of men he knows by feigning impotence; men will think that he is not a threat, and women will be assured that they can conduct an affair with no damage to their reputations. What follows surprises even Horner, though, as he discovers that women—both Town women like Lady Fidget and even young Margery Pinchwife, the country wife of the title—have desires of their own, and cannot be as easily manipulated as he thought.



William Wycherley, by Peter Cross, watercolour on vellum, circa 1675. National Portrait Gallery.

The Country Wife is one of the most powerful expressions of late seventeenth century culture, and it remained a popular play for decades in theaters throughout the English-speaking world. This play has often been classed by theater historians as a “sex comedy,” for reasons that are obvious. But Wycherley

is also interested in complex social issues, such as the confrontation between the values of the town and those of the country, the male anxiety over women's agency and autonomy, and language as the medium through which all of these social norms are expressed and fought over. Some of this concern over language is apparant in the names of the play's characters. Some characters—Horner, Pinchwife, the Fidgets, Quack, etc.—have names reminiscent of the allegorical names in a contemporary religious text like John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Such names suggest a fairly direct correspondence between a person's name and their nature—Horner “horns in on” other relationships, for example, attempting to put the horns of the cuckold on a man guilty of being excessively controlling of his wife—such as the equally-aptly named Pinchwife.



John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, was the most famous—or notorious—libertine of the period. (Wikimedia Commons)

At the same time, and going against the grain of such

directness, Wycherley is concerned with how many words lend themselves to misunderstanding because they can signify different things: starting with the vulgar pun in its title that practically dares the reader not to notice it, *The Country Wife* includes plays on words like “honour,” “civil,” “business,” “frank,” and, most famously “china,” which accumulates multiple, increasingly sexual associations in the play’s central scene. As a general rule of thumb while reading *The Country Wife*, if you think he see a dirty joke based on a double-entendre, you’re not mistaken; Wycherley has almost certainly indeed put it there. Yet that free play that the characters revel in, and that is so productive of *The Country Wife*’s comedy leads to a serious question. With language itself so unpredictable, so uncontrollable, Wycherley seems to be saying, how can people communicate honestly with each other? Beneath the play’s scandalous subject matter, the play seems designed to provoke serious questions about social norms, communication, and the possibilities for cohesion and harmony in his culture.

About this edition

The text of the play is based on the first, quarto edition, published in 1675, and probably printed from the Drury Lane company’s promptbook, the manuscript copy of the play that was the theater’s primary archival record for performance. This digital edition was prepared by the students in ENEC 3400, Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theater, at the University of Virginia in the fall of 2010. They collated page images of the first edition to achieve a clean reading text. The original spelling and punctuation have been preserved (except to correct some obvious errors), since they are often a guide to pronunciation and the rhythms of speech. I have spelled out the names of speakers in full and added footnotes, media files, and this introduction.

THE
Country-Wife,
A
COMEDY,

Acted at the
THEATRE ROYAL.

Written by Mr. *Wycherley*.

*Indignor quicquam reprehendi, non quia crasse
Compositum illepidè utetur, sed quia nuper:
Nec veniam Antiquis, sed honorem & præmia posci.*
Hoset.

LONDON,

Printed for *Thomas Dring*, at the Harrow, at the
Corner of *Chancery-Lane* in *Fleet-street*, 1675.

The title page to the first edition of
1675.