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17C SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND CHARACTER INTERPRETATION IN *THE COUNTRY WIFE*

The 20C embraced Restoration comedy as the quintessence of comedy of manners and adored *The Country Wife* as one of the most brilliantly glittering example of the genre. The definition of that genre, however, arose in the current era, and it has distorted our perspective on this comedy. We must consider the 17C dramatic meaning of manners in order to understand the characters' back stories, motivations, and social milieu. Such an analysis can guide us in making distinctive, precise interpretive decisions about the characters in this comedy—decisions that are based in the text and in the historical context. These character interpretations can accentuate for a 21C audience the 17C satiric and comedic elements enmeshed within the text of *The Country Wife*.

Greenwald et al. summarize our contemporary definition of comedy of manners very concisely (674). They assert that a comedy of manners and the people who inhabit it represent the ostentatiously idle upper-class. Its plot amounts to little more than a teapot tempest. The characters nonchalantly throw out witty observations about their social inferiors who clumsily strive to ape them. This modern view of comedy of manners presents several problems, however, when applying it to Restoration comedy. The theorist Brian Corman has critiqued comedy of manners as a 20C “bourgeois construction,” built on the concept of “taste” (253). The mostly middle-class audiences (and critics) of the 20C viewed taste symbolically as an ultra-chic fashion accessory for their political and economic dominance, and so the cultured protagonists of Restoration comedy proved irresistible as fantasy projections. (The Great Books movement, Alistair Cooke's introductions on *Masterpiece Theatre*, and Charlie the Tuna represented other well-known markers of this 20C social phenomenon.) In its own day Restoration comedy, however, encompassed something entirely different from self-aggrandizement sustained by suave demeanor and clever wit. John Dryden defined manners as a person's *ethos*—the inclination to behave in a certain way and even the CAUSES of the inclination (Fujimara 6). When theatre artists today speak of Stanislavski's spine or Aristotle's character, they mean this same concept. Elegant deportment and a rich vocabulary might be an external manifestation of an aristocratic character's *ethos*, but these remain superficialities. In the 17C, though, wit remained an essential attribute for the *ethos* of an aristocrat, for it marked a person as intellectually sophisticated. Wit might, indeed, be droll, humorous, clever, and whimsical, but it primarily suggested many other higher-order mental capacities.

Restoration authors consciously encumbered their comedies with rhetorical acrobatics to display their erudition and to provide intellectual pleasure to their sophisticated audiences. A Restoration comedy's protagonist would utter words that projected an idea with clarity as well as novelty, so that comprehension would come in a delightful flash. The audience derived pleasure from sharing with the character a totally new way of understanding an idea (Fujimara 21-38). This is the definition of wit in the 17C. Traditional techniques for generating laughter such as bawdry, excessively eccentric characters, quibbling and airy persiflage, mistaken identity, and invective had a subordinate place in Restoration comedy. Dramatists chose to link these inferior devices

with antagonistic characters, thereby signaling their lack of intellect, because 17C audiences would laugh with outright maliciousness at such mental midgets. While our modern era admires the sparkle of the elegant but nonetheless quaint language that we now associate with Restoration comedy, 17C audiences would listen carefully to discern each character's intellect by her or his rhetorical facility.

Intellectual life in Restoration England had a distinctive landscape, dominated by three trendy philosophical paradigms: scientifically-based *skepticism* about faith, spirituality, the supernatural, and all things beyond the scope of human observation and measurement; an epicurean-inspired indulgence in all human impulses that became known as *libertinism*; and an idealized quest for honesty, truth, simplicity, and unpretentiousness embodied in a movement called *naturalism* (Fujimara 39-50). Skepticism arose from the flood of scientific advancements and from the reactionary disdain for the mid-century Puritan theocracy. The austerity of the Commonwealth era also fueled interest in libertinism. It was Thomas Hobbes who supplied his era with a radical philosophical model that justified both the cold rationality of skepticism and the seemingly narcissistic morality of libertinism. He asserted that aversion and desire constitute the only two human motivations (Fujimara 48). Hence, distrust of everything except reason and fulfillment of human appetites represented the highest moral good for humanity in that epoch. Restoration comedy boldly paraded before its audiences protagonists who abided by this skeptical, libertine vision. Those 17C elite audiences easily empathized with such characters, because the world they conjured into life onstage so perfectly encompassed the spirit of the new monarchist social order of the 1660s and 1670s.

Naturalism takes us to the ironic underbelly of Restoration comedy, past its rhetorically elegant language, frilly lace fans, snuff-boxes, embroidered hose, and curly perukes that conspire to obscure the profound message at its core. A brief sojourn across the English Channel can give us a good case study of a character who attempts to live according to the tenets of naturalism. Our subject is Alceste, the gratingly antagonistic protagonist in Molière's anguishing drama, *The Misanthrope*. Alceste possesses many attributes of naturalism. Alceste genuinely loves Celimene and sincerely expresses his passion. He abjures the company of hypocritical people, preferring the company of his gentle friend, Philinte. Most importantly, his naturalism compels him to speak the truth as bluntly as possible at all times, in all places, and to all around him. He is the consummate "plain-dealer" (Schneider 96). Alceste's proclivity to carry honesty to this extreme, however, gets him into trouble. His obsession about honesty makes it impossible for him to forgive others' mendacity, and it makes him incapable of accepting human follies. A Restoration comedy protagonist would not make Alceste's mistake of excess. She would be a plain-dealer, but she would not become a wild-eyed enthusiast or ranting reformer—traits associated with the priggish Puritan bourgeoisie. Rather than preach didactically as Alceste does to Oronte about his poetry, the Restoration comedy protagonist might take delight in maneuvering those around him into revealing their own hypocrisy. Mirabell's manipulation of Lady Wishfort in *The Way of the World* offers a superb example of this dramatic action. Such a Restoration comedy plot affirms the protagonist's intellectual superiority and renders all other characters laughable.

The protagonists in *The Country Wife* exhibit skeptical, libertine, and natural attributes. Wycherley intends audiences to see Horner, for example, as a handsome, forceful, dangerously exciting, and reckless rogue who is skeptical of society's code of honor, libertine in his pursuit of pleasure, and plain-dealing in his advances upon Lady Fidget. Margery begins the comedy as absurdly natural, but acquires libertine and skeptical values along the way. Modeling Alithea and Harcourt after the appealing protagonists of romantic comedies held over from the Caroline era and from the popular heroic dramas of the late 17C (Corman 35), Wycherley gives them a plain-dealing, sentimental core that endears them to audiences. He layers upon that some contemporary texture: Alithea is a skeptical blue-stocking, and Harcourt is one of Horner's libertine companions. Most importantly, Harcourt and Alithea both possess that supreme intellectual power: wit. All these protagonists disdain the cloying affectations of Sir Jaspar and Sparkish, the violent paranoia of Mr. Pinchwife, and the missish prudery displayed by Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish early in the comedy. Hence, the dramatic action—even though it has multiple plot lines—has a singular dynamic: the protagonists explode the false, petty world of the disingenuous *parvenues*. Horner debunks the false honor of all the ladies and cuckolds Mr. Pinchwife. Sparkish's dunderheadedness drives Alithea into Harcourt's adoring embrace. Margery discovers the joy of gratifying herself on all the town's pleasures. These four are seconded by the confidant(e) characters, Quack, Lucy, and Dorilant, whose actions and presence positively reinforce audiences' perceptions of the protagonists.

We can identify unambiguously the three well-known Restoration comedy character types when they first appear onstage in *The Country Wife*. The protagonists, Horner, Alithea and Harcourt are truewits—the aristocrats with libertine, skeptical, naturalist manners. These characters outmaneuver, seduce, or dupe all the rest, and as the label suggests, they possess wit—in the 17C meaning of the word. Sir Jaspar, Old Lady Squeamish, Sparkish, Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish are witwounds. Their EXCESSIVE concern for social conventions marks them as inferior beings. Mr. Pinchwife and Margery Pinchwife are the lackwits, easily manipulated by any and all. These hierarchically stratified character types paralleled clear class divisions in 17C society, as B. A. Kachur notes in his text, *Etherege and Wycherley* (150). The truewits reside in the town, London's fashionable west side around Whitehall, St. James Palace and the royal court, where they preen in fashion splendor. The witwounds hail from the city. Sir Jaspar is a businessman from the burgeoning financial district of central London. Cynthia Lowenthal directs our attention to the Epilogue of *The Gentleman Dancing-Master* for a description of a "city man" in his "Velvet jumps, gold chains, fur gowns, satin caps, small cuffs, vast cravats" (77). He brings in his wake Lady Fidget and her sister sharers. Old Lady Squeamish, an ancient relic from the Commonwealth era, brings onto the Restoration stage memories that everyone in elite society wanted to forget—an England run by Cromwell's practical, puritanical, party-poopers. Her Puritan roots tar her with the same vulgar associations of money-grubbing as Sir Jaspar and the mostly Puritan city folk. It comes as no surprise that Wycherley pairs up Old Lady Squeamish with Sir Jaspar throughout the play. Most modern productions of *The Country Wife* miss the opportunity to communicate visually through costume design all

the baggage that characters like Sir Jaspar and Old Lady Squeamish bring with them. It's baggage that separates them radically from all the other characters in the play. Typically, designers and directors clothe all the characters in the sumptuous garb of the late 17C elite, perhaps relying on the color palate to distinguish personalities or families or class among characters. Sir Jaspar, however, should be costumed in bourgeois overstatement, as Lowenthal suggests, for he is as much a parodic figure in the play as Sparkish. While Sparkish revels in his aspiration to mimic everything about the elite, Sir Jaspar follows the fashion sense of his stodgy—but ostentatiously wealthy—banker friends in the city. Old Lady Squeamish should be costumed like one of Rembrandt or Van Dyke's stern Dutch matrons, including a dark, severe dress and a massive and stiffened ruff. She is from an earlier generation, and should look like it. The stark visual contrast that these two characters would thereby make on stage would intensify the humor directed at them by the truewits, and it would help modern audiences understand more fully why they are despised as interlopers. Mr. and Mrs. Pinchwife represent the third (and lowest) stratum of society—country folk. That makes them lackwits by default in the world of Restoration comedy. Even though Mr. Pinchwife possesses considerable wealth and has lived in the town, his recent marriage and removal to his country estate mark him and Margery as ignorant rubes. To compound his gaucherie, Mr. Pinchwife only comes to London for business in the city part of the metropolis, and he can only talk about marriage with the vocabulary of business, as Ben Ross Schneider observes (38). Mr. Pinchwife should project a visual image similar to that of Sir Jaspar—one of the counting-house city-folk. In Margery, Wycherley has created a very interesting hybrid character. Her identity early in the play is, indeed, the country wife, with all that the role connotes about her hayseed ignorance, social awkwardness, and gawking gullibility as a lackwit. She asks Alithea, "Pray, sister, where are the best fields and woods to walk in, in London?" Fundamentally, she is innocently naïve. On the other hand, the author gives her some core attributes of a truewit that blossom later in the action, and these will be discussed later in the essay.

A brief investigation of plot structure is important at this point in this analysis, because the plot structure directly affects character development and relationships among characters in the comedy. Wycherley has crafted a marvelously integrated plot derived from multiple classical and neoclassical origins, and 20C scholars have thoroughly analyzed it. Scholars such as Kachur (145) and Markley (162) have observed that the plot's ambivalent conclusion does not bring about change in the world of the play, depriving audiences the satisfaction of a comedic conclusion (Northrop Frye's illusion dispelled). Analyses by Canfield and Brian Corman propose a reasonable alternative to this criticism of Wycherley's craft. They observe within Restoration comedy two oppositional forces at work, and their fusion creates the "mixt way" that Dryden attributed to this unique genre (Canfield 11). First, the centripetal force of love/marriage sustains core aristocratic values, exemplified by the Alithea-Harcourt plotline. Working against this fundamentally comic force is the centrifugal force of trickster characters who threaten the power structure in a satirical mode, exemplified by the destabilizing plotline of Horner's escapades (Corman 209). The Canfield/Corman model offers a way of acknowledging Wycherley's mastery as playwright who was working in a post-civil war epoch of derailed moral values and oppressive censorship. The final tableau offers a

concise distillation of the Restoration's uncertainty about both the source of power (land vs. trade) and the location of power (feudal aristocracy vs. financial meritocracy). Despite this ambivalence, Horner's undetected trickstering and the union of Alithea and Harcourt clearly indicate the author's political loyalty to the court society of Charles II and his skeptical, libertine, naturalist compatriots who formed Wycherley's audience. 20C literary scholars on all sides of the plot debate, however, have overlooked a critically important element in this comedy's plot and in all drama—character metamorphosis. We clearly can see individual characters undergo change as a direct result of incidents in the plot. These character transformations offer audiences of *The Country Wife* aesthetic satisfaction that the allegedly unresolved plot might deny them. While the plot may not fulfill all the traditional expectations of comedy, audiences witness a conclusion where many character changes have occurred: some have been dispossessed of their power or status, others have grown in autonomy and emotional maturity, some have secured romantic happiness, and some have climbed higher up the social ladder. These character changes reinforce the social hierarchy both within the comedy and within the society of truewits/town aristocrats, witwouds/city bourgeois, and lackwits/country bumpkins.

Harcourt is the first character who changes. In Act I he enters Horner's lodging as one of the libertine crowd. He quips with Horner and snipes at Sparkish, displaying his wit as effortlessly as Horner. Most significantly, he joins his fashionable bachelor-buddies in skeptical denigration of marriage, love, and women, throwing off witticism like, "No, mistresses are like books; if you pore upon them too much they doze you and make you unfit for company, . . ." (Wycherley 18). In Act II he meets Alithea, whose noble attributes awaken his natural feelings of love. From that point until the conclusion of the comedy he directs all his energy towards winning Alithea's affection away from Sparkish. He conspires with Horner to outmaneuver his rival, and their masterful display of wit is what brings Harcourt to fulfillment of his ambition.

Harcourt's metamorphosis initiates Alithea's. Closeted with Lucy early in Act IV, she finally admits that Harcourt's maneuvering has convinced her that Sparkish is a nincompoop *extraordinaire*. Alithea sighs over Harcourt's virtues—including his wit—that make him attractive in so many ways that Sparkish is not. Wycherley uses a visual, theatrical device to emphasize Alithea's transformation. The stage directions at the beginning of the scene specifically call for her wear "new clothes" (Wycherley 85). On a literal level, she is attired thusly because it is her wedding day—a day of ritual transformation for any bride. On the metaphorical level Wycherley is showing us the change of heart she is feeling with an external cue. Ultimately, she sheds her fastidious devotion to Sparkish and attains emotional fulfillment with Harcourt in Act V. Norman Holland confidently asserts that this "education of Alithea" plotline forms the moral center of the comedy (78). Holland's 20C interpretation has limited justification in the 17C context, for he is applying 20C morality to the comedy. Holland reminds us, nevertheless, that a production of this comedy should not allow this plotline to be shoved upstage by Horner's trickstering. It remains an important component of the bifurcated plotline of the comedy.

Act V contains a cascade of character transformations. First comes the transformation—or at least unmasking—of Sparkish. Wycherley has contrived plot twists that cause Sparkish to read a forged letter that suggests his fiancée’s betrayal, and his urbane complacency evaporates as soon as he reads it. Outraged by this evidence of Alithea’s infidelity, he breaks off their relationship in a fit of jealousy (Wycherley 132). Along the way, he admits his contemptuous motive for the marriage—the money she would bring to him. The money-grubbing ambition at his character’s core erases his foppish façade of urbanity. His effort to marry into the town elite fails, because he has not genuine wit at the core of his *ethos*.

The transformation of Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish follows right upon Sparkish’s metamorphosis. These ladies have descended upon Horner for a night of revelry in Act V. Drink has made them bold plain-dealers, celebrating their disdain for social conventions and admitting to Horner the charade that is their much-cherished honor. Dainty Fidget urges the ladies to remove their masks in the Act V drinking scene “in token of our openness and plain-dealing” (Wycherley 135). This literal act of unmasking externalizes their internal liberation. They speak boldly of satisfying their lust wherever they can, and they proclaim their skepticism about marriage. Their drinking has also made them plain-dealers about their private little arrangement with Horner. Although they are a bit shocked when they first learn of each other’s escapades with Horner, Lady Fidget quickly unites them in a mutually advantageous accommodation. Any right-thinking 17C aristocrat in the audience would applaud their libertine sexual autonomy and their skeptical disdain for society’s hypocrisy. The sister sharers have Horner to thank for their promotion from second-class status (witwouds) into the elite circle of the smugly self-entitled town folk (truewits).

An examination of social status of these three pivotal characters can shed some light on this interpretation of their upwardly mobile transformation. As Canfield observes in his *Tricksters & Estates*, the social rank of Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish poses a conundrum (127). We can’t be sure if they trace their origins to the town elite or the city. Consider, first, Mrs. Squeamish, whose backstory can be deduced most easily from the text. Her descent from puritan, city ancestors—Old Lady Squeamish—gives us a foundation for situating (and portraying in a production) her persona in bourgeois city roots. Lady Squeamish is running away from her heritage as fast as she can, desperate to re-invent herself on a higher social plane (Wycherley 106-07). In Restoration England this was possible. Cynthia Lowenthal notes that the 17C saw for the first time mass marketing of apparel and a growing middle class who could purchase the *appearance* of wealth, breeding, and prestige (24). Mrs. Squeamish would possess the means to do this as the offspring of a wealthy merchant family. Lady Fidget and Dainty Fidget appear before the audience with fewer clues about their backgrounds. These two characters could hail from obscenely wealthy city families, like Mrs. Squeamish, whose money has bought them access among the fashionably elite. On the other hand, they could be daughters of distressed aristocratic families, married off to wealthy businessmen in order to rebuild power lost during the Commonwealth—a common occurrence in late 17C England (Kachur 151). The evidence in the text makes this second scenario more likely for Lady Fidget. First, her willingness to cuckold her husband indicates very libertine

views about marriage. Such disdain for the institution embodies attitudes that pervaded elite society, since the Marriage Act of 1653 demoted marriage from a sacramental union to a secular contract (Kachur 137). Second, Wycherley certainly gives her an *ethos* that suggests aristocratic self-entitlement. Her clothes, accoutrements, carriages, china collection, wealth, routs, treats, cabals, and gambling affirm her elite status in her own mind. Lady Fidget's rhetorical sophistication, however, probably represents the final and most convincing evidence to support her aristocratic heritage. Her verbal facility seems to match Horner's, Alithea's and Harcourt's in demonstrating wit. She could not spend every waking minute rubbing shoulders with the fashionable elite if she were merely a crass celebuntant, lacking this essential attributes of nobility. Dainty Fidget lacks Lady Fidget's eloquent wit. She and Mrs. Squeamish reveal through their rhetoric that they have smaller minds. They taunt Horner in the Act V drinking scene, for example, with a vocabulary of stinginess, lamenting the fiscal shortcomings of their gallants (Wycherley 138-39). Their obsessive harping suggests that they might be protesting too much. The bourgeois blood in their veins—quickenened by drink—spurts forth unrestrainedly in that scene.

Caught in the tension created by their ambition to break through the social glass ceiling, Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget, and Lady Squeamish suffer acutely from inescapable self-loathing, but for polar opposite reasons. Lady Fidget resents her marriage to Sir Jasper as a debasing humiliation of her aristocratic lineage. She not only uses her sexual infidelity with Horner as a personal attack on Sir Jasper and all he represents, but also to reclaim her place among the elite. She embodies everything that Alithea would become if she dwindled into marriage with Sparkish. Dainty Fidget and Lady Squeamish despise their *nouveau riche* credentials, longing restlessly to launch themselves into the elite solar system. They have the chutzpah, calculation, and wealth to attain that ambition as satellites orbiting Lady Fidget. Hence, they embody everything that Margery would become if she remained under the control of her husband.

The most dramatically rewarding metamorphosis culminates in the final scene—that of Margery Pinchwife from lackwit to truwit. We have watched her character maturing throughout the comedy. Her sojourn in London, her trips to the theatre, and her encounters with Horner all arouse her libertine appetites. Wycherley allows audiences to see this arousal most clearly in Act III, scene ii, when Pinchwife takes her abroad disguised as her younger brother, James. Margery gapes in wonder at all the fine sights of London, and she feels a “hot fever” (Wycherley 117) when Horner accosts her. By the final act of the comedy, audiences have learned that Margery's skepticism has helped her discern not only the false veneer of society but also her husband's boorishness. Since her first appearance on stage she has remained the most honest, plain-dealing character in the entire cast, and only reluctantly does she curb her tongue at the end of the comedy in order to retain her autonomy. Wycherley gives Margery Pinchwife another change of clothes to mark the process of her metamorphosis visually, paralleling Alithea's costume change in Act IV (Wycherley 124). Indeed, Margery's costume change marks the final phase of her transformation from lackwit country wife into a mirror-image of Alithea—an autonomous town woman, and so we can admire the author's dramatic symmetry when Margery puts on Alithea's clothes as her disguise.

It is difficult to know if 17C elite audiences would have enjoyed unreservedly the transformation of the four ladies into truewits. Restoration comedy rarely—if ever—presents such upward mobility, for its elite audience would sneer at the thought of permitting social-climbing *parvenus* to mix with them. Still, audiences in succeeding generations have applauded these ladies' triumphs at the conclusion of the comedy, because their actions have caused characters like Sir Jaspar and Mr. Pinchwife to suffer well-deserved humiliation. These four ladies demonstrate wit through their actions—the successful deceptions enacted upon the characters of inferior *ethos*.

The above analysis of the characters, especially the affirming discussion of the upwardly mobile female characters, contradicts most scholarly interpretation of the past fifty years. Many literary critics take a pessimistic attitude towards the character trajectories in this comedy. The Feminist theorist Pat Gill, for example, imposes the 20C Madonna/Magdalene paradigm on the female characters to interpret their dramatic fates. Gill concludes that Alithea and Margery degenerate from the former to the latter, while Lady Fidget's sister sharers begin and end the play as Magdalenes, embodying all the corruption referenced in the play (69). Markley carries this grim interpretation further, asserting that Margery, Harcourt and Alithea find themselves dragged down into "the world of dissembling and hypocrisy," a world that can never improve and from which they can never escape (177). Such critical analyses have merit and can be enacted in a production, as B.A. Kachur has documented (188-96), but they approach *The Country Wife* from a 20C moral perspective that labels the comedy's underlying tone as cynical, bleak, malicious, cruel, and unpleasant. This essay attempts to view the characters' transformations as the 17C audience would have seen them. 17C audiences, dominated by the elite aristocratic and professional classes, engaged this comedy from their perspective of self-entitled privilege. Standing at the apex of the socio-political order, they saw *The Country Wife* affirming their skepticism, libertinism and naturalism, and so it provided enormous intellectual satisfaction to them on several levels. Rather than walk out of the theatre shaking their heads in morally-indignant disgust like Gill, Markley, Kachur, or Schneider, 17C audiences would have found *The Country Wife* a rousing good show, for it exalted the privileged world they were determined to preserve (Horner, Alithea, Harcourt, Margery, Lady Fidget) against the striving encroachments of the Bible-thumpers or money-grubbers beneath them (Sir Jaspar, Sparkish, Pinchwife, Old Lady Squeamish).

The world of the play projects a clearly defined hierarchy of social prestige, political power and intellectual sophistication. The plot causes characters to move up and down that social scale, and the final arrangement of the pecking order reinforces for 17C audiences the elite's political prominence, visually confirmed in the pairing up of characters and their places in the longways set for the concluding dance. The analysis of the female characters presents the most controversial element of this interpretation. Many scholars interpret their trajectories (both within the plot of *The Country Wife* and metaphorically) as downward into the moral cesspool of society's hypocrisy and corruption. This analysis, however, sees all of them ascending. With Horner's willing assistance they all gain admission into the world of the elite. A production that offers this

interpretation will offer 21C audiences an opportunity to embrace something close to the original, authentic comic power of this comedy.

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