The Country Wife

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM WYCHERLY

William Wycherly was born in Shropshire, England, into a moderately wealthy, Royalist family. He went to school in France where he briefly converted to Catholicism, returning to Protestantism after coming back to England in the 1650s. Wycherly took up residence at Oxford on his return but left Oxford for London in 1659. He joined the armed forces and was sent first to Ireland, in 1662, and later to Madrid. In 1671, Wycherly produced his first play, *Love in a Wood*, which was popular in the court of Charles II. It is believed to have caught the attention of Charles's mistress, Barbara Villiers, who would afterwards patronize much of Wycherly's work. In 1672, Wycherly was deployed with his regiment to the Isle of Wight, and, during this period, he is believed to have written *The Country Wife*. This play, and another, *The Plain Dealer*, were performed in 1675 and secured Wycherly's reputation in Charles II's court and in London high society. He had a reputation as a hedonist, a man's man, and a confirmed bachelor; qualities which were encouraged and valorized during the Restoration period. In 1679, Wycherly secretly married a wealthy widow, the Countess of Drogheda. He deliberately kept the marriage a secret to protect his reputation as a libertine, but word got out and the marriage put him out of favor with Charles II. After his wife's death in 1685, Wycherly was left with significant debts and was eventually imprisoned in London. He was released by King James II, after Charles II's death. He married again in 1715 but died shortly after and never recovered his reputation or wealth during his lifetime. He died in 1716 and was buried in Covent Garden in London.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Restoration in English history refers to the period between 1660 and 1685, when King Charles II ascended to the English throne. Although England had been ruled by a monarchy for several centuries, Charles II's father, Charles I, had been deposed and executed in the aftermath of the English Civil War. Although Charles I ruled with the help of Parliament, the King could disband Parliament if he wanted to. Charles I believed in the "divine right of kings" and felt that monarchs should rule alone, which upset Parliamentarians and sparked the English Civil War. Another factor which caused Parliament to rebel against Charles I was the fact that he was a High Anglican; a doctrine closer to Catholicism than Protestantism. This upset the substantial Protestant and Puritan factions in the country. Charles I and his Royalists went to war with the Parliamentarians in 1642 and Charles was captured and executed in 1649. After the death of the King, England was ruled for eighteen years by a Commonwealth parliament under the direction of Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell was a Puritan and censored many aspects of life during his rule. He closed the theatres and was wary of activities such as drinking and dancing. After Cromwell's death in 1658, the Commonwealth rapidly collapsed because people were sick of the strict, Puritan lifestyle that was imposed on them. Charles II, who had been in exile abroad, was restored to the throne. The period of his reign was notable for its reversal of many of the Commonwealth's Puritanical policies. Charles II's court deliberately cultivated an atmosphere of leisure and hedonism, liberally supported theatres and the arts, and celebrated the values of the nobility and the upper classes who had been exiled under Cromwell. He ruled until his death in 1685.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Country Wife is an example of Restoration comedy, or a Comedy of Manners. The term Restoration Comedy refers to comedies produced during the reign of Charles II, from 1660 to 1685. These comedies usually involve complex love triangles, mistaken identities, sexual jokes, references to contemporary figures, witty social critique, and a celebration of courtly life, Royalist values, and the hedonistic habits of the upper classes, which reflected the preferences of the monarchy and Charles II himself. Restoration writers like Wycherly were influenced by earlier playwrights, such as William Shakespeare, and by Classical comedy. Greek comedies, such as *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, often revolve around sexual politics and posturing, while Shakespeare's comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, use theatrical tropes such as mistaken identity, misunderstanding, and disguise to enhance their plots. Wycherly was heavily influenced by the French playwright Moliere, who was popular around the same time. Moliere's plays, such as *The School for Wives* and *The Misanthrope*, dealt with similar elements as those favored by English Restoration playwrights. However, while Moliere's work tended have organized plot structures and neat resolutions, English Restoration drama was notoriously complex. *The Country Wife* is a good example of this with its morally ambiguous conclusion. English Restoration playwrights, such as George Etherege and John Dryden, also celebrated the masculine, libertine ideals of the period and portrayed real-life Restoration celebrities as characters in their work. The courtly plots and sexual intrigues of Restoration drama also appear in later fiction, such as the French novel *Dangerous Liaisons* from 1782, written by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, which has been dramatized many times. Farcical, romance-based plots have also become a staple of

modern Romantic comedy films.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Country Wife
- **When Written:** 1672-3
- **Where Written:** Isle of Wight
- **When Published:** 1675
- **Literary Period:** Restoration
- **Genre:** Comedy of manners
- **Setting:** London during the Restoration period.
- **Climax:** Horner's doctor publicly affirms that Horner is a eunuch, leaving his mistress' reputations (and their husbands' pride) intact
- **Antagonist:** Pinchwife

EXTRA CREDIT

Censorship. Although *The Country Wife* was popular in the early Restoration, a period of cultural liberalism, it gradually fell out of favor with middle class audiences because of its sexual content. Eventually, the play was considered too provocative to be performed and was banned from 1753-1924. A sanitized version of the play, called *The Country Girl*, was performed instead during this period.

Art Imitates Life. Just as *The Country Wife* is a play filled with intrigue and disguise, Wycherly's own life in the court of Charles II reflected some of this theatrical extravagance. For example, it was rumored that Wycherly flirted with Charles II's mistress, Barbara Villiers, after she saw and enjoyed one of his plays. After this interaction, it was widely believed that Villiers would go to visit Wycherly in his lodgings disguised as a peasant girl to hide her identity.

PLOT SUMMARY

Harry Horner, a notorious womanizer, spreads a rumor that he has contracted venereal disease and that, while being treated for this by a French surgeon, he has accidentally been made impotent. He persuades his doctor, a Quack, to spread this story all over town, hoping that gullible men will leave their wives, sisters, and daughters with Horner without suspicion that he might seduce them.

As soon as the rumor has been circulated, Horner is pleased to find that Sir Jasper Fidget, a businessman who works in the city, comes to call and leaves his wife, Lady Fidget, and her companions, Mrs. Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish, in Horner's care. When they are told that Horner is impotent, however, the ladies (who have a reputation for being extremely virtuous) are disgusted and refuse to stay with him. They storm out just as Horner's friends, Harcourt and Dorliant, arrive to commiserate with him about his new impotence.

As they are talking, Sparkish arrives and the friends scramble to find a way to get rid of him. Sparkish is a bore and so arrogant that he does not understand when they insult him and ask him to leave. They eventually succeed in seeing Sparkish off just in time for Mr. Pinchwife to arrive. Pinchwife was a womanizer in his youth but has recently married a young woman from the country. He has not heard the rumors about Horner and becomes extremely jealous when Horner inquires about his wife and suggests that she may make Pinchwife a "cuckold." Pinchwife replies that his wife is too simple and stupid to be taken into town and so he plans to leave her at home. He is only in town briefly to arrange Sparkish's marriage to his sister, Alithea.

Horner notices how jealous Pinchwife is of his wife and decides to tease him. He tells Pinchwife that he saw him at the theatre the previous night with a beautiful young woman. Pinchwife is insulted and storms out and Horner understands, from his reaction, that this woman is his wife.

At Pinchwife's house, his young wife, Margery, complains to Alithea that Pinchwife will not let her go out and enjoy the town. She tells Alithea that she loved going to the theatre the night before and found the actors extremely handsome. Pinchwife returns and overhears them and berates Alithea for setting a bad example for Margery. Margery begs Pinchwife to let her go into town and Pinchwife tells her that she cannot go because, if she does, young men may fall in love with her. This only increases Margery's enthusiasm, so Pinchwife tells her that a man has already seen her at the theatre and is in love with her. Margery is excited by this, and begs to know the young man's name, so Pinchwife locks her in her room to punish her.

Just then, Sparkish arrives with Harcourt to visit Alithea and to show his fiancée off to his friend. Harcourt falls in love with Alithea instantly and begins to court her, brazenly, in front of Sparkish. Although Alithea protests, Sparkish does not notice and seems incapable of jealousy. Harcourt, Alithea, and Sparkish head off to the theatre, Alithea still protesting because Sparkish plans to seat her with Harcourt. Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish arrive at Pinchwife's house to take Margery to see the play. Pinchwife chases them off, much to their amusement.

While they wait for Sir Jasper, Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish lament that they are always being passed over by men in favor of common women. They feel that men no longer seek out "virtuous" women to have affairs with. While they are talking, Sir Jasper arrives with Horner and Dorilant and tells the ladies that these young men will take them to the theatre. The ladies are horrified and refuse. Dorilant leaves but Sir Jasper insists that it will not harm their reputations to be seen with Horner. Horner takes Lady Fidget aside and whispers

to her that he is not actually impotent and says that he has lied for her sake, to get close to her. Thoroughly flattered, Lady Fidget relents and persuades the others to allow Horner to take them out. Sir Jasper rushes off to attend to business, feeling very pleased with himself and the entertainment he has provided for his wife.

Margery, still cooped up in Pinchwife's house, eventually puts her foot down and forces Pinchwife to take her into town. He agrees on the condition that she dress up like a man so that Horner and his friends will not recognize her. Alithea and her maid, Lucy, accompany them. Horner, Harcourt and Dorilant are also in town and Harcourt tells Horner about his predicament; he is in love with Alithea, Sparkish's fiancée. Horner tells him that Sparkish will help him to woo her and Sparkish joins them at that moment.

As they are talking, Pinchwife, Margery, Alithea and Lucy walk past, and the men pursue them. Pinchwife tries to avoid them, but the men accost the party and ask who the young man among them is. Pinchwife says that the young man, who is Margery in disguise, is his wife's brother. Sparkish begins to push Harcourt and Alithea together and implore her to forgive Harcourt for offending her that morning.

Meanwhile, Horner begins to flirt with Margery and kisses her in front of Pinchwife, begging her to take the kiss "to her sister." Pinchwife, desperate to get Margery away from Horner, tries to hail a carriage but, while he is gone, Horner leads Margery away down another street. Pinchwife is frantic when he returns but Margery reappears a few moments later with a bundle of fruit that Horner has given her. Sir Jasper Fidget arrives and reminds Horner that he must take the ladies to the theatre. He leads Horner off and leaves a disgruntled Pinchwife in the street.

The next morning, Sparkish arrives at Pinchwife's house to marry Alithea. However, the parson he has brought with him to conduct the wedding is really Harcourt in disguise. Alithea easily sees through this trick and refuses to allow the wedding, much to the confusion of Sparkish. Meanwhile, Pinchwife grills Margery about the time she spent alone with Horner the evening before. When Margery tells Pinchwife that Horner put his tongue in her mouth when he kissed her, Pinchwife can no longer contain his jealousy and forces Margery to write a letter to Horner in which she tells him that she finds him disgusting and will not tolerate his advances.

Margery is upset because she has fallen in love with Horner and thinks of a way to trick her husband. Since he has taught Margery to write letters, which before she did not know how to do, she writes a second letter to Horner, in which she confesses her love to him. When he returns with the letter seal, Margery swaps the letters and seals the one she has written herself, rather than Pinchwife's, to send to Horner.

Horner is at home with the Quack, who is eager to hear how Horner's experiment is going. He is impressed with what he hears and even more impressed when Lady Fidget arrives alone. Horner ushers the Quack behind a screen and the doctor watches as Lady Fidget throws herself at Horner. The pair begin to fondle each other but are interrupted by Sir Jasper. Lady Fidget thinks quickly and tells her husband that she is tickling Horner because he has refused to take her shopping. Sir Jasper watches in amusement as Lady Fidget rushes into another room and locks the door, claiming she is going to steal some of Horner's fine **china**. Horner rushes in after her and Sir Jasper laughs at the sounds coming through the door.

Mrs. Squeamish arrives moments later and tries to break into the room. She is followed by her grandmother, Old Lady Squeamish. Horner and Lady Fidget re-emerge, Lady Fidget carrying some china, and Mrs. Squeamish tries to persuade Horner to give her some china, too. Pinchwife enters and the ladies immediately leave with Sir Jasper to avoid being seen by another man. Pinchwife has brought Horner the letter from Margery. Horner reads it and is extremely confused about Pinchwife's triumphant attitude. Pinchwife leaves, but he is brought back a moment later by Sparkish, who insists they must join him for his wedding dinner.

Margery, meanwhile, pines for Horner's love, and begins to write him another letter. Pinchwife bursts in on her and forces her to finish what she is writing. He is confused when she signs the letter from Alithea and tells him that it is Alithea who is in love with Horner. Pinchwife agrees to take his sister to see Horner and Margery dresses up as Alithea, puts on a mask, and tricks Pinchwife into taking her in the disguise.

Horner is shocked when Pinchwife reappears, this time bringing him a masked woman. The woman says that she will only speak to Horner alone so Pinchwife leaves them. Before Margery can explain herself to Horner, however, Sir Jasper arrives and tells him that Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty, and Mrs. Squeamish are on their way up. Horner hides Margery in another room and meets the ladies, who are preparing to get very drunk and have a bawdy evening with him.

Outside Horner's house, Pinchwife meets Sparkish and shows him the letter which is addressed to Horner and signed with Alithea's name. Sparkish is insulted and confronts Alithea in the street to break off their engagement. Alithea is confused but relieved. Inside, Horner drinks with the "honorable" ladies who begin to get tipsy. Lady Fidget finally announces that Horner is her secret lover and is surprised when Mrs. Dainty and Mrs. Squeamish confess that he is theirs, too. The group agree to keep each other's secrets.

When Sir Jasper arrives to take the ladies home, Horner releases Margery, who tells him that she is to be his wife now. While they are in discussion, Sparkish, Alithea, Pinchwife, Harcourt, Lucy, and a chaplain arrive. Pinchwife insists that Horner and Alithea should marry but Alithea denies any

knowledge of this affair. Eventually she points out that Margery is dressed up as her and Alithea and Harcourt are united and agree to marry instead. Pinchwife is furious with Horner for "cuckolding" him and prepares to duel him.

Sir Jasper and the ladies return as this scene is underway and Pinchwife tells Sir Jasper that Horner has made a "cuckold" of him too. Sir Jasper is taken aback for a moment, but Horner is saved by the reappearance of the Quack who gives Pinchwife and Sir Jasper his word "as a physician" that Horner is impotent. Margery plays along with this, though she knows that they are all lying, and resigns herself to a future as Pinchwife's wife.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Harry Horner – Harry Horner is a wealthy London socialite who has a reputation as a great "wit" and a notorious womanizer. He spreads a rumor that he has caught a venereal disease and that, after being treated by a French surgeon, he has been left impotent. Horner does this so that men will allow him to spend time with their wives without suspicion that he might seduce them. Horner also, rightly, believes that his plan will encourage women to have affairs with him because his reputation of impotence will safeguard their own "honorable" reputations. Horner is a clever and calculating individual. He is willing to sacrifice his own reputation for the sake of efficiency and sexual gratification. This suggests that Horner sees through Restoration society's obsession with reputation and appearance and does not care how he is seen by his peers. Like many of the other male characters, Horner views women as sexual conquests and does not genuinely enjoy spending time with them; it is simply "sport" to him. Horner is extremely cold, almost sociopathic in his approach to women, and in his determination to outsmart society. He is unaffected by emotional considerations and enjoys hedonism and sensuality purely for its own sake. Although Horner's lies are almost exposed, in the final scene of the play, his ingenuity and forethought (his precaution in recruiting the Quack to back up his story) protects him from discovery. In this sense, the play refuses to punish Horner for his behavior; after all, he is behaving the way that everyone else does, he is simply more efficient and self-aware in his methods. Horner's name is significant, as a "cuckold" (a husband whose wife has been unfaithful) was commonly believed to have horns. Horner's name suggests, therefore, that he gives men horns or is "cuckoldmaker."

Margery Pinchwife – Margery is the young bride of Pinchwife and the titular "country wife." She is seduced by Horner and eventually becomes his mistress when she outsmarts her husband and escapes from his jealous supervision. Margery is naïve and unfamiliar with the way of life in the city. Pinchwife believes that Margery is stupid and easily manipulated and he marries her because he is terrified that, if he marries an intelligent wife, she may make him a "cuckold." Margery, however, is not stupid but is simply young and inexperienced. During her stay in the city, Margery proves herself to be as intelligent, devious and resourceful as Pinchwife believes town wives to be. She proves that she can think quickly and lie to protect herself. Although Pinchwife believes that Margery is innocent and unsexual, Margery is a sensual person who is immediately drawn to the good-looking actors at the theatre. The only real difference between Margery and the town ladies, like Lady Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish, is that she does not understand the etiquette or rules of city life. She has no interest in maintaining her reputation, as she does not realize she has one to protect, and she does not assume that extramarital love equates to "ruin," as the town ladies do, because she does not understand the town's hypocritical preoccupation with the appearance of "virtue." Margery grows wily and experienced in the ways of the town throughout the play. She remains an honest character, however, because she does not realize when it is and is not appropriate to lie and only lies when Pinchwife threatens her or when she is persuaded by the other characters.

Pinchwife – Pinchwife is Margery's husband. He is obsessively jealous and is terrified of being made to look foolish and of gaining a reputation as a "cuckold." He has chosen Margery for a wife because he believes that she is innocent and naïve and therefore easy to control. Pinchwife is bullying and hypocritical in his treatment of Margery. He expects total fidelity from her, suspects her every move, even when she is faithful to him, and resorts to imprisoning and abusing her when his jealousy gets out of control. Pinchwife is a figure of fun throughout the play, even though, at times, his treatment of Margery is genuinely sinister. He is so preoccupied with not seeming foolish that he makes himself appear a fool; he marries a country wife so that she cannot outsmart him and then is easily tricked by her. Similarly, he is so determined to keep Margery away from temptation that he over-compensates, behaves irrationally and, ultimately, leads her to Horner who seduces her. In this sense, Pinchwife is a personification and parody of puritanical impulses in society, which seek to censor and eradicate behaviors they think of as sinful and, by doing so, inadvertently encourage people to rebel and take up the very pastimes they wish to prevent. Pinchwife's name is significant as it reflects his behavior; he annoys and bullies Margery and is stingy with her, or "pinches" her, when he keeps her locked up. It also suggests that his wife will be "pinched," or stolen, which is nearly the case in the play.

Sir Jasper Fidget – Sir Jasper Fidget is a wealthy businessman, the husband of Lady Fidget and the brother of Mrs. Dainty Fidget. It is implied that Sir Jasper has made his money through business and is not a member of the nobility. Sir Jasper is a

resident of the city, the business center of London, rather than the Town, where members of Charles II's court and the gentry live. His inferior social status is reflected in his obsession with business rather than sensuality; he prefers to work rather than spend time seducing women. As the Restoration was a period which celebrated aristocracy and the idle pursuits of the very rich, men like Sir Jasper were looked down upon and made to be "fools" on the stage, as they did not meet the ideals of the age and were associated with the common and vulgar practices of business and making money. Sir Jasper is a "cuckold" and represents a stock figure on the Restoration stage. He is totally oblivious to his wife's infidelity, even inadvertently aiding her in cheating, and he is a figure of ridicule for the audience, who expect to see him outsmarted. Sir Jasper pushes his wife and sister to spend time with Horner and even, ironically, mocks Horner for his impotence. Sir Jasper never realizes that he is being tricked and feels that, instead, he is getting one over on Horner, as he leaves Horner in charge of his wife and sister, whom he views as an annoyance. Sir Jasper's **blindness** to Horner's true motives is most blatantly exploited for laughs in the famous "**china** scene," in which Horner makes love to Lady Fidget, under the pretense of fighting with her over a piece of rare china, while Sir Jasper listens happily and makes jokes in an adjoining room.

Lady Fidget – Lady Fidget is Sir Jasper Fidget's wife and, ironically, a woman known in the town for being extremely virtuous and "honorable." She spends most of her time with her sister in law, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and her friend Mrs. Squeamish, and the trio are known as the "virtuous gang." Their reputation as women who are honorable is extremely ironic as, underneath this public image, Lady Fidget and her friends are highly promiscuous. Although they pretend to be disgusted by "lewd" men, like Horner, they exaggerate their disdain for men and for sex to hide their appetite for these things. Lady Fidget even pretends to dislike the word "naked" in front of her husband, because of its bodily connotations, but in private she is just as much of a "false rogue" as Horner. Lady Fidget brazenly lies to and "cuckolds" Sir Jasper, even going so far as to have sex with Horner while her husband is in the next room during the famous "**china** scene." While Lady Fidget is decidedly *not* a virtuous character, she is not punished at the play's conclusion and is, in some regards, a sympathetic figure. She is witty and cunning in her ability to outsmart society and, as these were regarded as admirable traits in Restoration society, she is rewarded rather than ruined for them and gets away with all her escapades. She is the female counterpart of Horner in everything except what society expects from her, because she is a woman and he is a man. While Restoration society encouraged vigor, promiscuity, and sensuality in men, it condemned these traits in women. Lady Fidget complains bitterly about this double standard during her drinking song, which laments the plight of "virtuous" women like herself, whose husbands ignore them and whose lovers pass them over for "common women."

Mrs. Dainty Fidget – Mrs. Dainty Fidget is the sister of Sir Jasper Fidget and the companion of Lady Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish—known together, ironically, as the "virtuous gang." Mrs. Dainty Fidget has a reputation as a "virtuous" woman who scorns "lewd" and promiscuous men and is disgusted by anything sexual. Like her sisters in the "gang," Mrs. Dainty is extremely preoccupied with protecting her reputation and refuses to be seen in the company of men who are not her brother, Sir Jasper (Mrs. Dainty is unmarried and under her brother's care). Mrs. Dainty, like the other "virtuous" ladies, makes an exception for Horner because he is widely known to be impotent. Even though this report is false, and Horner is really her lover, (as he is the lover of all the ladies in the "gang"), Mrs. Dainty feels secure spending time with Horner, as people will not believe that he is capable of seduction and this protects her public image from scandal. Mrs. Dainty Fidget, like the other ladies, believes that it is more pleasurable to have sex with dishonorable men to whom one is not married than to have sex with one's husband. This reflects popular opinion that marriage was a chore and an obligation rather than an act of love, and that pleasure really came from things which were forbidden rather than behaviors that were socially approved. Like the other "virtuous" ladies, Mrs. Dainty Fidget is a "false rogue" who does everything in her power to deceive her brother (and society in general) so that she may fulfil her desires. Her name is ironic, as "dainty" suggests that she is delicate and innocent; while Mrs. Dainty may pretend to be this way in public, she is the opposite in private.

Mrs. Squeamish – Mrs. Squeamish is a fashionable town lady, the companion of Lady Fidget and Mrs. Dainty Fidget and a member of the "virtuous gang." Mrs. Squeamish is unmarried and lives under the care of her grandmother, Old Lady Squeamish. Like the other "virtuous" ladies, Mrs. Squeamish pretends to be extremely pure and "honorable" in public, but is highly promiscuous and decadent in private. Alongside the other two ladies in her "gang," she becomes the mistress of Horner and is constantly trying to escape her grandmother so that she may do as she pleases. Mrs. Squeamish is involved in the "**china** scene," in which Lady Fidget and Horner have sex offstage, while Sir Jasper and Old Lady Squeamish listen at the door, believing that Lady Fidget and Horner are fighting over a piece of rare china. Mrs. Squeamish arrives while Horner and Lady Fidget are offstage, followed by her grandmother who is trying to keep an eye on her. When she hears that Lady Fidget and Horner are alone together, she becomes extremely jealous and tries to interrupt them. Although Mrs. Squeamish does not know for sure that Horner is sleeping with Lady Fidget, she is suspicious, and this suggests that the "virtuous" ladies do not expect loyalty from each other any more than they do from men. Horner plays the women off against each other in this scene, but he and the ladies are proved to be each other's

equals at the end of the play when Mrs. Squeamish and her companions reveal that they use their reputations to hide their true pursuits, just as Horner uses his. Like Mrs. Dainty, Mrs. Squeamish's name is symbolic, reflecting her outward persona, as a woman who is "squeamish" about sex, when underneath she is very promiscuous.

Sparkish – Sparkish is a vain, foolish socialite who is obsessed with his reputation and "honor," has an extremely high opinion of himself, and is easily tricked by the clever characters in the play, such as Harcourt and Horner. Sparkish is engaged to Pinchwife's sister, Alithea, but he is only marrying her for her money. Although he is clearly a noble man with a "title," Horner describes him as a "cracked title," which implies that Sparkish is broke. Sparkish admires Alithea not because he cares about her, but because of how it makes him look to have a clever, pretty wife. He brazenly shows her off to Harcourt and does not notice that this makes Alithea uncomfortable. His arrogance here also leads him to lose his engagement to Alithea, as Harcourt and Alithea quickly fall in love and eventually jilt Sparkish. Sparkish, however, is so vain and so convinced that other people are always impressed by him that he barely notices when people insult, criticize, or bully him to his face. Horner, Harcourt and Dorilant have great fun at Sparkish's expense and dislike his company. However, even when they make this obvious, Sparkish thinks that they are joking and refuses to leave them alone. He believes (wrongly) that he is a "true wit" (a comic, genuinely funny man) like Horner and the others, but, in reality, he is a "false wit" or a "spark" (a common stock figure on the Restoration stage, an arrogant buffoon whose opinion of himself and his own intelligence is much higher than it should be). Sparkish is associated with **blindness** in the play as, even when Harcourt courts Alithea in front of him, Sparkish still fails to see what Harcourt is doing, even when Alithea points it out.

Alithea – Alithea is Pinchwife's sister and is engaged to Sparkish. She falls in love with Harcourt and, though she resists his advances at first (out of loyalty to her fiancé), she is paired with Harcourt by the end of the play. Alithea is a genuinely honest woman who, unlike the other "honorable" ladies in the play, tries her best to be virtuous and loyal to her betrothed. She tries to tell Sparkish that Harcourt is insulting him when Harcourt tries to court her in front of Sparkish, but Sparkish dismisses her concerns. Alithea, unlike many of the people around her, is very canny and sees the truth of things where others are **blind**. She sees, for example, that Pinchwife will drive Margery to be unfaithful because of his jealousy, and she sees, rightly, that a jealous husband is a terrible and dangerous thing for a wife to have. However, rather than being rewarded for her virtue and honesty, Alithea's "honor" is almost her downfall in the play. She is so loyal to Sparkish, who does not deserve her loyalty, that she almost forfeits her true love, Harcourt—and, because she is honest and not conniving with the others, she is used by them to assist in their schemes. Margery and Lucy, Alithea's maid, conspire to use Alithea's identity to sneak Margery out to see Horner and, when Alithea tries to prove her innocence, Horner does not think twice about throwing her under the bus to save his mistress's reputation. Alithea's "honor" is only saved by Harcourt's true love and respect for her. This suggests that, in Restoration society, real "honor" will get you nowhere and those who look out for themselves succeed.

Harcourt – Harcourt is the companion of Horner and Dorilant and the lover of Alithea, whom he tries to persuade to leave her fiancé, Sparkish. Harcourt begins the play as one of Horner's "rakish" companions but is converted by his love for Alithea and is truly attached to her by the end of the play. Harcourt and Alithea represent the lovers in the play and are the only respite from the cynical machinations and hypocritical schemes of the other characters. Still, their love is not pure and socially sanctioned, and Harcourt must steal Alithea from under her fiancé's nose before they can be together. Harcourt shows no loyalty to Sparkish, who thinks Harcourt is his friend, and is merciless in his attempts to undermine Sparkish and woo Alithea. At first, Harcourt is so brazen that Alithea is put off by his attempts and tries to warn Sparkish. However, although this behavior seems questionable by modern standards, Harcourt's behavior reflects the literary and theatrical tradition of courtly love, which believes that adulterous love is more pure than marital love and that it is a "gallant's" job to court ladies, even if they are married to his friends. A famous example of this style of love is the adulterous love between Lancelot and Guinevere, who is married to King Arthur, in the Arthur legends. The "court" in Harcourt's name reflects his role and personality in the play.

Dorilant – Dorilant is the companion of Horner and Harcourt and a well-known "rake." Dorilant does not play a large role in the action of the play but is present in the background of many scenes. He makes up the third of Horner's party so that the group of three "rakes" mirrors the group of three "honorable" ladies, Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish. Just as Dorilant and his friends know the "honorable" ladies by their reputations, and know that they pretend to be intolerably virtuous, the ladies know Dorilant by his reputation as a "lewd fellow" and refuse to allow him to accompany them to the theatre with Horner for fear that his presence will threaten their public image. Dorilant ends the play a confirmed bachelor and this suggests that he will continue to live a "rakish" life while Harcourt will soon be married to Alithea and while he believes Horner to be impotent.

Lucy – Alithea's maid. Like Margery, Lucy is from a lower social class and, therefore, is not educated and does not have a reputation to protect the way that upper class ladies do. However, like Margery, Lucy is more intelligent than people realize. She immediately sees through Sparkish, who is engaged

to Alithea, and knows that he is not good enough for her and does not appreciate his fiancée. Lucy tries to warn Alithea of this, but she is resigned to the fact that, as a servant, Alithea will take no notice of her. Lucy also conspires with Margery to trick Pinchwife. As a woman of lower social status, Lucy is openly treated with less respect by men than the upper-class ladies in the play. In one scene, she is manhandled by Dorilant and he later calls her a "strapper," a term which suggests a prostitute or a common woman.

Quack – The doctor who helps Horner spread the rumor of his impotence. A "quack" is an old-fashioned term for a doctor who peddles nonsense cures and who is not reliable. Therefore, it is fitting that an unreliable doctor spreads this false rumor and confirms it, "as a physician," at the end of the play. The doctor's word in this final scene convinces Pinchwife and Sir Jasper Fidget that Horner is incapable of seducing their wives and spares Horner his punishment from these gentlemen. Although these men are completely taken in by the Quack's word, the audience is aware that the Quack is unreliable and, therefore, his word as a medical man means nothing. Further evidence that the doctor is unreliable appears when, at the beginning of the play, the Quack admits that he has often spread rumors for young men before and knows all the best places to peddle gossip and scandal so that it will spread in London. This implies that the doctor is a fashionable socialite rather than a serious medical man.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Old Lady Squeamish – Mrs. Squeamish's grandmother and chaperon who is elderly and easily outsmarted by her granddaughter.

Boy – Horner's servant.

TERMS

Cuckold – Cuckold is an old-fashioned term that describes a man whose wife is unfaithful. It usually refers to a man who is unaware of his wife's infidelity and who is viewed as naïve or gullible because of this. Cuckolds are often assumed to unknowingly raise and support other men's children, which their wives claim are their own. The term was commonly used in medieval and Renaissance literature and derives from a reference to cuckoo birds, which are known to lay eggs in the nests of other birds. The metaphorical idea that cuckolds have horns was widely accepted and is believed to have originated from the mating rituals of stags; when one stag beats another in competition over females, the victorious stag takes the herd and offspring of the loser. The term was widely known in common dialect and would have been familiar to Restoration audiences. In *The Country Wife*, Horner's name reflects his status as a "cuckold maker," as he gives men horns, or makes them cuckolds, when he sleeps with their wives. Sir Jasper, in contrast, is the quintessential naïve cuckold who is oblivious to his wife's deceptions.

Gallant or Rake – A gallant is a term used to describe a man who is chivalric, attentive, or courteous to women. In the Restoration, it was also used to describe a fashionable man who escorts women or a man who is very concerned with his reputation and appearance. The term is similar to that of the "rake": a fashionable playboy, libertine, or roguish character, which was also a popular stock character in Restoration drama. The term gallant has links with medieval romance, in which knights would gallantly enter the service of ladies who were not their wives and perform daring feats in their honor. In *The Country Wife*, this definition of the term is ironic. Margery and the "honorable" ladies refer to Horner as their "gallant," because he is their lover and not their husband and because he ruins his own reputation to protect their "honor." However, Horner is the opposite of an honorable, or gallant, character and is closer to the roguish "rake" or debauched cheat of Restoration theatre. Horner is also a gallant in that he is a fashionable libertine who mingles with the upper classes and seems to be a member of the gentry in Restoration society.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

REPUTATION, APPEARANCE, AND HYPOCRISY

William Wycherly's *The Country Wife* criticizes Restoration society (late 17th century England) for its hypocrisy. Harry Horner, a wealthy "rake" who spends his time pursuing women and hedonism, spreads a rumor that he has contracted a venereal disease and has been made impotent. Although this destroys Horner's reputation, he uses this to his advantage to seek out "honorable" women and conduct affairs with them because he knows that their husbands, and society more broadly, will not suspect him of seducing women in his new "impotent" state. The "honorable" women are happy to take advantage of this situation, as it protects their reputations in society while allowing them to pursue their own hedonistic desires. This ploy by Horner makes up a large part of *The Country Wife*'s action and supports Wycherly's broader argument: that reputations often do not align with reality, and that Restoration society is more interested in the appearance of "virtue" than the practice of it.

Characters are preoccupied with maintaining their reputations

throughout the play. For example, the jealous Pinchwife, whose wife Margery (the "country wife") falls in love with Horner, is terrified that Margery will cheat on him because of the social shame attached to the label of "cuckold." He dreads this reputation so much that he is willing to lock his wife up rather than risk letting her out in public where she might meet other men. What's more, Horner tells Pinchwife that, if a country wife does not make him "a cuckold, she'll make him jealous and pass for one; and then 'tis all one." This suggests that *looking* like a cuckold is as bad as actually being one in the eyes of a society that does not care about the truth, but only the *appearance* of things. Similarly, Mrs. Squeamish—an "honorable" lady seduced by Horner, asserts, "the crime's the less when 'tis not known." It seems Restoration society's obsession with reputation has made everyone markedly shallow; people don't actually care about *being* virtuous, so long as they look like they are.

Indeed, many characters who present themselves publicly as caring about virtue and honor are decidedly different in private. Pinchwife, for instance, is obsessed with the idea that his wife should be pure and that she should not make him a "cuckold," yet he himself was once known as a notorious "whoremaster." The "honorable" ladies seduced by Horner—Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish—only pretend to be disgusted by sex and by men like Horner, yet they are in fact extremely promiscuous. Hypocrisy is particularly clear in Lady Fidget's description of her honor as a "jewel." This implies that an honorable reputation is a woman's most prized possession, yet this moment is ironic: the viewer knows that Lady Fidget is *not* an honorable woman and only uses her honorable reputation to hide her many infidelities. Horner understands this and uses his ruse, his pretense at impotence, to seek out the ladies he knows will be unfaithful to their husbands. He believes that women who "love the sport" and are willing to have affairs, will show "the greatest aversion" to a man who is impotent, as this type of man cannot satisfy them sexually. He is proved right, and his method helps him court Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish. Therefore, in the context of the play, the women who pretend to be the most virtuous are the most promiscuous. Reputation is thus not correlated with actual virtue in this world, and many characters who pretend otherwise are hypocrites.

Together, these details reveal how such intense preoccupation with reputation can in fact blind people to the truth. Although Horner differs from the other characters in that he does not care what society thinks of him, he still relies on his appearance to deceive those around him and get what he wants. To be sure, although Horner's reputation as impotent is an unfavorable one according to the conventions of Restoration society (which emphasized vigor and sexual prowess in men), he maintains this unfavorable reputation among the town husbands because of the privilege this affords him with their wives; he is able to freely spend time with them and make them his mistresses without the husbands asking questions *because* of his reputation. The peril of relying on appearances to judge character is further supported by the fact that the only truly honorable woman in the play, Alithea, is not recognized as such and is constantly accused of leading Margery astray by Pinchwife. Ultimately, Restoration society is so blinded by appearances and pays so much attention to reputation rather than reality that it makes it extremely easy for clever men like Horner to exploit this to their own advantage and use their own reputations to pretend to be something they're not.

LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND MISOGYNY

Marriage is not depicted as a symbol of love in *The Country Wife* and, instead, is associated with qualities such as hatred, greed, and misogyny. In the Restoration period, marriages were commonly viewed as transactions, especially among wealthy class people, and were often arranged for material and social reasons rather than because the couple were in love. Wycherly is critical of this model for marriage and portrays married life as an unnatural, unpleasant state that puts women in danger of mistreatment by their husbands.

Marriage is treated as a joke throughout much of the play. This suggests that marriage as an institution is absurd because it forces people to act against their natural inclinations. Although marriage is, socially, a symbol of love, the married couples in the play do not like or respect one another. Sir Jasper Fidget is constantly trying to get rid of Lady Fidget so that he can spend more time on his favorite pastime, business, while Lady Fidget and the other married ladies constantly try to avoid and escape their husbands to carry on love affairs with "gallants" like Horner. The idea that marriage is unnatural is further reinforced by the suggestion that forbidden love is more exciting and pleasurable than socially sanctioned or marital love. This is expressed by Lady Fidget, who objects to sleeping with honorable men because "the pleasure will be the less," and also by Margery, who catches "the town sickness" of pining after a man, Horner, who is not her husband. Infidelity is so common in the play that it suggests that fidelity to one partner is unnatural and that it is made even more impossible when one is forced to spend all one's time with a partner, as in a marriage. People forced into this situation will end up bored with or suspicious of each other and this will end the love between them. It is implied that infidelity, rather than fidelity, is the natural result of marriage.

Marriage is not only portrayed as a thing that destroys love, but also as something which is often undertaken for cynical or mercenary reasons. Pinchwife has married Margery because he believes that she is innocent and, therefore, will be faithful to him. It is implied that he has done this because he is getting old and can no longer "keep a whore to himself." This suggests that Pinchwife wishes to replace the town women, whom he

bribed to spend time with him, with a woman who, as his wife, will be forced to spend time with and be faithful to him. He does not really care about Margery—he only cares about his own gratification and pride. Similarly, Sparkish is only marrying Alithea for her money. He is a "cracked title," which means he is broke, and he clearly does not really love her but, like Pinchwife, is interested in how she makes him look to others. He thoughtlessly shows her off to Harcourt and does not care that his behavior is embarrassing for Alithea. This leads to Harcourt's seduction of Alithea and suggests that marriage, rather than a vehicle for love, is actually an obstacle to love.

Both men and women stand to lose by marriage in the play, yet women have *more* to lose because marriage may put them in physical danger from their husbands. The husbands in the play are concerned about losing their reputations or their money through marriage. Pinchwife is afraid of being given the reputation of a "cuckold" and Horner teases him and suggests that wives spend all their husbands' money. However, men have significantly more freedom in marriage than women do. Lady Fidget is bored because she is discarded by Sir Jasper, who only cares about his work. She is not allowed to do as she likes, however, but is spied on and controlled by Sir Jasper, who feels that women must be kept occupied to keep them out of trouble. This, ironically, is why he leaves his wife and sister with Horner. This attitude reflects the misogynistic belief that women are inherently more corrupt and deceitful than men, which was common in this period.

This attitude is also displayed by Pinchwife, who keeps Margery locked up and who believes that women should be kept "ignorant" and be treated like "pets." Margery describes her marriage to Pinchwife as like life in a "cage" and his abuse of her is emphasized when, while he forces her to write a letter to Horner, he threatens to "carve whore" into her face with his knife if she will not obey him. This gives the viewer an insight into the real physical danger that wives could be placed in by jealous husbands who believe that their wives are their possessions and their property. Although Margery does prove unfaithful to Pinchwife, in her attempts to seduce Horner, the play makes it clear that she is driven to this by Pinchwife himself because he is so unkind to her and because of his misogynistic attitudes to women, which are supported and encouraged by the conventions of Restoration marriage. This suggests that when marriage is undertaken for mercenary or financial reasons it does not improve people's lives or encourage loving relationships but, instead, breeds resentment, places restrictions of people's pleasure and quality of life and, in extreme cases, places women in danger because of the lack of rights afforded to them in Restoration society.

THEATRE, PURITANISM, AND FORBIDDEN DESIRE

Throughout *The Country Wife*, Wycherly uses theatrical devices, such as disguise and costume changes, to suggest that the more something is forbidden, the more titillating and attractive it becomes. The Restoration was a period of rebellion against Puritanism, which was enforced in England after the defeat of Charles I in the English Civil War. During this period of Puritan rule, theatres were closed and activities such as dancing and drinking were heavily censored. After the Restoration of Charles II, these things were flaunted in popular drama and the theatre once again became an important aspect of social life in London. *The Country Wife* suggests that forbidding things makes them more desirable. It pokes fun at the Puritan government that chose to ban various allegedly sinful activities in order to keep people away from them—and suggests that, by doing so, that government accidentally encouraged people to take sinful activities up.

Wycherly uses certain characters in *The Country Wife* to personify the Puritan approach to sin: the idea that people should be kept away from immoral things to avoid being corrupted. Sir Jasper Fidget makes it his business to find entertainment for his wife and sister, Lady Fidget and Mrs. Dainty Fidget, because he believes that, if he does not, they will find it for themselves. He believes that "'tis as much a husband's prudence to provide innocent diversion for a wife as to hinder her unlawful pleasures." A husband, therefore, in Sir Jasper's mind, should control his wife's behavior and will have more success at this if she is distracted than if she is left to her own devices. This suggests that Sir Jasper has a puritanical attitude towards women and believes that they must be kept away from vice to keep them from being corrupted. Pinchwife mirrors this attitude in his treatment of Margery; he keeps her locked up so that she will not learn deceitful behavior from corrupt influences in the outside world. This implies that, according to men like Pinchwife and Sir Jasper, it is better to force people to behave well than to allow people the freedom to make moral decisions for themselves. They incorrectly believe that limiting people's choices and censoring society is a way to restrict and control behavior.

However, Wycherly points out that this type of restriction usually makes forbidden things all the more attractive and can actually lead people to sin. This idea is demonstrated literally in the character of Sir Jasper, who believes he is leaving his wife and sister with an impotent man, who cannot lead them into promiscuity. Instead, however, Sir Jasper leads them to and leaves them with Horner who plans to seduce them. Similarly, Pinchwife, by denying Margery access to the town makes her "desire it." As Margery is not allowed to see the city herself, she imagines that it must be wonderful and cannot stop fantasizing about it. Although Pinchwife tries to blame Alithea for setting a bad example to Margery, it is really Pinchwife himself who keeps titillating Margery with information about town life. For example, when he overhears Margery ask Alithea about the theatre, he tries to put her off going by suggesting that, if she

were to go, men might fall in love with her. This makes the experience seem even more attractive to Margery. Pinchwife then sets her on a path to fall in love with Horner when he tells her that Horner is already in love with her. Although he means to frighten her with this information, he really makes her curious to meet Horner. These examples directly parody Puritan attitudes towards sin, which tried to censor things, like going to the theatre, to stop people from partaking in sinful behavior—but which inadvertently encouraged people to do the opposite.

Wycherly draws attention to theatrical devices in *The Country Wife* to further support the idea that hiding something only encourages people to discover it. Before the Restoration, Puritans specifically objected to the theatre because of its associations with deceit and disguise and because of the sexual connotations of spending time there (theatres were often frequented by prostitutes and used as a social space in which wealthy patrons could flirt with each other). *The Country Wife* emphasizes the idea that it is not only the actors who are disguised, but also the audience. For example, it was common for women use "vizard-masks" when out in public to hide their real identities so that they could engage in covert flirtations during the plays. Pinchwife, as a representation of puritanical behavior, is especially afraid of Margery going to the theatre because she finds the actors sexually attractive. Alithea suggests that he put her in a mask when they go into town, to hide her face from the young men. Pinchwife, however, complains that "a masked woman, like a covered dish, gives a man curiosity and appetite." The hidden face makes men more interested, as they can imagine that the woman is extremely attractive, regardless of what she really looks like.

Ironically, however, Pinchwife then uses another theatrical technique and disguises Margery as a man so that she will not be attractive to young "gallants." This would have been especially ironic and comical to Restoration audiences, as women had only recently been allowed to appear on stage and it was common for playwrights to cast women in men's roles so that their bodies, usually hidden by large dresses, would be visible and titillating to the audience. This demonstrates the way that Restoration playwrights like Wycherly flaunted their enjoyment of titillation and risque comedy and used it to distance themselves from the puritanical values of the previous decades and show their allegiance to the hedonistic court of Charles II. Wycherly showcases his antagonism towards puritanism by mocking puritanical characters and by demonstrating how, in trying to make the world less sinful, they actually encourage the very behaviors that they wish to prevent.

TOWN VS. COUNTRY

In *The Country Wife*, Pinchwife, an older man who is terrified of being cheated on and made a "cuckold," marries a young woman, Margery, from the country because he believes that she is less likely to cheat on him than a city wife. This implies that people from the country are simple and uneducated compared with sophisticated and cosmopolitan town dwellers and relates to popular notions from the Restoration period that cities were places of sex and sin while the countryside remained unspoiled by modernity and corruption. Wycherly's play, however, suggests that this notion is false and that people from the country are just as likely to be devious, sexual, and intelligent as those who live in the city. Ultimately, in *The Country Wife*, it is not people from the country who are shown to be foolish, but rather those who believe that they are better, more cultured, and more intelligent than others simply by being from the city who are fools.

There is an assumption made by several of the characters that country life is simple and innocent compared with the exciting, hedonistic lifestyle of the city. Pinchwife's choice in marrying Margery reflects his belief that a good wife should be "ignorant" and illiterate. This shows that he thinks he is superior to Margery and that he will be able to manipulate her and control her behavior because she is from the country and, therefore, will be stupid and pliable. He intends to take advantage of what he views as her simplicity. He feels that her lack of life experience is symbolized by the fact that she is a "country wife" and that, if she gains experience in the town, she will be corrupted or spoiled in some way. This is implied when he says that "if she loves him she must hate the town," which suggests that the town symbolizes sexuality, deviance, and hedonism; things he believes are impossible in the country, as the people there are too simple to think of them. This attitude is clearly shared by many of the city dwellers. Lucy, Alithea's maid, says that the "country is as terrible" to young women "as a monastery to those abroad." This suggests that life in the country is viewed as pure and sexless, deonstrating a romanticized view of country life in the minds of city dwellers.

In contrast to what the city dwellers believe, as the play goes on it becomes apparent that people from the country are much the same as people from the city in terms of their desires, intelligence, and ability to cheat and deceive others. Although Margery believes that the city is more exciting than the country, her behavior demonstrates that many of the things that Pinchwife believes makes the city so corrupt also go on in the country. For example, although Margery has never flirted with men at the theatre, in her love letter to Horner, she reveals that she knows how to flirt just as well as city women do and has flirted with young men at country parties. Margery also easily outwits Pinchwife on several occasions. She writes a duplicate letter to Horner under Pinchwife's nose and tricks her husband again towards the end of the play when she

pretends to be Alithea so that Pinchwife will lead her to Horner, whom she wants to have an affair with. Pinchwife blames Margery's interest in city life on Alithea's example. However, it is clear from Margery's behavior that she understands more than Pinchwife realizes and the fact that she is from the country does not mean that she is simple, stupid, or has no life experience.

In the end, it is not where someone is from that defines their level of intelligence. Instead, Wycherly suggests that the world is made up of "wits" and fools, and that those fools are easily outsmarted by the "wits," no matter where they come from. While Pinchwife tries to insist that he is worldly and that he "knows the town," he is really an ignorant and foolish character who is easily outsmarted by Margery. Similarly, Sparkish, who prides himself on being a cosmopolitan and fashionable "wit" of the town, is obtuse and made to look foolish by Harcourt. Meanwhile, characters like Horner and Alithea, are truly wise because they understand that human nature is the same everywhere, town or country. Horner quite rightly believes that it is as easy to be cheated "by a friend in the country" as it is in the city and Alithea proves she is wise because she understands that honor and loyalty are choices which people can make rather than believing, as Pinchwife does, that they come from ignorance and lack of knowledge. The play does not punish clever characters like Margery and Horner for their acts of deception and infidelity. Instead, it is foolish characters, such as Sir Jasper, Pinchwife, and Sparkish, who continue to be outsmarted by the others. This suggests that, in Wycherly's play, people are not divided into categories based on whether they come from the town or the country, but are divided into those who are clever, or "wits," and those who are fools. This reinforces Wycherly's Restoration worldview which values wit, intelligence, and self-awareness above honesty, innocence, or moralizing.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SIGNS

Signs represent reputation in *The Country Wife* and symbolize the ways in which the characters use their reputations to advertise things about themselves which they wish to be widely known. When Sparkish first arrives at Horner's house, he tells Horner a joke which suggests that Horner, whom Sparkish believes to be impotent, is a "sign" of a man and compares him to a literal street sign. Sparkish's joke means to imply that Horner is a shadow of a man because he is impotent, however, his comment inadvertently hits on a truth about Horner's persona; he is a man who successfully advertises himself as something he is not, as Horner is not really impotent, despite pretending to be. Sparkish is a foolish character, however, and does not comprehend the real, symbolic truth of what he says. Later in the play, Margery is fascinated by the different painted signs that hang above the shops in London. All the signs depict horned animals, such as rams, bulls, and stags. Pinchwife compares these signs to the husbands who occupy the street and notes that their "proper signs" would also have horns; he means that they are all "cuckolds" as, in Pinchwife's mind, all women are unfaithful. This implies that people's reputations are not always under their own control and that, although someone may wish to be seen in one way, they may not necessarily be able to regulate the way that other people see them or to hide their true nature from society. This idea is personified in Pinchwife who, in his desperation not to become a "cuckold," drives his wife to be unfaithful and makes himself one.

CHINA

China is used to symbolize sex throughout the play and Horner and his lovers use it as a code word. When Horner takes Margery aside in Covent Garden, stealing her away under Pinchwife's nose, he gives her some "China oranges" which she proudly takes back and presents to her husband. Although Horner does not actually have sex with Margery in this scene, Pinchwife correctly interprets his intention towards her as sexual and takes the gift of a "China orange" as an insult. He believes that Horner has "squeezed his orange and given it back to him," which suggests that Horner has made use of something which belongs to Pinchwife; in this case, his wife. The significance of the term "china" as a sexual innuendo comes again later in the play when Horner and Lady Fidget pretend to fight over Horner's china collection, when they are really having sex, while Sir Jasper, Lady Fidget's husband, waits innocently outside the door. Horner indicates that "china" is an agreed upon "cue" between him and the ladies and he knows to follow Lady Fidget into the room when she says that she wants some of his china. This innuendo effectively deceives Sir Jasper because china shopping is considered to be a dainty, innocent, and feminine hobby and this supports the general façade of purity and sexual aversion that the "honorable" ladies (Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish) maintain throughout the play. The use of the term china furthers the impression that the "honorable" ladies and Horner mask their promiscuity and deviance behind a veneer of sexual innocence and a disdain for sex, while, in fact, the opposite is true.

BLINDNESS

Blindness is associated with love in *The Country Wife*, which reflects the theatrical and literary

traditions which Wycherly is drawing on throughout his play. When Harcourt first meets Alithea (Sparkish, her fiancé, introduces him to her), he claims that he could look at her "until he was as blind" as Sparkish. When Sparkish asks what Harcourt means, Harcourt tells him that he is "stock blind" because he is a "true lover." In the theatrical tradition, love is often associated with the Greek God Cupid who is portrayed as blindfolded. This imagery implies that lovers are biased towards their beloved and can see no evil in them; therefore, it is easy to be fooled in love and they are metaphorically "blind." Wycherly, who is writing an ironic and satirical comedy, subverts this tradition because the only real "lovers" in the play, Alithea and Harcourt, are able to see clearly where others are not. For example, Harcourt sees immediately that Sparkish does not really love Alithea and is marrying her for her money and Alithea literally sees through Harcourt's disguise when he comes to her dressed as a parson. Sparkish, who is not a lover, is the one who is metaphorically blind. He cannot see the truth about himself, or his friends, who make fun of him constantly and really dislike him. While Sparkish does not believe Alithea at the end of the play when she is accused of having an affair with Horner, Harcourt knows instantly that this rumor is false and he correctly stands up for Alithea's innocence. The theatrical and mercenery nature of love among the cynical characters is further emphasized when it is contrasted with Margery's love letter to Horner. Horner says that it is the first love letter "without flames, darts" or "destinies." This reference to darts is a reference to cupid and suggests that, while more experienced lovers may write extravagant confessions of love, these confessions are false compared with Margery's unaffected and honest confession of love. Again, this suggests that it is lovers who see clearly and who are not blind in Wycherly's play.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Nick Hern Books edition of *The Country Wife* published in 2002.

Act 1 Quotes

❝ A quack is as fit for a pimp as a midwife for a bawd; they are still but in their way both helpers of nature.

Related Characters: Harry Horner (speaker), Quack

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Horner asks his doctor to spread a rumor that he is impotent. He does this so that married men will leave their wives with him without suspicion. Horner, in this quote, justifies his choice of accomplice in asking the doctor, a "quack," to help him.

Ironically, Horner spreads this rumor so that he will be able to seduce women; he will not have to go to the effort of hiding his affairs, as men will encourage their wives to spend time with him and will not feel the need to supervise his behavior with them. By spreading a rumor that will help Horner have sex, the doctor has acted, in a sense, as his "pimp," since "pimps" usually run brothels or provide prostitutes for clients. It also implies that Horner has paid the doctor to spread his story for him, just as a client pays a pimp.

"Bawd," too, is another term for "pimp." Horner says that a "midwife" is fit to be a "bawd" because a midwife helps women give birth, and having a baby is the natural result of sex (the process that the pimp facilitates). By connecting sexual activity with childbirth, Horner highlights the idea that, although sex is taboo and considered impure in Restoration society, it is a natural process—as natural as childbirth. Although childrearing is often associated with innocence and purity, it is the natural result of sex, which is ironically considered morally impure.

❝ Dear Mr Doctor, let vain rogues be contented only to be thought abler men than they are, generally 'tis all the pleasure they have, but mine lies another way ... there are quacks in love, as well as physic, who get but the fewer and worse patients for their boasting. A good name is seldom got by giving it oneself, and women no more than honor are compassed by bragging. Come, come, doctor, the wisest lawyer never discovers the merits of his cause till the trial. The wealthiest man conceals his riches, and the cunning gamester his play.

Related Characters: Harry Horner (speaker), Quack

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

The doctor tells Horner that it is strange that he should advertise himself as impotent as a means of impressing women. Horner feels that the doctor is being simplistic and literal, and he tries to explain the nuance of his plan.

Horner thinks that only shallow men take "pleasure" in having a good reputation. Horner cares about a different sort of "pleasure" (sex with women) and is prepared to sacrifice his reputation if this will help him seduce women more easily. Horner suggests that men who brag about being excellent lovers probably take little pleasure in the act of love itself and their reputation as a lover is "all pleasure they have." These men are "quacks in love" as a "quack" is a term for a disreputable or unskilled doctor, and these men are unskilled lovers.

Most people are not impressed with "bragging" and arrogant people who boast about themselves constantly are unlikely to gain a good reputation, with women or with anyone else. Wise people know that people with genuine ability do not need to show it off because talent speaks for itself. Although ignorant people may believe that appearance is everything, Horner believes that it is what's underneath that counts and that a reputation is worthless if one does not have the skills to back it up. He does not fear the loss of his reputation because he is so confident in his ability to seduce women without it.

❝ Ask but all the young fellows of the town, if they do not lose more time, like huntsmen, in starting the game, than in running it down. One knows not where to find 'em, who will, or will not. Women of quality are so civil you can hardly distinguish love from good breeding, and a man is often mistaken. But now I can be sure she that shows an aversion to me loves the sport, as those women that are gone, whom I warrant to be right. And then the next thing is, your women of honor, as you call 'em, are only chary of their reputations, not their persons, and 'tis scandal they would avoid, not men.

Related Characters: Harry Horner (speaker), Quack

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Horner tries to convince his doctor that his plan, to spread a rumor that he is impotent so that men will let him spend time with their wives, is a good one.

Horner compares seducing women to hunting animals or "game." This was a common metaphor in the seventeenth century and it supported the popular idea that sex was a conquest rather than a romantic pastime. Horner complains that men waste most of their time trying to work out if a woman is interested in them or not; this takes longer than the seduction itself. Horner says that this is the case because women are so "civil" and well-bred that they will pretend that they are not interested in sex even if they are. This is because they wish to protect their reputations; women were expected to be "virtuous" and to dislike sex and, therefore, could not be seen to flirt openly with men.

However, Horner says that, with his new reputation as impotent, he will know immediately which women love sex or "sport" because these women will be disgusted by a man who cannot make love to them and this will save him time. He refers to the "women that are gone;" Lady Fidget and her companions as examples of this. Although these women may *appear* virtuous and pretend to dislike men, it is really "scandal" and damage to their reputation that "they would avoid, not men." They do not really care about *being* virtuous, only about being thought of as virtuous.

❝ Horner: A pox upon 'em, and all that force nature, and would be still what she forbids 'em! Affectation is her greatest monster.

Harcourt: Most men are the contraries to that they would seem. Your bully, you see, is a coward with a long sword; the little, humbly fawning physician with his ebony cane is he that destroys men.

Related Characters: Harcourt, Harry Horner (speaker), Sparkish

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Horner and Harcourt discuss Sparkish, whom they dislike because they find him so false and affected. Harcourt agrees with Horner that people are generally the opposite of what they seem.

Horner feels that to put on an act and pretend to be something one is not is to "force nature" or to go against one's natural temperament. Sparkish, who is not naturally witty or entertaining, insists on behaving like a "wit" and on forcing himself into the company of "wits," like Horner and Harcourt. Forcing nature, or being false, is a distortion of nature, in Horner's view, and, therefore, the result is monstrous. However, it is ironic that Horner of all people thinks this, since his own persona (that of an impotent man) is a lie.

Harcourt agrees with Horner and agrees that affected people are hypocrites who pretend to be the opposite of what they are underneath. For example, a bully is often a coward and an unskilled doctor may claim to heal a patient while he is really harming them. Although Horner appears disgusted by this, he is a hypocrite himself and is, literally, the opposite of what he pretends to be. He affects that he is impotent but is, really, highly virile. Horner also suggests that, although affectation is a distortion of nature, it is still a product of nature and, therefore, it is a natural for people to be affected and to be hypocrites.

Why, 'tis as hard to find an old whoremaster without jealousy and the gout, as a young one without fear or the pox.

As gout in age from pox in youth proceeds,
So wenching past, then jealousy succeeds:
The worst disease that love and wenching breeds.

Related Characters: Harry Horner (speaker), Pinchwife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Horner and his friends tease Pinchwife about the fact that he is married and suggest that soon they expect him to be made a "cuckold." Pinchwife is extremely jealous and paranoid that his wife will cheat on him and he becomes enraged by this. Horner chalks this anger up to Pinchwife's past, in which he was extremely promiscuous.

Horner's comment implies that Pinchwife was a womanizer, or "whoremaster," in his youth. This demonstrates that Pinchwife is a hypocrite because he expects total fidelity and sexual purity from his wife, but he did not live this way himself. This also suggests that Restoration society maintained a double standard when it came to sexual promiscuity; it was considered acceptable in men but unacceptable in women. Horner suggests that old "whoremasters" like Pinchwife grow bitter and jealous as they get older because they can no longer attract women. Pinchwife still wishes to have a pretty young wife but becomes fearful and jealous because he knows that he is unattractive and that she might stray with other men because of this.

Horner also implies that "wenching," or womanizing, ages a man because it requires them to live a life of decadence. Conditions like "gout" were believed to be the result of a hedonistic lifestyle. The "pox" is a reference to venereal disease and suggests that diseases in older age come from living recklessly when young. "Jealousy" is the "worst disease" because it makes men act irrationally and causes them to be cruel to their wives for straying, which is unfair and hypocritical as this is how they behaved when they themselves were young.

Act 2 Quotes

Pinchwife: Ay, my dear, you must love me only, and not be like the naughty town-women, who only hate their husbands and love every man else; love plays, visits, fine coaches, fine clothes, fiddles, balls, treats, and so lead a wicked town-life.

Margery Pinchwife: Nay, if to enjoy all these things be a town-life, London is not so bad a place, dear.

Pinchwife: How! If you love me, you must hate London.

Alithea: The fool has forbid me discovering to her the pleasures of the town, and he is now setting her agog upon them himself.

Related Characters: Alithea, Margery Pinchwife, Pinchwife (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Pinchwife tries to explain to his wife, Margery, that she cannot be a good wife while also enjoying the pleasures of London. He blames his sister, Alithea, for putting ideas into Margery's head, but Alithea thinks that Pinchwife is more to blame than she is.

Pinchwife tries to convince Margery that a city life is corrupt. He believes that, because Margery is from the country, she is innocent and naturally inclined towards moral purity; a quality he expects in a wife. He is a hypocrite, however, as Pinchwife has lived a decadent city life in his youth and so he only expects purity from Margery and not from himself.

Pinchwife is puritanical in his approach to censorship and vice; he believes that people must be prevented from encountering "wicked" things to avoid being corrupted. This underlines a major theme in the play; the idea that those who moralize and prescribe purity to others are usually the most corrupt themselves. The play also mocks puritanical

impulses to censor society, as the viewer sees, from this example, that it is Pinchwife himself who makes Margery feel that London is "not so bad a place" after all by describing all the "wicked" town "pleasures" to her. Alithea, who is a wise person and not a hypocrite, correctly predicts that, by trying to keep Margery away from sin, Pinchwife will accidentally lead her towards it. Pinchwife, in contrast, is blind to his own folly here and this reflects Wycherly's dislike of Puritanism in society more broadly.

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? For you look upon a friend married as one gone into a monastery, that is dead to the world.

Related Characters: Alithea, Harcourt (speaker), Sparkish

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Harcourt falls in love with Alithea, who is engaged to Sparkish. Rather than accepting her engagement, Harcourt tries to woo Alithea in front of Sparkish and to convince her that this marriage is not a good idea.

Harcourt claims that marriage has never been his "enemy before" because, previously, he has been a young single "rake" in the city and has felt no desire to get married. Harcourt has probably had mistresses who were married to other men, but he himself has had no desire to marry them, or any other woman. Marriage was viewed as a social necessity rather than a demonstration of love in Restoration society. Men and women would often marry to gain money, titles, or social status rather than for affection.

Alithea is aware that marriage is viewed as a hindrance to the lifestyle of young men in Restoration London. It was viewed as something which placed restrictions on their social freedom to do as they liked. As Restoration society encouraged decadence, promiscuity and close friendships among men, which generally excluded women, marriage was seen as the death of one's rakish freedom. The idea that marriage is sexless is also suggested by the image of the "monastery;" marriage was generally seen as a threat to passion and sexual activity rather than a vehicle for it, as men and women did not often marry because of mutual attraction.

Mrs. Squeamish: 'Tis true, nobody takes notice of a private man, and therefore with him 'tis more secret, and the crime's the less when 'tis not known.

Lady Fidget: You say true; i'faith, I think you are in the right on't. 'Tis 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; and to say truth.

Related Characters: Lady Fidget, Mrs. Squeamish (speaker), Mrs. Dainty Fidget

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Squeamish, Lady Fidget and Mrs. Dainty Fidget discuss the question of promiscuity. Mrs. Squeamish and Lady Fidget assert that it is not being promiscuous which is dishonorable but, rather, getting caught.

Mrs. Squeamish suggests that it is better to have an affair with a "private" man because nobody "takes notice" of him. This implies that a man who keeps his affairs to himself is not of any interest to Restoration society, which is primarily interested in gossip and public scandal. Mrs. Squeamish also believes that being unfaithful or promiscuous is "less" immoral if no one knows about it. Restoration society clearly thinks of promiscuity among women as something immoral, but the ladies are not especially concerned by this and continue to do as they like in private.

However, Mrs. Squeamish and Lady Fidget still present themselves publicly as "women of honor." This suggests that "honor" is based on reputation, rather than on how one behaves. Promiscuity could be considered an "injury" to a husband as, if their wives cheat on them, they may gain a reputation as a "cuckold," which was considered extremely shameful. It may also suggest that, if a woman is known to be promiscuous before she is married, it may deter "honorable" men from marrying her, as they do not wish to damage their own reputations. This further implies that couples in Restoration society often married to gain status and social privileges rather than for love.

Lady Fidget: Well, that's spoken again like a man of honor; all men of honor desire to come to the test. But, indeed, generally you men report such things of yourselves, one does not know how or whom to believe; and it is come to that pass we dare not take your words, no more than your tailor's, without some staid servant of yours be bound with you. But I have so strong a faith in your honor, dear, dear, noble sir, that I'd forfeit mine for yours at any time, dear sir.

Horner: No, madam, you should not need to forfeit it for me; I have given you security already to save you harmless, my late reputation being so well known in the world, madam.

Related Characters: Harry Horner, Lady Fidget (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Horner tells Lady Fidget that he is not impotent. He claims that he has spread this rumor and destroyed his reputation for her sake, so that she may visit him without suspicion and so that their association will not damage her own "honorable" reputation.

Horner tells Lady Fidget that she may "test" him to prove to herself that he is not impotent. Lady Fidget feels that Horner's willingness to sacrifice his own reputation for hers makes him a "true man of honor." This is ironic because Horner is dishonest and not at all "honorable" in his intentions. Her statement that all "men of honor" wish to be tested is a reference to courtly romance, in which knights would compete in challenges and undertake quests for the sake of ladies.

Lady Fidget alludes to the fact that young men in Restoration society are constantly bragging about themselves. This suggests that Restoration society is shallow and preoccupied with reputation. There is a general interest in gossip and judging the lives of others and, because of this, everyone wishes to control their public image and influence how they are seen in society. Lady Fidget suggests that she would "forfeit her reputation" for Horner's. This implies that she would lose her virtuous reputation to serve his "rakish" one; to allow him to brag about her as a conquest. Horner, however, has already ensured that her reputation will be safe by telling everyone that he is a "eunuch."

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

Would it not make anyone melancholy, to see you go every day fluttering about abroad, whilst I must stay at home like a poor, lonely, sullen bird in a cage?

Related Characters: Margery Pinchwife (speaker), Pinchwife, Alithea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Margery complains to her sister-in-law, Alithea, about her marriage to Pinchwife. He keeps her cooped up in the house and will not let her go out into the city.

Margery quite reasonably announces that "anyone" would be miserable in the situation that she is in. Pinchwife is extremely jealous and possessive, keeps her locked in the house, will not let her be seen in public and becomes aggressive if he suspects Margery's interest in any other man. Margery's point here supports one of the central ideas in the play; that jealousy is destructive and that a jealous husband is a danger to and makes life miserable for his wife.

This suggests a criticism of marriage more generally as, like many of the other characters in the play, Pinchwife has married Margery for mercenary reasons and not because he loves her. He has married her on the condition that she remain pure and avoid temptation. As Wycherly points out, this type of puritanical lifestyle is depressing for Margery and unreasonable of Pinchwife to expect from her. Margery compares herself with a "bird" in a "cage." This accurately describes her situation, as Pinchwife wishes to keep her imprisoned for his own pleasure—just as a person might cage a bird so that only they can hear it sing. Alithea, too, is compared with a bird through the use of the word "fluttering," however, unlike Margery, Alithea is unmarried and so maintains her personal freedom and can come and go as she pleases.

A mask makes people but the more inquisitive, and is as ridiculous a disguise as a stage beard; her shape, stature, habit will be known. And if we should meet with Horner, he would be sure to take acquaintance with us, must wish her joy, kiss her, talk to her, leer upon her, and the devil and all. No, I'll not use her to a mask, 'tis dangerous; for masks have made more cuckolds than the best faces that ever were known ... No — a woman masked, like a covered dish, gives a man curiosity and appetite, when, it may be, uncovered, 'twould turn his stomach.

Related Characters: Pinchwife (speaker), Alithea, Margery Pinchwife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Margery demands that Pinchwife take her into town, but Pinchwife will not let her go unless her identity is hidden. He does not want men to see her and find her attractive. Alithea suggests that Margery wear a mask, but Pinchwife feels that a mask makes women more attractive to men.

Pinchwife is a parody of puritanical impulses to censor society and he mimics the Puritans' decision to close all the theatres under the governance of Oliver Cromwell, prior to the Restoration of Charles II. Pinchwife's objection to the theatrical device of a mask parodies the Puritans' belief that the theatre encouraged deception and corruption because of its use of make-believe and costume (essentially, Puritans saw theater and theatrics as being used to *deceive* the audience).

Pinchwife believes that masks are seductive because they force people to imagine the face underneath and, therefore, people are free to imagine that the face underneath is extremely beautiful, even if is not. Pinchwife sees masks as "dangerous," because he believes they encourage promiscuity, and so he forbids Margery from wearing one, just as Puritans banned the theatre because they associated it with sex. The fact that Wycherly makes fun of this *in* a play suggests that censoring society in this way does not work and that forbidding and hiding things only makes them more attractive as people wish to discover them for themselves. Ironically, the puritanical belief that one can censor society tends to encourage people to test out forbidden activities, just as covering a woman's face can make her more desirable.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

❝ Because I do hate 'em and would hate 'em yet more. I'll frequent 'em. You may see by marriage, nothing makes a man hate a woman more than her constant conversation. In short, I converse with 'em, as you do with rich fools, to laugh at 'em and use 'em ill.

Related Characters: Harry Horner (speaker), Dorilant, Harcourt

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Horner comes up with an excuse for spending so much time with women even though he claims to be a "eunuch." He explains to Harcourt and Dorilant that he likes to spend time with women to get revenge on them because they caused his impotence by giving him a venereal disease (which he claims necessitated his castration).

Horner tells his friends that "frequenting" (or spending time with) women makes one "hate them more." This suggests that men dislike women's company. He supports this claim by referring to "marriage," which he claims makes men hate women because they are forced to spend all their time with their wives. This statement reflects Restoration interest in male friendship and in pitting men and women against one another, which is an important aspect of theatrical comedy or farce.

It is implied that most men hate their wives, which showcases Restoration attitudes towards marriage; that it is an unpleasant necessity rather than a declaration of love. Horner claims that he will only spend time with women to make fun of them and "use them ill." This suggests that he will allow women to spend their money on him, the way one would with a "rich person." This shows how Horner, as a character, thinks nothing of manipulating people for his own pleasure. It is also not quite a lie, as Horner does use women for his own pleasure (for sex), but Harcourt and Dorilant do not know this.

❝ Horner: No, a foolish rival and a jealous husband assist their rival's designs; for they are sure to make their women hate them, which is the first step to their love for another man.

Harcourt: But I cannot come near his mistress but in his company.

Horner: Still the better for you, for fools are most easily cheated when they themselves are accessories; and he is to be bubbled of his mistress, as of his money, the common mistress, by keeping him company.

Related Characters: Harcourt, Harry Horner (speaker), Alithea, Sparkish

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Horner tells Harcourt that, if he wants to woo Alithea, he should use his friendship with Sparkish, Alithea's fiancé, to his own advantage. Sparkish is so foolish, Horner says, that he will unwittingly help Harcourt win Alithea's heart.

Horner's statement reflects the way that events unfold in the play. Sparkish, Harcourt's "foolish rival" for Alithea's affection, *does* encourage Alithea to fall for Harcourt, just as Pinchwife inadvertently helps Margery cheat on him with Horner. Horner is canny enough to realize that, while fools like Sparkish may brag to attract women, and jealous husbands may lock up their wives to stop them from straying, this kind of behavior will become tiresome to the women and will eventually drive them away.

Horner implies that, when this inevitably happens, women will look for another man and that clever men, like he and Harcourt, can use this to their own advantage. They can make themselves seem superior to women's husbands and, therefore, profit off another man's failure. What is more, if a man is very foolish or jealous, it will make him irrational and make it hard for him to see what is really going on. Therefore, it is easy for a rival to trick, or "bubble," them and convince them to help with, or be "accessories," to their wife's seduction. Harcourt's success in doing this suggests that clever men prosper most when they take advantage of fools.

Harcourt: I see all women are like these of the Exchange, who, to enhance the price of their commodities, report to their fond customers offers which were never made 'em.

Horner: Ay women are as apt to tell before the intrigue as men after it, and so show themselves the vainer sex.

Related Characters: Harry Horner, Harcourt (speaker), Sparkish, Alithea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Alithea tells Sparkish that Harcourt has flirted with her. Harcourt pretends to be indignant so that Sparkish will not believe Alithea.

Harcourt refers to prostitutes who solicit men in "the Exchange" (the financial center of London). This area was popular with prostitutes because rich men worked there. Harcourt suggests that these prostitutes often lie about the amount of money they have been offered for their services and increase their prices so that men will think that they are highly in demand and, therefore, highly skilled as lovers. Harcourt compares Alithea to a prostitute and implies she has pretended that other men are interested in her to make Sparkish jealous.

This is a deeply unflattering statement to make about Alithea, who is the only honest woman in the play, and it demonstrates the underlying misogyny in Restoration society. It also demonstrates the extent to which Harcourt is willing to lie to outwit Sparkish, even to the point where he will insult the woman he loves. This fits with the play's tone, in which love, even between Harcourt and Alithea, is a matter of competition and conquest rather than affection and sincerity. Horner notes that the difference between men and women is that women brag about having many suitors while men brag about having many conquests. This is because it was considered shameful for woman to be promiscuous but was encouraged in men in Restoration society. Women, on the other hand, were meant to be beautiful and desirable but chaste.

Gad, I go to a play as to a country treat; I carry my own wine to one, and my own wit to t'other, or else I'm sure I should not be merry at either. And the reason why we are so often louder than the players is because we think we speak more wit, and so become the poet's rivals in his audience. For to tell you the truth, we hate the silly rogues; nay so much that we find fault even with their bawdy upon the stage, whilst we talk nothing else in the pit as loud.

Related Characters: Sparkish (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60-61

Explanation and Analysis

Sparkish tells Horner and Harcourt that he does not go to the theatre to listen to what the playwright has written, but rather to entertain himself with his own jokes, which he shouts out in the audience.

Sparkish compares the theatre to a "country treat" because he implies that a play, like the country, lacks sophistication and witty entertainment. Sparkish, like Pinchwife, believes that people from the country are simple and unintelligent

compared with cosmopolitan city dwellers. However, it is really Sparkish and Pinchwife who are fools and are easily outwitted. Sparkish's belief in his own intelligence and wit is what makes him so foolish; he is extremely arrogant, he does not listen to anyone else and, therefore, he is incapable of learning. He believes that he is more intelligent than the playwrights, although he never pays attention to the plays.

Sparkish is a parody of Restoration audiences (particularly "wits row" where Sparkish claims to sit) who would be vocal and restless throughout the plays. This demonstrates that Restoration theatre was a social place where people came to mingle and be seen. Wycherly's criticism of Sparkish suggests his real impatience with the audiences at his own plays. Sparkish and his fellow wits also criticize the playwrights for putting "bawdy" or sexual content in their plays, even though they themselves make smutty jokes "in the pit." This suggests that Restoration society is hypocritical and pretends to dislike promiscuity when it is rife with promiscuity under the surface.

❝ So we are hard put to't, when we make our rival our procurer; but neither she nor her brother would let me come near her now. When all's done, a rival is the best cloak to steal to a mistress under, without suspicion; and when we have once got to her as we desire, we throw him off like other cloaks.

Related Characters: Harcourt (speaker), Alithea, Sparkish

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Harcourt realizes that his best chance to woo Alithea is to get close to her fiancé, Sparkish. Harcourt plans to use his friendship with Sparkish to hide his real intention, which is to seduce Alithea.

Harcourt feels it is desperate times when one is forced to rely on one's "rival" to get close to a woman. However, he acknowledges that this is a necessity if he wants to spend time with Alithea because Pinchwife, Alithea's brother, suspects Harcourt's motives and would keep him away from her. Pinchwife is extremely jealous of his own wife and is always looking out for signs of promiscuity; therefore, he recognizes Harcourt's intentions towards Alithea.

Sparkish's idiocy, however, leaves him vulnerable to Harcourt's cunning. Harcourt will use his friendship with Sparkish as a disguise, like a "cloak," to conceal his intentions towards Alithea. Sparkish is so convinced of his own intelligence that he will not suspect Harcourt of being able to outwit him and, therefore, he will not expect it. Harcourt will present himself as the opposite of a rival, a loyal friend, to win Sparkish's confidence and steal Alithea out from under his nose. This subplot mirrors the main plot in the play; Horner's ploy to convince society that he is impotent when, in fact, he is the opposite. The use of the cloak metaphor relates the actions of the characters to the dramatic action of a play, in which disguises and theatrical revelations are commonly used to enhance the drama.

❝ Margery Pinchwife: I don't know where to put this here, dear bud. You shall eat it. Nay, you shall have part of the fine gentleman's good things, or treat, as you call it, when we come home.

Pinchwife: Indeed, I deserve it, since I furnished the best part of it. (*Strikes away the orange.*)

The gallant treats, presents, and gives the ball; But 'tis the absent cuckold, pays for all.

Related Characters: Pinchwife, Margery Pinchwife (speaker), Harry Horner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Pinchwife reluctantly takes Margery into town where, to his dismay, they encounter Horner and his friends. Pinchwife has dressed Margery as a boy so Horner will not recognize her, but Horner is not fooled. While Pinchwife's back is turned, Horner takes Margery to his house and gives her some fruit, which she offers to share with Pinchwife when she returns.

Although Margery is not stupid, as Pinchwife believes, she is innocent in some ways and lacks life experience because she is young and has grown up in the country. The behavior of city men and "rakes" like Horner is new to her and she interprets Horner's gift of fruit straightforwardly, as a present. She does not realize that his gift has underlying sexual connotations or that he wants to seduce her, and she innocently offers Pinchwife a share of the "fine things" that Horner has given her. This shows that Margery is an open-hearted, generous person who intends to treat her husband well if he is kind to her.

Margery's behavior here suggests that it is Pinchwife's jealousy and cruelty which drives her towards infidelity,

rather than her own deceitful temperament. Pinchwife is very entitled in his attitude towards Margery and thinks of her as his possession, which other men try to use. He is afraid of being taken advantage of by men like Horner and he implies that a "cuckold pays" for his wife's affair because he loses his pride and reputation.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ The woman that marries to love better will be as much mistaken as the wencher that marries to live better. No. madam, marrying to increase love is like gaming to become rich; alas, you only lose what little stock you had before … 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 do themselves mischief. Men lose their lives by it; women what's dearer to 'em, their love, the life of life.

Related Characters: Lucy (speaker), Sparkish, Alithea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

On the morning of her wedding to Sparkish, Alithea tells Lucy, her maid, that, although she does not love Sparkish, she hopes her love for him will grow with time.

Lucy suggests that Alithea is taking a gamble and not one that is likely to pay off. She is risking her future happiness on the unlikely chance that, although she does not like Sparkish now, her affection for him will grow once they spend more time together. Lucy compares this risk to a promiscuous man who thinks that marriage will stop him from chasing other women or a person who gambles "to become rich." It is well known in Restoration society that womanizers are not redeemed just because they are married (they will likely continue their conquests in secret) and that people who gamble usually lose more than they win.

Lucy complains that Alithea is only marrying Sparkish because she has given her word and to take it back would be "dishonorable." Lucy tries to warn her that living honorably will do her more harm than good. Lucy, who is a servant, observes that the gentry are obsessed with their honor and are always getting into trouble because of it; men die in duels over insults to their honor and women marry men they hate for the sake of their honor. She suggests that there is no difference between genuinely being honorable, as Alithea tries to be, and being vain about one's honorable reputation; neither option leads to a happy life.

❝ I say, loss of her honor, her quiet, nay, her life sometimes; and what's as bad almost, the loss of this town; that is, she is sent into the country, which is the last ill usage of a husband to a wife, I think.

Then of necessity, madam, you think a man must carry his wife into the country, if he be wise. The country is as terrible, I find, to our young English ladies as a monastery to those abroad; and on my virginity, I think they would rather marry a London jailer than a high sheriff of a county, since neither can stir from his employment. Formerly women of wit married fools for a great estate, a fine seat, or the like; but now 'tis for a pretty seat only in Lincoln's Inn Fields, St James's Fields, or the Pall Mall.

Related Characters: Lucy, Alithea (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86-87

Explanation and Analysis

Alithea gives Lucy the reasons that she does not want a jealous husband; she fears that a jealous man might kill his wife or send her to live in the country.

A jealous husband may cause his wife to lose her "honor" because his lack of trust in her could be publicly humiliating and he may act in ways that shame her and make people believe she is unfaithful even if she is not. If a husband is violently jealous, he may physically abuse or even murder his wife. Alithea is aware of this danger because she has observed the violent way that Pinchwife, her brother, treats his wife, Margery. Alithea believes it is worse to be sent into the country by one's husband than to be killed by him. This is a joke about the perceived importance of social life and fashionable society in Restoration England.

Lucy comments on this ironically. She suggests that, if a woman loves town life, which is notoriously promiscuous, then a "wise husband" should send her to the country. In European Catholic countries, women could be placed in a monastery as punishment for promiscuity. Monasteries were sexless and shunned decadence and pleasure. Lucy notes how society has changed and that, while fashionable people used to live in the country, all the social life has moved to London. This reflects the increase in industrialism in the seventeenth century and the King's preference for city life, which the nobility imitated.

So, 'tis plain she loves him, yet she has not love enough to make her conceal it from me. But the sight of him will increase her aversion for me, and love for him, and that love instruct her how to deceive me and satisfy him, all idiot that she is. Love! 'Twas he gave women first their craft, their art of deluding. Out of nature's hands they came plain, open, silly, and fit for slaves, as she and heaven intended 'em, but damned love –well – I must strangle that little monster whilst I can deal with him.

Related Characters: Pinchwife (speaker), Harry Horner, Margery Pinchwife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Margery admits the she let Horner kiss her when they were alone together at his house. Pinchwife thinks that Margery is in love with Horner and forces her to write a letter to him which claims that she hates him.

Pinchwife believes that Margery has betrayed Horner by confessing about the kiss. He does not realize that Margery is naïve about the ways of town life and that she doesn't know one is not supposed to admit things like this to one's husband. Margery has no real concept of jealousy or possessiveness, but Pinchwife, who is obsessively jealous, cannot believe that she is innocent in this way. Pinchwife believes that a person cannot love two people and that, if Margery is attracted to another man, she will lose all affection for him. This shows that jealousy comes from insecurity.

Although Pinchwife believes that Margery is capable of deceit, he also believes she is stupid. Pinchwife views women as inferior to men, born to be instructed by men and made "slaves" to men's will, but also that they are naturally more corrupt and deceitful than men. This represents a typical Puritan worldview in this period. The use of the word "craft" also links women with witchcraft, for which women were often persecuted in this era. Jealousy is the enemy of love because it seeks to "strangle" it. Rather than allowing for love and attraction, or different types of love to exist simultaneously, jealousy seeks to destroy everything that competes with it.

Act 4, Scene 3 Quotes

Oh, amongst friends, amongst friends. For your bigots in honor are just like those in religion; they fear the eye of the world more than the eye of heaven, and think there is no virtue but railing at vice, and no sin but giving scandal. They rail at a poor, little, kept player, and keep themselves some young, modest pulpit comedian to be pricy to their sins in their closets, not to tell 'em of them in their chapels.

Related Characters: Harry Horner (speaker), Quack

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Horner tells the Quack that his plan has been very successful and that he now regularly spends time with "honorable" people and sees how they really behave in private.

"Bigots in honor" refers to people who condemn those they feel are not "honorable." These "bigots" often present themselves as the most "honorable" people it is possible to be. The same goes for religious people; it refers to people who are extremely intolerant of people who do not share their faith or who they feel are less godly than them. Horner suggests that these people are not genuinely "honorable" or religious and, instead, only care about how they look.

Horner believes that people who are confident in their beliefs, or in their own morality, do not feel the need to force others to follow the same rules as them or to behave exactly as they do. Intolerance, like jealousy, is bred from insecurity. This reflects Wycherly's criticism of Puritanism in the play, as the Puritans heavily censored society to fit with their own model of faith when they ruled England prior to the Restoration, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell. He also suggests that these people are usually hypocrites. They pick an easy target to vilify and hold up as an example of vice while they themselves are carrying out these same behaviors in private.

If you talk a word more of your honor, you'll make me incapable to wrong it. To talk of honor in the mysteries of love is like talking of heaven or the deity in an operation of witchcraft, just when you are employing the devil; it makes the charm impotent ... I tell you, madam, the word 'money' in a mistress's mouth, at such a nick of time, is not a more disheartening sound to a younger brother than that of 'honor' to an eager lover like myself.

Related Characters: Harry Horner (speaker), Lady Fidget

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Fidget arrives at Horner's house to seduce him but, before she sleeps with him, she asks for an assurance that her honor will be safe. Horner complains that she is putting him off and that honor has no place in love.

Horner suggests that concepts such virtue and "honor" are the opposite of sex and pleasure. This reflects the general idea in the play that things which are forbidden and considered deviant are more attractive than things which are socially sanctioned and proper. This mindset reflects Wycherly's criticism of Puritanism, which had a large influence in English society in the period before the Restoration. Wycherly, as a libertine and a fashionable socialite, has little sympathy for the Puritans and, instead, champions the perspective of hedonistic "rakes" like Horner who are comfortable with their own moral bankruptcy, who enjoy corruption and vice, and who despise hypocrites who pretend to be more virtuous than they are.

The reference to witchcraft and devil worship again parodies Puritan beliefs, as Puritans believed that the devil was at work everywhere in society and suspected members of the upper classes of witchcraft. Although fashionable, cosmopolitan men like Horner were unlikely to believe seriously in the occult, witch trials were common in Europe throughout this century. Talk of "money" is off-putting to a man about to sleep with a prostitute, as it destroys the illusion of love and reminds the man about the practicalities of everyday life—something hedonism is considered as an escape from.

❝ But Harry, what, have I a rival in my wife already? But with all my heart, lord he may be of use to me hereafter! For though my hunger is now my sauce, and I can fall on heartily without, but the time will come when a rival will be as good sauce for a married man to a wife as an orange to veal.

Related Characters: Sparkish (speaker), Alithea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Horner suggests to Sparkish that someone else is in love with his fiancée, Alithea, and Sparkish wonders who this rival could be.

Sparkish proves that he does not really love Alithea because he is so unconcerned about his "rival." Although jealousy is portrayed as destructive in *The Country Wife*, Sparkish's lack of jealousy here is a sign that he does not really care about Alithea. Sparkish's attitude towards his "rival" is mercenary; he thinks about how it could benefit him in the long run if Alithea were distracted with another man. Sparkish openly acknowledges that he will probably get bored of Alithea and suggests that their love will lose its flavor.

Although this is portrayed as a common result of marriage in the play, it seems unnatural for Sparkish to feel this way so early in their relationship. It is commonly accepted that true lovers believe they will always be faithful to each other regardless of how unlikely this may be. Sparkish's casual and calculating belief that he will eventually grow tired of Alithea suggests that he does not really care about her. His behavior is contrasted with Harcourt's; Harcourt vows to marry Alithea and to always remain true to her, renouncing his rakish lifestyle. Sparkish demonstrates no such intention and suggests that a "rival" will keep their marriage interesting when he has inevitably grown bored. It also suggests that Sparkish may turn a blind eye to Alithea's infidelity so that he can continue his own.

Act 4, Scene 4 Quotes

❝ Well, 'tis e'en so, I have got the London disease they call love; I am sick of my husband, and for my gallant. I have heard this distemper called a fever, but methinks 'tis liker an ague, for when I think of my husband, I tremble and am in a cold sweat, and have inclinations to vomit, but when I think of my gallant, dear Mr. Horner, my hot fit comes and I am all in a fever, indeed, and as in other fevers my own chamber is tedious to me, and I would fain be removed to his, and then methinks I should be well.

Related Characters: Margery Pinchwife (speaker), Pinchwife, Harry Horner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Margery pines for Horner, whom she has fallen in love with, and regrets that she is married to Pinchwife.

Margery is experiencing the symptoms of lovesickness or

courtly love; a condition that was believed to accompany sexual desire, especially for a person one was not married to. Courtly love is associated with medieval romance, in which knights often had adulterous affairs with ladies and the lovers pined for each other while they were kept apart. This type of relationship was deliberately imitated by members of the nobility during the Restoration and it was fashionable to discuss relationships and write love letters, or theatrical love scenes, in this type of courtly language.

Margery associates this type of love with the city, as it was popular in fashionable circles and was a staple of a hedonistic and leisure-filled town life, rather than a pastime of country people like Margery, who had poorer, less frivolous lifestyles. It is also Margery's first encounter with sexual desire and the symptoms she describes are commonly recognized as those associated with "having a crush." Although Margery does not realize that she is not supposed to love two men at once, her attraction to Horner brings on an aversion to Pinchwife. This is because she did not love Pinchwife in the first place, was given little choice in marrying him, and, now, when compared with the real experience of desire, her life with him seems miserable.

❝ Sparkish: Lord, how shy you are of your wife! But let me tell you, brother, we men of wit have amongst us a saying that cuckolding, like the smallpox, comes with a fear, and you may keep your wife as much as you will out of danger of infection, but if her constitution incline her to't, she'll have it sooner or later, by the world, say they.

Pinchwife: What a thing is a cuckold, that every fool can make him ridiculous! – Well sir – but let me advise you, now you are come to be concerned, because you suspect the danger, not to neglect the means to prevent it, especially when the greatest share of the malady will light upon your own head, for

Hows'e'er the kind wife's belly comes to swell
The husband breeds for her, and first is ill.

Related Characters: Pinchwife, Sparkish (speaker), Margery Pinchwife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Sparkish is surprised by Pinchwife's jealousy and thinks that Pinchwife's concerns are excessive. Pinchwife warns Sparkish that, when he is married, if he does not take measures to prevent his wife's infidelity, then he will regret it.

Sparkish claims that "cuckolding, like smallpox, comes with a fear." This suggests that, the more paranoid someone is that they will be cheated on, the more likely they are to drive their partner to cheat. Although Sparkish is usually a foolish character, he is proved right on this occasion. This suggests that, while Sparkish is a fool, an excessively jealous husband is the biggest fool of all. Sparkish believes that, if women want to cheat, they will find a way to do so and trying to stop them won't help. Sparkish here represents Wycherly's view that people must be free to make their own choices, even if these choices are bad.

Pinchwife disagrees and, in contrast to Sparkish, who considers himself a "rake" and a libertine, is closer to a Puritan. Like a Puritan, Pinchwife believes that people can be controlled and can be forced to behave. He therefore supports taking pre-emptive measures against his wife to dissuade her from cheating. Wycherly suggests that this is an unsuccessful method for managing people's behavior and just encourages them to lie, not to stop the forbidden activity. The image of the husband carrying the child for the wife refers to common the idea that "cuckolds" will often unknowingly raise another man's children.

Act 5, Scene 4 Quotes

❝ Why should our damned tyrants oblige us to live
On the pittance of pleasure which they only give?
We must not rejoice
With wine and with noise.
In vain we must wake in a dull bed alone.
Whilst to our warm rival, the bottle, they're gone.
Then lay aside charms
And take up these arms.
Tis wine only gives 'em their courage and wit,
Because we live sober, to men we submit.

Related Characters: Lady Fidget (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Fidget and the "honorable" ladies (Mrs. Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish) throw a party at Horner's house. They get drunk and Lady Fidget sings a drinking song in which she complains about her husband.

Lady Fidget refers to a husband as a "tyrant." This suggests

that a husband has an unfair amount of control over a woman's life, as women were expected to obey their husbands and had very few rights compared with men. The "pittance of pleasure which they only give" refers to the idea that it was acceptable for men to be promiscuous but unacceptable for women to be so. Therefore, Lady Fidget complains, if women follow this rule, they must rely only on their husbands for sex and can do nothing if their husbands avoid them or spend all their time with other women.

It is also considered improper for women to drink, while it is considered acceptable in men, and many wives are ignored while their husbands spend all their time out drinking and socializing. The song implies that Lady Fidget rebels against this by breaking the rules. The "arms" she takes up is her glass of wine, which she will drink to enjoy herself and to increase her bravery, the way that men drink to increase their bravado. When she is drunk and brave, Lady Fidget implies, she will not worry about breaking the rules and will live a life she enjoys rather than submitting to the rules set for women by men.

❝ Lady Fidget: 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? Our virtue is like the statesman's religion, the Quaker's word, the gamester's oath, and the great man's honor – but to cheat those that trust us.

Squeamish: And that demureness, coyness, and modesty that you see in our faces in the boxes at plays is as much a sign of a kind woman as a vizard-mask in the pit.

Dainty: For, I assure you, women are least masked when they have the velvet vizard on.

Related Characters: Mrs. Dainty Fidget, Mrs. Squeamish, Lady Fidget (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 141-142

Explanation and Analysis

Horner asks the "virtuous" ladies why, if they want to attract lovers, they pretend to be so "honorable" that they put suitors off. The ladies reply that, like Horner, they pretend to be the opposite of what they are and use their reputation to hide the truth so that they can do what they like.

The ladies point out that Horner thinks they are less cunning than men. They tell him that this is not true and that they are just as capable of cleverly deceiving the world as men are. They use their reputations to avoid suspicion; because they behave extremely "virtuously" in public, no one will suspect them of promiscuity in private. This will give them more freedom, as their husbands will trust them and leave them alone and society will not judge them.

Lady Fidget points out that this is an old idea and is already used by politicians and preachers, who must appear moral on the surface, but who are corrupt underneath. Mrs. Squeamish points out that, if Horner wants to find promiscuous ladies, he must look for the opposite; those who pretend to be "demure" and "coy." She refers to a vizard-mask, which was a fashionable item allegedly worn by ladies to protect their "honor" in public, but really used to hide their identities so that their scandalous behavior would not damage their reputation. Women are the "least masked" when their faces are covered, as then they feel free to behave as they really want to, free from society's judgement or rules.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Horner, a wealthy "rake," addresses the audience. He describes the tenacity of playwrights and "poets" who never tire of writing for an audience, no matter how much the audience might criticize their work. In fact, writers anticipate a negative reaction from their audience and, therefore, they "defy" their critics and get the first word in. They are willing to fight to make themselves heard and their work "shan't ask" the audience's "leave to live" but will drown out the audience's complaints and seek to get one over on them.

Audiences in Restoration theatres did not sit quietly, and watch plays, but were instead noisy and often participated indirectly in the action onstage through their complaints and comments. Therefore, Wycherly implies that a playwright must be daring to submit his work to this scrutiny. He takes a combative stance with the audience and suggests that he will go on writing plays whether they like it or not.

Horner, however, acknowledges that he is just an "actor" and that he will always try to give the audience what they want. He will, therefore, act badly if the audience wants to see the writer's work "murdered." Actors, he says, ultimately, will give the audience whatever they want to win their approval.

Wycherly differentiates himself from the actor playing Horner. While the first part of the prologue reflects Wycherly's stance as a playwright, the second shows the actor's point of view. Actors (Wycherly suggests) do not care so much about the quality of the work they perform, but rather about adulation from the audience. Therefore, if the audience hates a play and loudly makes this known, the actors will change their performance and act badly or make fun of the playwright's work to win the audience's applause. This suggests that the playwright's work is not his own to control, but is affected by the actor's interpretation of the work and the audience's reaction to it.

ACT 1

In his house in London, Harry Horner is in discussion with his doctor, who is "a Quack;" an old-fashioned term for a doctor, usually an unreliable or fraudulent one. Horner asks the doctor if he has followed Horner's instructions; indeed, the Quack has told everyone in the town that Horner is "as bad as a eunuch." Horner is anxious to know that the rumor will spread, and the Quack assures him that he has told all the women he knows and has told them to keep it a secret.

The doctor clearly has a reputation as unscrupulous and willing to do whatever his clients pay him for. Therefore, Horner knows he can pay him to spread a false rumor—something a more scrupulous doctor would hopefully refuse to do. A "eunuch" is a term for a man who has been castrated. The Quack suggests that women cannot keep a secret and are more likely to pass something on if it is told in confidence. Gossiping was historically considered a primarily female habit and women were historically considered less reliable than men.

The Quack thinks that, once this rumor has spread, women will want nothing to do with Horner. Horner cheerfully agrees that women will avoid him as much as they avoid their husbands; his only fear is that people will not believe the rumor. He checks that the Quack has got his story straight and told the townspeople that Horner has been accidentally castrated by a French surgeon who was treating him for venereal disease. The doctor assures Horner that he has said just this, and that people are likely to believe it because Horner has just come back from France.

Horner implies that married women dislike and avoid their own husbands. This reflects common ideas about marriage in this period, which suggests that people forced to spend all their time together in marriage inevitably end up hating one another. In this period, British people considered France a seat of aristocratic decadence and sexuality, which Restoration culture emulated. It was assumed, therefore, that French doctors were familiar with venereal disease, although STIs would have been rife in both France and England in this period. Horner likely chooses a French surgeon for his alleged operation because, in London, everyone knows everyone else's business, whereas a French surgeon would not be known, and, therefore, the truth of Horner's story cannot be questioned.

The Quack also thinks that people will believe Horner's story because, since his return from France, Horner has hardly been out in public. The Quack confesses that, although he has been paid to spread rumors for young men before, these rumors tended to be the opposite of the one Horner has spread. Horner says that it is only "vain" men who want to be thought of as better than they are, and that he has other plans.

Horner has hidden himself so that others will assume he is too ashamed to go out. As a well-known London "rake," Horner's reputation as a womanizer is assumed to be very important to him. The doctor points out that young men generally use rumors to make themselves sound more virile and successful with women, rather than less.

The Quack feels that Horner's approach is ridiculous and says that he would not advertise his business by criticizing his own practice. Horner, however, retorts that boasting is worthless and that those who are truly gifted rarely advertise themselves as such and, instead, are modest about their abilities.

Horner believes that actions speak louder than words and that a reputation is meaningless if one cannot back it up with proof. This is contrary to the general trend in Restoration society: that reputation is everything and that the appearance of something is as good as the reality. Horner believes instead that people who boast a lot are often compensating for their lack of ability.

Horner's servant enters and announces visitors; a gentleman and two ladies. Horner is afraid that it is someone who has heard and does not believe the rumors, but he is relieved when Sir Jasper Fidget (who Horner thinks is a "fool") enters with his wife, Lady Fidget, and sister, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and claims that his coach has broken down outside Horner's house.

Horner has clearly had a formidable reputation as a womanizer if people will not believe the rumor of his impotence. It also suggests that news is unreliable in Restoration London. Sir Jasper says that his coach has broken down, but, really, he is interested in scandal and wants an excuse to visit Horner so he can verify the gossip he has heard.

Sir Jasper tries to introduce Horner to his wife and sister, but Horner will have nothing to do with them. Sir Jasper has heard the rumor about Horner's impotence and feels that Horner's behavior proves this to be true.

Horner pretends to hate women and want nothing to do with them because, he implies, they are the cause of his impotence. He claims to have caught a venereal disease from a woman and, when being treated for this, was accidentally castrated. Therefore, he pretends to blame women for his condition.

Sir Jasper thinks this is hilarious, but the ladies are offended by Horner's attitude. Lady Fidget remarks that men like Horner hate virtuous women. Horner tells Lady Fidget that he has nothing to offer her, as he has brought nothing back from France that she might enjoy; not even a "bawdy picture" or a copy of *L'Ecoles des Filles*. Lady Fidget accuses Horner of compromising her "honor" and Horner tells her that he would if he could, which seems to pique Lady Fidget's interest.

Lady Fidget has a reputation for being a notoriously "virtuous" woman. She pretends to shun the company of "rakes" like Horner and pretends to be offended by any mention of sex. As French culture was notoriously lewd, British aristocrats, imitating French nobility, would buy risqué French art which contained nudes. L'Ecoles des Filles was a French pornographic novel, often cited as the first work of pornography. Lady Fidget pretends to be insulted but there is an innuendo implied when she asks how Horner intends to compromise "her honor;" it implies she wants to have sex with him.

Sir Jasper is highly amused and whispers to Lady Fidget and Mrs. Dainty Fidget that Horner cannot "wrong their honor" because he is impotent. The women are disgusted and urge Sir Jasper to take them away. Sir Jasper dismisses their complaints and tells them to stay with Horner while he attends to some business in town.

Sir Jasper tells the ladies that Horner cannot have sex with them. Although the ladies pretend to be "virtuous" and, therefore, to be disgusted by sex, they seem more disgusted by the idea of a man who cannot have sex with them. The use of the innuendo "wrong their honor" to imply sex suggests that it is considered "wrong" or dishonorable for a woman to enjoy sex.

The ladies are distressed about being left with a man, but Sir Jasper reminds them that Horner is "innocent" and cannot interfere with them. He leaves feeling very pleased with himself because he has found a way to entertain his wife and sister and no longer has to worry about what they are doing while he is at work.

Sir Jasper believes that he has got one over on his wife and sister by getting them off his hands, and that he has used Horner to his advantage by persuading him to take the women off his hands. However, he has naively fallen straight into Horner's trap and left the ladies with a man who wants to seduce them and whom they want to be seduced by.

Lady Fidget and Mrs. Dainty Fidget refuse to stay with Horner and hurriedly leave. The Quack laments that Horner has ruined his reputation with women, but Horner seems pleased with this turn of events. Horner explains that, because of the rumor, men like Sir Jasper will freely leave their wives with him and this arrangement will allow him to have countless new mistresses.

As the ladies do not know that Horner's impotence is an untrue rumor, they react with genuine disgust to a man who cannot have sex with them, and, therefore, cannot provide them with anything they want.

The Quack wonders how Horner will be able to seduce women who believe he is impotent, but Horner thinks that his pretended impotence will give him an advantage. He will be able to tell which women want to have sex with him because they will be horrified when they hear of his impotence. He will also have the advantage of being able to spend time with married women, in front of their husbands, without arousing suspicion.

Horner believes that women who show an aversion to impotent men prove that they love sex. As friendship between the genders was not encouraged in this period, so the women in the play have no other use for a man and are only interested in men they can have sex with.

The Quack is baffled by Horner's confidence, but he wishes him luck and leaves to attend to his patients. After he leaves, Horner's friends Harcourt and Dorilant arrive. They want to find out if Horner is ready to face public life again; he was mocked at the theatre the previous night because of his "impotence." They are surprised that he is taking it so well, as Horner seems unaffected by this public ridicule. Horner wants to know what the fashionable women have said about him and Harcourt tells him that the women do not feel any sympathy for him because women never pity men, even if the man has lost everything for the sake of a woman.

This shows what a small world Restoration London is. News travels fast and everyone has already heard of Horner's impotence. The theatre is not just a place of entertainment but also an important social meeting place where news is spread and people go to be seen with other fashionable people. Horner is not at all interested in his reputation. He is only interested in bedding women and does not mind if, publicly, women are disgusted by him as long as privately he can seduce them. Harcourt's comment about "sympathy" shows the "battle of sexes" mentally that is bred between men and women in Restoration society.

Dorilant commiserates with Horner and tells him that, although he can no longer seduce women, he will be able to spend time with them in the capacity of a servant or a "half-man." Horner dismisses his concern and says that the loss of female company means that he can spend more time with his male friends, whose company he enjoys more than women's.

The use of the term "half-man" to denote impotence suggests that Restoration society valued virility and sexual prowess above all else in men. There was a celebration of macho culture in this period and men aspired to be rakish and promiscuous. It was common to look down on things considered feminine, which Horner demonstrates when he claims to despise female company. In this type of mindset, men only pursue women for sex and as conquests, rather than as companions.

Horner says that it is impossible to have both women and money and the three men launch into a witty tirade about the disadvantages of loving women. Horner announces that he will enjoy his celibate life and, while they are bantering, Horner's servant enters to tell them that Sparkish is downstairs.

A common misogynistic stereotype about women was that they were shallow and only interested in money and, therefore, would take advantage of men for their wealth. In the play this is undercut, however, as Sparkish tries to marry Alithea for her money.

Horner, Harcourt and Dorilant are dismayed. They dislike Sparkish and feel that he is an arrogant bore who will not take the hint that they don't like him. Horner exclaims that he despises Sparkish because Sparkish pretends to be something he is not. Harcourt adds that people are usually the opposite of what they pretend to be.

It is ironic and hypocritical that Horner dislikes Sparkish because Sparkish pretends to be something he is not (Horner is pretending to be impotent, after all). Harcourt's comment implies that almost everyone in Restoration society is a hypocrite because reputation is so important; people wish to be seen as better than they are.

Sparkish bursts in and begins to tease Horner about his impotence. Horner, Harcourt and Dorilant try to make it clear that they do not find Sparkish funny and they try to dissuade him from hanging around. Sparkish insists that he wishes to dine with them, but Horner, Harcourt and Dorilant make excuses until he loses patience and leaves so that he will not be late for the "new play."

Sparkish is a "false-wit;" a stock character on the Restoration stage. A "false-wit" wrongly believes he is funny and entertaining, but is actually pompous and stupid. He is usually outwitted by the "true-wits," like Horner, who are genuinely intelligent and calculating. Sparkish is concerned with being a fashionable man and feels he must make an appearance at the theatre, as this is the height of Restoration social life.

As Sparkish storms off, Mr. Pinchwife enters. Horner says that he can tell that Pinchwife has recently been married because of his glum expression and bad dress. Pinchwife is furious that Horner knows he is married but conceals his rage. Pinchwife says that he is dressed badly because he has been living in the country and has only come to town to arrange for Sparkish to marry his sister. Horner teases Pinchwife and tells him that, once a man is married, it is only a matter of time until he gets a reputation as a "cuckold."

Marriage is considered bad for men, as it robs them of their freedom. They are believed to be nagged and harangued by their wives. Like marriage, life in the country, compared to the hedonistic and fashionable life in the city, is believed to be dowdy and tiresome. Marriage is believed to be so lethal to romance and sexual attraction between a couple that it is seen as inevitable that they will cheat on each other.

This jibe infuriates Pinchwife, but he tries to brush it off and tells Horner that he has not married a "London wife." Horner tells him that it is just as easy to be cheated in the country as it is in the town, and he asks Pinchwife about his new bride. Pinchwife tells Horner, Harcourt and Dorilant that she is plain, stupid and awkward and that, because of this, there is no point bringing her to town or taking her out in society. Although Horner objects, Pinchwife says that this is how he likes his women and implies that he does not intend to educate her.

Pinchwife is under the impression that a "country wife" is more likely to be faithful to him because, he thinks, people from the country are naïve and simple. He believes that a country girl will lack the intelligence needed to have an affair. However, Pinchwife is foolish to assume this and Horner, who is more intelligent than Pinchwife and cannier about human nature, knows that people are the same everywhere. Pinchwife tells the men his wife is stupid and plain so that they will not want to seduce her.

Horner insists that Pinchwife should bring his wife to town so that she may learn "wit" and conversation. Pinchwife grows angry and says indignantly that his wife will not make him a "cuckold," even if Horner has his way. Hearing this, Harcourt and Dorilant realize that Pinchwife has not heard the rumors of Horner's impotence. Horner tells Pinchwife that he saw him at the theatre the previous night with a pretty young woman and Pinchwife is horrified because Horner has seen his wife. He swears that he will never take her to the theatre again.

Pinchwife assumes that educating a woman will make her dishonest. He believes that withholding knowledge is the way to control people and make them behave, since, without knowledge, they will remain innocent and will not have the experience to choose for themselves whether to be good or bad. This is a parody of Puritanism, which was popular in Britain before the Restoration and which encouraged censorship of vice in society.

Horner, Harcourt and Dorilant pester Pinchwife to tell them who this woman was, although they can tell from Pinchwife's reaction that the pretty young woman at the theatre was his wife. Horner invites Pinchwife to dine with them but Pinchwife storms out. Harcourt jokes that he is going home to beat his wife and Horner remarks that it is common for men like Pinchwife, who have always been promiscuous, to become very jealous in old age.

Although Pinchwife tries to hide his wife's identity, his furious reaction gives him away. He would not be angry if they had seen him with another woman, because he does not care if people believe he cheats on his wife; only if they believe she cheats on him. This shows that Pinchwife does not really care about his wife—he cares only about his reputation. He is also a hypocrite, as he expects total purity from his wife but not from himself.

ACT 2

In Pinchwife's house, Margery Pinchwife complains to Alithea, Pinchwife's sister, that Pinchwife never lets her go out into town or wear pretty clothes. Alithea tells her that Pinchwife is jealous but reminds her that he took her to the theatre the night before. Margery complains that he would not let her sit with "the gentry" because only "naughty women" sat there. She confesses that she found the actors very attractive and Alithea is amused. She tells Margery that she should not admire the actors, but Margery is confused and wonders how she can control this.

Margery is unhappy with the way Pinchwife controls her and refuses to let her experience town life. Pinchwife is a parody of a middle-class Puritan from the period, who believes that the "gentry" are all promiscuous hedonists. The Restoration was a period of rebellion against these puritanical impulses, as the Puritans, under Oliver Cromwell, had ruled Britain for eighteen years prior to Charles II's ascension. Margery does not understand the etiquette of the city and does not realize that, even though she is naturally attracted to other men, she must pretend that she is not for the sake of appearances and because she is married.

Pinchwife returns and snaps at Margery as soon as he comes in. Margery begins to cry and Alithea reprimands him. Pinchwife shouts at Alithea that it is her fault Margery wishes to go to town because Alithea sets a bad example by swanning around the town herself. Alithea retorts that, although she goes into town often, she is an honest woman and Margery will not learn any bad habits from her. Pinchwife says that he heard Alithea talking to Margery about actors, but Margery explains that Alithea told her off for "liking the playermen."

Pinchwife misogynistically blames his sister for leading Margery astray. This reflects puritanical, Christian beliefs that women were more corrupt than men and that women needed men's guidance and protection to be kept pure. However, Alithea is adamant that, although she mingles in the city, she is not corrupted because she does not partake in corrupt activities. This suggests that Pinchwife's theory, that people will be corrupted by their proximity to sin, is false.

Pacified slightly, Pinchwife explains to Margery that she must not be like the corrupt town women who cheat on their husbands. He describes the hedonistic pleasures of the town to Margery, who listens intently and seems to like the thought of going into London. Pinchwife, disgruntled, reminds her that she cannot be loyal to him and also love the town, but Margery feels that it is not her fault; when he "forbids" her from going she wants to go even more. Alithea remarks that this is always the way.

By describing the pleasures of the town, which he has forbidden Margery from enjoying, he makes them even more appealing to her. If he had not told her about them, she is unlikely to have sought them out herself. This suggests that censoring things makes them more attractive. Alithea, who is wiser than Pinchwife, realizes this and predicts Margery's reaction. Pinchwife, however, believes that if Margery goes into town, her innocence will be corrupted. He does not have any faith that she can observe town behavior without practicing it herself.

Margery begs Pinchwife to take her into town. Pinchwife tries to dissuade her again and tells her that, if she goes to town, men might see her and fall in love with her. This only seems to excite Margery, so he tells her that a young man has already seen her when she was at the theatre and has fallen in love with her. Pinchwife is dismayed to find that Margery is delighted by this news. She begs to know who the young man is.

Again, Pinchwife increases Margery's curiosity when he suggests that she has an admirer. This young man is Horner, as Pinchwife assumed from Horner's teasing that he is in love with Margery.

Pinchwife warns Margery that this young man would destroy her, but Margery cannot understand why someone who loves her would hurt her. As they are arguing, Pinchwife hears voices approach. He drags Margery to her chamber and locks her in as Harcourt and Sparkish arrive.

Margery does not understand the social rules of the city. She does not realize that men view women as conquests and will ruin their reputations by bragging after they have seduced them. Neither does she realize that women are expected to be "virtuous" and dislike sex. Pinchwife is very abusive of Margery and keeps her locked up like a prisoner.

Sparkish, who is engaged to Alithea, shows her off to Harcourt and invites him to admire her beauty. Pinchwife watches incredulously as Harcourt, who is struck by Alithea's beauty, compliments and begins to court her. Sparkish, who does not notice that he is mortifying Alithea, forces her and Harcourt into a corner together so that Harcourt may learn how witty she is. While Sparkish is away, Harcourt pleads with Alithea not to marry Sparkish but to marry him instead.

Sparkish does not care about Alithea's feelings and shows her off to make himself look good. He views her as an extension of his own reputation, rather than a wife or companion. Pinchwife can see what Harcourt's is doing but Sparkish is totally blind to it. Sparkish is the equivalent of Pinchwife as, while Pinchwife drives Margery to cheat by forcing her away from other men, Sparkish drives Alithea to cheat by forcing her together with Harcourt to boost his own ego.

Alithea insists that it is "too late"; arrangements have already been made for her marriage to Sparkish. She does not wish to betray him and, besides, she is impressed by Sparkish's lack of jealousy because she believes it proves that he thinks she is very virtuous. Harcourt tries to persuade her that Sparkish is only marrying her for her money and that he is a conceited fool.

Sparkish is not jealous because he doesn't care about Alithea, not because he believes she is incapable of infidelity. He is so conceited that he assumes she must feel lucky to have him and, therefore, could not fall for another man. Although jealousy is portrayed as a destructive emotion, it is also portrayed as essential, in small amounts, to love, since it proves a person's affection.

Offended, Alithea tells Sparkish that Harcourt has been flirting with her, but Sparkish dismisses her concerns. She then tells him that Harcourt called him an "idiot" and, at this, Sparkish flies into a rage and threatens to kill Harcourt for insulting his "honor." He challenges Harcourt to a duel, which he thinks is a good opportunity to show off his valor in front of Alithea, but Alithea intervenes and tells Sparkish that Harcourt only said these things to her so that he could test her loyalty to Sparkish.

Sparkish does not listen to Alithea when she tells him that Harcourt has upset her. He only reacts when he thinks Harcourt has insulted his own reputation, which shows that he only cares about himself and how things make him look. He tries to impress Alithea by threatening to kill Harcourt and this makes Alithea realize that she has feelings for Harcourt and does not want him hurt.

Sparkish accepts Alithea's story and the three of them set off to the theatre. Pinchwife is left alone, amazed at what he has just witnessed. He is surprised when Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish, a friend of theirs, arrive to take Margery to the theatre. He will not let them in to see her and he eventually storms off, leaving the three ladies alone.

Pinchwife will not associate with "honorable" ladies because, despite their noble reputations, he believes they are promiscuous and will corrupt Margery.

Left alone, the women lament their circumstances. They complain that "men of quality" never come and visit them anymore and, instead, spend all their time running after "common women." When "men of quality" do come to see them, they cannot keep a secret and tell everyone about the affair, which is an affront to the ladies' "honor." Lady Fidget suggests that, with a "man of quality," an affair may be less shameful, but Mrs. Dainty Fidget thinks that this makes it less fun.

The women complain that noble men do not visit them; instead they spend their time with prostitutes or women without titles. It is ironic that the ladies look down on common women for being "dishonorable" as their own "honor" is only a façade. The "men of quality" are also only "men of quality" in title and reputation, and not in reality, as they, too, are promiscuous and behave dishonestly. The ladies prefer to sleep with "rakes," or men with reputations as womanizers, because this is the most damaging to their reputations if they get caught, the most socially taboo and, therefore, the most exciting.

While the ladies are talking, Sir Jasper, Horner, and Dorilant approach. Sir Jasper tells them that he has an engagement that evening and, therefore, Horner and Dorilant will take the ladies to the theatre. The ladies are horrified and refuse to be seen in public with a pair of known "rakes." Dorilant is indignant and leaves when he hears this. To appease her, Sir Jasper tells Lady Fidget that Horner is a bad player at cards and that she may cheat him out of some money if she agrees to go.

The ladies maintain their façade of "honor" and pretend that they do not want to be seen with known womanizers like Horner and Dorilant. At the same time, Dorilant objects to being seen with "virtuous" women, as this may damage his reputation as a ladies man. Sir Jasper correctly predicts that his wife will only spend time with an impotent man if she can get something from him; either money or sex. Gambling and card games were pursuits which were outlawed by the Puritans under Cromwell's rule, but which returned during the court of Charles II.

Sir Jasper teases Horner and invites him to take Lady Fidget aside to persuade her himself. Horner agrees to do so and, aside, remarks that he feels confident he can trust Lady Fidget with his secret.

Horner knows that Lady Fidget loves sex, because she is genuinely disgusted by and wants nothing to do with a man who is impotent.

When Lady Fidget hears the truth about Horner's impotence she is enraptured and feels that Horner is a "true man of honor" as, she thinks, he has ruined his own reputation for her sake. Her only qualm is that word might get out that his impotence is fabricated, but Horner assures her that no one would believe him even if he tried to undo the rumors now.

Lady Fidget is flattered that Horner has put her reputation before his own. If people believe he is impotent, then she can visit him freely without compromising her "honor." Of course, Horner also gets something out of this, as he can make her his mistress. Since Restoration society loves scandal, they will choose to believe the most shocking story (the story of Horner's impotence) over the truth.

Utterly mollified, Lady Fidget announces to Mrs. Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish that Horner is an excellent companion for them all and Sir Jasper hurries off to attend to business, confident that he has provided his "honorable" wife and sister with a "innocent playfellow."

It is ironic that Sir Jasper thinks the ladies will be "innocently" entertained, when, really, they will be seduced by Horner.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Back at Pinchwife's house, Margery is depressed because she is not allowed into town. She is envious of Alithea, who goes about freely, and Pinchwife rebukes his sister for setting a bad example. Alithea says that it is Pinchwife himself who has put these ideas into Margery's head, but Pinchwife insists that his wife was innocent until she met Alithea. He is glad that, the next day, he will be rid of Alithea, who will be married to Sparkish in the morning. He believes that he and Margery should return to the country.

Pinchwife wrongly believes that forbidding people from encountering sin will prevent them from sinning. Alithea wisely knows that forbidding people from partaking in any activity simply makes them more curious to experience it. Pinchwife, in this sense, is a parody of a typical puritanical mindset. Pinchwife views his sister as his possession to be given to Sparkish. This reflects a misogynistic outlook.

Margery grows irritated when Pinchwife mentions their country home and tells him that she has been ill since he told her about the man at the theatre who was in love with her. Pinchwife argues that her illness will make him ill with jealousy, but Margery insists that she does not understand what he means. She begs him to take her to the theatre so that she can see the man who loves her. When Pinchwife tells her that the play is finished for the evening, she says that she wants to see some of the sights of the town.

Margery is "sick" with love; this was a trope commonly used in drama and reflects the tradition of "courtly romance" in which love produces symptoms like a disease. Margery is inexperienced in the ways of city life and does not realize that she is supposed to be faithful to Pinchwife. Even though they are married, she does not love him and does not realize that she is expected to pretend she does for the sake of his reputation.

Pinchwife is reluctant but Margery insists. Pinchwife decides that he will take her, but only if she puts on a disguise so that the young men of the town will not see her. Alithea suggests that she should wear a mask but Pinchwife believes that a mask on a woman makes a man more eager to see her face and he is worried that Horner will recognize her. Instead, he decides to dress Margery in her brother's clothes and he, Alithea, Margery, and the maid, Lucy, head into town.

Masks were associated with the theatre and with decadent social events, such as masked balls—these kinds of entertainment were looked down upon and censored by the Puritans as activities which encouraged promiscuity. Ironically, although Pinchwife believes he is making Margery less attractive, it was a common Restoration dramatic technique to dress actresses up as men to show off their figures in tight men's outfits to titillate the audience.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

In the New Exchange, in the city center, Horner, Harcourt, and Dorilant are discussing their plans for the evening. Harcourt and Dorilant are confused that Horner will go to dinner with some ladies rather than with his friends. After all, they complain, he hates women and can have no use for them now that he is impotent. Horner, however, tells them that, because he hates women, he wishes to spend time with them, to make fun of them and to get them drunk so that he may take revenge on them by exposing them as drunkards.

Horner pretends to be the opposite of what he is to hide his true intentions; he pretends to hate women when, really, he loves them. This demonstrates Horner's hypocrisy and shows that Restoration society is easily taken in by reputation and appearance. Drunkenness was considered another vice, like promiscuity, which was publicly frowned upon but often privately practiced by "honorable" people.

Harcourt begins to tell them that he is in love with Alithea and to ask their advice about how to woo her. As they are talking, Sparkish approaches. Horner tells Harcourt that Sparkish will help Harcourt win Alithea's love because he is such a fool. When Sparkish meets them, he begins to tease Harcourt about the fact that he flirted with Alithea. He then rounds on Horner and asks if he heard the "wits" making fun of him in the theatre that afternoon.

Horner knows that Sparkish is so arrogant that he does not believe Alithea could cheat on him. Therefore, he will not suspect Harcourt of being able to woo her and will not notice if Harcourt does so right in front of him. Sparkish is very proud of his reputation as a "wit," but he is not considered a "true wit" by clever "rakes" like Horner. Therefore, he would be recognized as a fool by Restoration audiences.

Horner admits that he did but finds it strange that Sparkish and his friends do not go to the theatre to laugh at the play. Sparkish announces that he and his friends are much funnier than most of the plays and that they hate the poets who write them.

This shows Sparkish's arrogance and disdain for the theatre and represents the attitude of many Restoration theatre goers. Restoration audiences would participate in the action on stage by shouting from the pit and Wycherly sees this as disrespectful and thinks it shows that the audience, like Sparkish, are pompous and pretentious and look down on the playwright's work.

Horner asks why Sparkish hates poets and Sparkish explains that he wrote some songs for a woman he was courting and that a poet made fun of them in one of his plays. Sparkish was deeply offended by this and believes that poets deliberately try to make brave, "honorable" men of rank look foolish onstage by giving them comic parts.

Wycherly explains the hatred leveled at playwrights by arrogant fools like Sparkish. They dislike it when playwrights portray them in unflattering ways onstage. Men like Sparkish expect to be respected because of their rank and position in society.

Harcourt says that the poets are just following the fashion and asks why Sparkish is not embarrassed by what he says loudly in the audience if he is too embarrassed to hear his words spoken onstage. Sparkish says that he would prefer to have his portrait painted than his likeness portrayed onstage because painters go out of their way to make a portrait flattering.

Sparkish wants all the adulation of a playwright with none of the risk. He will make jokes and witticisms when he is anonymous, among the crowd in the theatre, but is not brave enough to write his own plays for public scrutiny. He only wants to be seen in a flattering light and dislikes playwrights because they tell the truth and do not flatter. Wycherly suggests that it is a playwright's job to portray the world as it is.

Pinchwife, Margery, Alithea, and Lucy pass them in the street. Sparkish tries to hide from Alithea because he wants to spend the evening at court rather than with her. Pinchwife tries to ignore Horner but Horner recognizes them and asks Sparkish who the young man with them is. Sparkish says that it is Margery's brother and Horner and Dorilant follow them at a distance.

Sparkish is more concerned about his reputation at court, and impressing the King, than about spending time with Alithea. He does not really love her and is already casting her aside in the manner of a careless husband like Sir Jasper.

Harcourt convinces Sparkish that Alithea has noticed him and that she will be insulted if he does not acknowledge her. Harcourt also says that he wants to make up with her because he offended her with his behavior earlier. Sparkish agrees and Harcourt realizes that being friendly with Sparkish will help him spend time with Alithea. Sparkish walks off looking for Alithea and Harcourt prowls after him.

Harcourt follows Horner's advice and uses his friendship with Sparkish to get close to Alithea. Harcourt is very mercenary and predatory in his approach—but, it is implied, Sparkish brings this on himself because he is such a fool.

Pinchwife is about to take Margery home and shouts back to Alithea, whom they have left behind, that they will not wait for her. Margery says that she doesn't want to leave, so Pinchwife begrudgingly leads her down another street. Margery is amazed by the number of painted **signs** on the shopfronts. Pinchwife notices that all these signs depict rams, or bulls, or other animals with horns, and Pinchwife says that these images are like the husbands they see swarming the streets of the Exchange.

Pinchwife says that the signs are like the husbands because all city husbands are "cuckolds." "Cuckold" is an old-fashioned term for a husband whose wife cheats on him and, in drama, literature, and folklore, cuckolds were often depicted as men with horns. In this sense, the husbands are like the horned animals painted on the shop signs.

They walk out of sight and Sparkish, Harcourt, Alithea, and Lucy reappear. Sparkish is imploring Alithea to forgive Harcourt, even though Alithea insists that she hates Harcourt because he is disloyal to Sparkish. Sparkish does not understand why Alithea wants him to hate Harcourt and thinks she is being very unreasonable. Harcourt continues to flirt with Alithea and poke fun at Sparkish, although Sparkish does not realize this, and Alithea grows more and more infuriated by Sparkish's obtuseness.

Sparkish does not listen to Alithea or believe her when she says that Harcourt is flirting with her. He automatically takes Harcourt's side and continues to push them together despite Alithea's protests.

Alithea cannot understand why Sparkish is not jealous when Harcourt pursues her in front of him and eventually points out to Sparkish that Harcourt is making fun of him. Sparkish, however, thinks that Alithea is overreacting and misinterpreting Harcourt's friendliness for flirtation. He asks Harcourt how he feels about Alithea and Harcourt replies that he loves her "with all his soul." This satisfies Sparkish that Harcourt does not wish to marry Alithea as, he says, marriage is not for couples who really love each other.

Sparkish misogynistically assumes that Alithea is exaggerating Harcourt's advances because she is vain and convinced of her own beauty. Harcourt answers honestly because he really loves Alithea. Sparkish, however, cannot recognize real love because he is so self-involved and only thinks about what he can get from marriage; in this case, Alithea's money. Marriage was widely assumed to be an obstacle to real love rather than a vehicle for it and adulterous love was often considered more genuine than marital love.

This causes Alithea to question Sparkish's motives in marrying her and Sparkish realizes he has made a mistake. He makes Alithea stay to listen to the rest of Harcourt's proclamation and Harcourt makes a long speech about how *he* loves her best. Alithea is incredulous at Sparkish's naivety and tries to point out that, by "he," Harcourt means himself but Sparkish will not listen and encourages Alithea to kiss Harcourt.

Alithea does believe that married couples can love each other and she believes that Sparkish does love her. Much of this interaction between Harcourt and Sparkish would be played for laughs, with Harcourt saying one thing and gesturing another behind Sparkish's back.

Pinchwife returns with Margery at this moment and is horrified by what he sees. He insults Sparkish but Sparkish brushes it off and informs Pinchwife that he loves to be an object of jealousy and takes it as a compliment when other men admire his wife. Oblivious still, he leaves Harcourt and Alithea together. Pinchwife, seeing this, drives them apart and tries to take his sister home, but not before Harcourt has promised to call on her the next morning.

Pinchwife, who sees infidelity in everything, immediately understands Harcourt's real intentions. He interprets them as an insult to himself because Alithea is his sister and he sees her "honor" and reputation as an extension of his own. He does not want her to be tarnished by an affair with Harcourt, who is a "rake."

As Pinchwife is trying to lead his sister away, Horner and Dorilant join them. Pinchwife tries to get away but Horner accosts him and implores him to leave his "little brother" with them while Pinchwife goes about his business. Pinchwife tries to insist that Margery is waiting for them at home, but Horner takes hold of Margery, who is dressed as a young man, and tells her that she looks exactly like the woman he fell in love with at the theatre. Margery thinks Horner is very handsome and Pinchwife notices the chemistry between the pair.

Margery is dressed in her "little brother's" clothes. It is implied that Margery's disguise, like Pinchwife's jealousy which has driven him to dress her like this, is ridiculous and that Horner sees right through it.

Pinchwife tries to drag Margery away, but Horner announces that they shall go with Pinchwife and have dinner at his house. Flustered, Pinchwife then tells Horner that Margery is asleep in bed and must not be disturbed, so Horner asks "her brother" to send her his love and kisses Margery several times in front of Pinchwife. He then passes her to Harcourt and Dorilant to be kissed by them too.

Horner plays along with and pretends he is taken in by Margery's disguise to torment Pinchwife by kissing his wife in front of his face.

Pinchwife is furious but cannot reveal Margery's identity. When Horner, Harcourt, and Dorilant finally saunter away, he rushes off to find his carriage to take Margery home. While he is gone, they return and Horner leads Margery away down a side street while Harcourt holds Alithea fast, to stop her protesting, and Dorilant takes hold of Lucy.

Pinchwife has got himself into this ridiculous situation, because of his irrational jealousy, and he has made it so that he cannot tell Horner that this is Margery, and therefore prevent Horner's advances.

Pinchwife returns and is furious when Lucy tells him that Horner took Margery away to "give him something." Pinchwife rushes down the nearby streets looking for them. Meanwhile, Harcourt tries to court Alithea again while she struggles to escape his grasp. Lucy tries to assure Pinchwife that, whatever Horner is doing with Margery, it "will not take long," and Pinchwife berates Alithea and blames her for the situation.

Lucy makes several sexual innuendos in this scene. Harcourt, although he truly loves Alithea, treats her like a conquest and is extremely rough and insistent with her. This shows misogynistic attitudes in the Restoration period: they believed that women should be pursued aggressively and that men should not take no for an answer. Pinchwife, equally misogynistically, blames Alithea for the men's behavior.

Margery rushes back out to meet them and shows them that her hat is full of fruit, which Horner has given her. Horner follows her and Pinchwife struggles to control his temper while Margery shows off her new things. Sir Jasper Fidget arrives to summon Horner because Lady Fidget and her companions are waiting for him to join them for dinner. He begins to lead Horner away and, when Dorilant tries to invite himself along, Sir Jasper rejects him because, he says, there will be "civil" ladies in attendance, and they will not want to keep company with the likes of him.

Margery takes this gift from Horner innocently and does not interpret the sexual connotations behind it; she shows it off to Pinchwife without realizing how jealous it makes him. Sir Jasper is blind to his wife's pretense at "honor."

Horner leaves with Sir Jasper while Pinchwife still tries to lead Margery away. Harcourt and Dorilant take their leave of Lucy and Alithea and wander off. Margery, gathering up the gifts Horner gave her, offers half the fruit to Pinchwife. Pinchwife knocks the present out of her hands and complains that, while Horner has provided the "treat," Pinchwife is the one paying for it.

Pinchwife is so blinded by jealousy that he cannot see Margery's innocence. She clearly takes Horner's gifts in good faith and is simply pleased to have the presents. Pinchwife's angry response rejects Margery's simple kindness and makes her more likely to dislike him and, ultimately, to be unfaithful.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

The next morning, in Pinchwife's house, Lucy dresses Alithea for her wedding to Sparkish. Although Lucy admits that Alithea looks pretty, she feels that she has wasted her effort and that she may as well have dressed "a corpse for a second hand grave" as a bride for her wedding day. Lucy is angry with Alithea because she has sent Harcourt away, but Alithea insists that she has long been promised to Sparkish and is not willing to go back on her word of "honor" and break her engagement. Lucy says that it is wrong for Alithea to marry a man she does not love. Although Alithea thinks she may learn to love Sparkish with time, Lucy thinks this is unlikely.

Lucy feels that Alithea's beauty is wasted on Sparkish because he does not see it and only thinks about himself. She views Alithea's wedding as a type of "death" because Alithea will be mistreated and will no longer be seen by men who might love her. Alithea, unlike the other women in the play, is genuinely "honorable" and would be unlikely to cheat on Sparkish even if she disliked him.

Lucy laments that people put so much stock in "honor" as, she feels, it does them more harm than good. Alithea admits that she likes Harcourt more than Sparkish but feels obliged to Sparkish because he has such faith in her "virtue." Alithea is afraid of marrying a jealous husband as she dreads the way that jealous husbands treat their wives. Her greatest fear is that a jealous husband may send her to live in the country. Lucy remarks that the thought of a life in the country terrifies the town women as much as the thought of being confined in a monastery.

Lucy suggests that "honor" gets you nowhere in Restoration society. Alithea believes that Sparkish is not jealous because he believes she is incapable of being dishonest. However, he is not jealous because he does not notice her or care about what she does. Alithea is wary of a jealous husband because she has seen her brother's example. However, a small amount of jealousy is considered necessary to prove love. In European Catholic countries, promiscuous women could be put in a monastery as punishment. The country is believed to be sexless, like a monastery, because one is away from the hedonistic social life of the town.

Sparkish arrives accompanied by Harcourt, who is dressed up as a parson. Alithea is incredulous and, when she asks why Harcourt is dressed this way, Sparkish informs her that this is not Harcourt, but Harcourt's brother Ned, who is a chaplain. Alithea is amazed at how gullible Sparkish is and tries desperately to convince him that this is Harcourt in disguise. Sparkish thinks that she is the one who is foolish and unreasonable.

Sparkish is easily fooled and has been taken in by Harcourt's trick. He believes he is too intelligent to be fooled and, therefore, is easy to fool. Alithea, who is clear sighted, immediately sees through Harcourt's ruse. Ironically, Sparkish believes she is the fool when she tries to point it out.

Harcourt insists that he *is* a chaplain and wishes to marry Alithea that morning, but Alithea easily sees through him and wishes to postpone the wedding. Lucy takes Harcourt's side and tries to persuade Alithea to let the "chaplain" marry her. Finally, Sparkish, who will not listen to Alithea's objections, marches her off to be married, followed by Harcourt (the "chaplain"), and Lucy.

Harcourt implies that he, himself, wants to marry Alithea. This is a pun on the term marry, which means both to be married to and to perform the ceremony of a marriage.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Pinchwife and Margery are in bed and Pinchwife repeatedly asks Margery what happened between her and Horner when he took her away the previous evening. Although Margery thinks Pinchwife is only asking because he is entertained by the story, Pinchwife is really trying to discover if Margery is telling the truth or not; he wants to see if her story changes when she tells it several times. Margery impatiently tells Pinchwife that Horner took her up to his house and gave her a "**China** orange." She then mentions that he kissed her several times (kisses to convey to her sister, since she was dressed as her brother) and even put his tongue in her mouth.

Margery is inexperienced and does not understand jealousy; she assumes that Pinchwife asks her to repeat her story because he finds it entertaining. Pinchwife, however, is taking advantage of Margery's innocence to try and trip her up and discover some inconsistency in her story which will prove she is lying. Unknown to Pinchwife and Margery, "china" is a codeword of Horner's and signifies sex and seduction.

Pinchwife demands to know how Margery reacted when Horner did this and she replies that she "stood very still" and even enjoyed it a little. Pinchwife flies into a rage at this, even though Margery says that she would only kiss Horner again if Pinchwife compelled her to. Pinchwife responds that "no woman can be forced" and launches into a bitter tirade against women, who he feels are deceitful and stupid and should really be "slaves" to men.

Margery is too innocent to know that she should not admit this to Pinchwife. Ironically, Pinchwife will metaphorically force her to kiss Horner again before the end of the play when she is disguised as Alithea. Pinchwife holds the extremely misogynistic opinion that women cannot be "forced" to have sex, or raped, because he believes that they secretly enjoy it. He believes that women are inferior to men and that men must control women to protect them from their own corrupt natures.

Pinchwife roars at Margery to go and fetch a pen and paper. He tells her that she is going to write a letter to Horner and that he is going to dictate what it says. Margery indignantly refuses and Pinchwife thinks that she does this because of her love for Horner. However, he soon learns that Margery is confused because she does not know how to write letters and thinks that letters can only be sent from the country to the town and that people who are both in the town never write letters to each other. When Pinchwife clears this up for her, she agrees to write what he narrates.

Again, Pinchwife misinterprets Margery's naivety about city etiquette for intentional deceit.

Pinchwife tells Margery to open the letter with the word "Sir" and, when Margery asks if it should not be "Dear Sir," Pinchwife threatens to carve the word "whore" on her face with his knife. Pinchwife instructs Margery to write to Horner that his kisses repulsed her and that she wants nothing more to do with him. Margery again pleads to leave out some of the harsh language and Pinchwife threatens her again until she finishes the letter.

Margery asks this question naively but Pinchwife is mad with jealousy and takes it as an insult. His response is violent and genuinely disturbing. Although this is a comedy, Pinchwife's treatment of Margery is treated seriously and it is implied that she is in real physical danger because of his possessiveness.

When she is finished, Pinchwife goes to get a seal and wax to secure the letter and, while he is gone, Margery ponders her situation. She is pleased that she now knows Horner's name, which she did not know before writing the letter, but she is distressed because, while she does not want to send the letter, she is afraid that her husband will kill her if she refuses. She decides to write a second letter and swap it with the first when her husband returns with the seal. She sets about penning a love letter to Horner which warns him about Pinchwife's jealousy.

By trying to keep Margery under his control, Pinchwife has inadvertently liberated her. She now knows how to write letters in the proper town style, and she knows Horner's name, because Pinchwife has revealed it. This is a parody of Puritanism, which, while trying to keep people away from certain activities, actually encouraged them to take them up. Margery demonstrates that, although she is unfamiliar with the ways of the town, she is a quick learner and not stupid, as Pinchwife believes.

Pinchwife returns with the seal and, first, checks the letter which Margery has written. She gives him the letter which he has composed and, satisfied, he sets about sealing it. Margery asks if she might seal the letter, kicks up a fuss when he refuses, and, when he finally allows her to, she swaps the letters and seals her own rather than the first. Pinchwife triumphantly tells her that the letter is going straight to Horner and is gratified when Margery enthusiastically agrees that this should be so.

Margery easily outwits Pinchwife. This shows how fast she is learning to deceive when she is driven to it by Pinchwife's unreasonable demands.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

In Horner's house, the Quack has returned to find out how Horner's trick has worked out for him. He is shocked at how much progress Horner has made. Horner tells him that he has already spent time with several "civil persons" and that, while all the husbands and chaperons in the city believe that he is impotent, their "wives, sisters, and daughters" know the truth. The doctor is shocked and impressed by what he hears and presses Horner for information about how "honorable" ladies behave in private. While they are talking, Lady Fidget arrives, and Horner tells the Quack to hide behind a screen so that he can witness how successful Horner's ploy has been.

Horner uses the word "civil" ironically since, although the "civil" ladies pretend to be "honorable," they are "noble" in title only and are corrupt and promiscuous underneath. Hiding a character behind a screen is a common device in theatrical farce, in which characters are often concealed during scenes to discover important pieces of information.

Horner begins to seduce Lady Fidget, but she stops him and seeks more assurance that her "honor" will be protected and her secret kept safe with him. Horner insists that all her talk of "honor" is spoiling the mood, but Lady Fidget insists that, even if Horner only tells other women that he is not impotent, her "honor" could be put in jeopardy, as other women might seek to ruin her. Horner says that, if they did, he would ruin their reputations first by sleeping with them and telling everyone, but Lady Fidget thinks that it is best if she is the only person who knows that Horner is not really impotent.

Lady Fidget is extremely worried about her reputation but does not wish to conform to Restoration standards of morality and virtue. "Honor" is considered the opposite of sexual and, therefore, those who pretend to be the most "honorable" are the most sexual. Lady Fidget hints at the scandal, intrigue, and backstabbing that goes on in high Restoration society. Lady Fidget wants to keep Horner to herself and is possessive of him.

Lady Fidget throws herself into Horner's arms just as her husband, Sir Jasper Fidget, walks in. She quickly pretends she is tickling Horner and he pretends to be infuriated with her and begs Sir Jasper to keep his wife under control. Sir Jasper thinks this is hilarious and Lady Fidget explains that she is angry with Horner because he would not come shopping with her to get some new **china**. She adds that Horner owns some "very fine china" himself and that she means to take some of it for herself.

Sir Jasper is a stereotypical stage cuckold and stock character in Restoration theatre. He is totally oblivious and a comical figure to the audience. "China" is a codeword which refers to sex; Horner has previously arranged this code with his mistresses. It is used in this scene as an extended sexual innuendo. This scene, known as "the china scene," is one of the most famously lewd scenes in British theatre and was removed from some productions of the play for being too vulgar.

With that, Lady Fidget rushes into another room and locks the door. Horner pretends to be extremely frustrated and tells Sir Jasper that there is another way into the room by which he will follow her. He rushes off and Sir Jasper remains behind, helpless with laughter. He shouts through the door to his wife that Horner is "coming in the back way" and Lady Fidget replies that he may do as he pleases.

Sir Jasper inadvertently joins in with Horner and Lady Fidget's banter but does not understand the real content of what he says. "Coming in the back way" is a reference to anal sex.

While Sir Jasper is listening at the door, Mrs. Squeamish bursts in looking for Horner. When she hears that he is with Lady Fidget she suggests they break down the door and, when Sir Jasper brushes off this suggestion, she determines to find another way into the room and hurries out of the parlor. Her grandmother, Old Lady Squeamish, then enters the room and frantically looks for Mrs. Squeamish. When she hears from Sir Jasper that this is Horner's house, she relaxes, and she and Sir Jasper wait patiently outside the door for the others to return.

Mrs. Squeamish is clearly jealous and wishes to keep Horner to herself. She suspects that Lady Fidget also knows Horner's secret and is eager for them not to be alone together. She must conceal this from Sir Jasper to protect her own reputation. Husbands and elderly chaperones were stock figures in Restoration drama and acted as obstacles for young lovers to overcome. Old Lady Squeamish has heard the rumors of Horner's impotence.

Lady Fidget reappears, holding a piece of **china**, and Horner follows, complaining that she has taken his best piece. Mrs. Squeamish then re-enters the room and begs Horner to give her some china too but he tells her he has none left and will give her some another time. The women take hold of Horner and insist that he come for dinner with them while Sir Jasper and Old Lady Squeamish laugh at how they harass the poor, long-suffering man. The Quack, still behind the screen, is absolutely incredulous and vows to believe every word that Horner says in future.

The china symbolizes sex and shows the audience that Horner and Lady Fidget have just had sex offstage (something the audience are already in on because of the use of innuendo and double entendre). Mrs. Squeamish also knows the codeword, "china," but does not know whether Horner has literally given Lady Fidget china or has had sex with her.

While this commotion is underway, Pinchwife strides in upon the scene. The ladies, seeing another man enter, immediately cover their faces and leave with Sir Jasper, wary of their "honor." Pinchwife presents Horner with the letter from Margery. Horner is confused but plays along with Pinchwife's belief that Margery's letter is abusive and unkind. Pinchwife thinks that Horner is making light of the situation and begins to threaten him. He reveals that it was not a young man that Horner kissed the night before but his wife. Horner pretends to be shocked and agrees with Pinchwife that he would never knowingly insult Pinchwife's "honor." Pinchwife leaves feeling vindicated.

It is ironic that the ladies want to protect their virginal reputations given that they have both come to Horner's house to have sex with him. Pinchwife believes that he has given Horner the letter that he dictated for Margery; he does not know that she has switched them. Horner conceals the love letter from Pinchwife because he is confused and does not want to betray Margery before he understands the situation. Pinchwife is on edge and plays right into Horner's hands; he confesses that Horner kissed Margery (rather than her brother), which Horner already knows, but this gives Horner the opportunity to pretend he did not know this and to flatter Pinchwife.

Horner drags the Quack out from his hiding place and shows him the letter. The Quack observes that Pinchwife has not heard the rumors about Horner. A moment later, Sparkish enters, dragging Pinchwife after him. Sparkish has come to insist that Pinchwife and Horner attend his wedding dinner but Pinchwife reminds him that Sparkish is not yet married; his bride took issue with the parson who was to marry them. He tells Sparkish he will attend his dinner, though, and leaves.

Pinchwife has avoided being social in London and still has not heard that Horner is "impotent." Sparkish does not care about Alithea's part in the wedding at all and does not think it is important that she refused to go through with the ceremony.

Horner asks Sparkish whom he has married and, when he hears it is Alithea, he says that it is a shame for another man. Sparkish demands to know who his "rival" is. Although he is indignant about the existence of this "rival" at first, he soon decides that a rival might end up being quite a useful thing in a marriage. Horner is repelled by Sparkish's words, but Sparkish fails to notice and, again, invites Horner to dinner.

Horner means that it is a shame for Harcourt, who is in love with Alithea. Sparkish thinks that a rival will help him in the future when he is sick of Alithea. It will give him an excuse to cheat on her or will distract her so that he can keep his mistresses unnoticed. Horner finds Sparkish's conniving unpalatable, even though he is a rogue himself.

Horner says that he will only attend the dinner if Margery is there. Sparkish tells Horner that Pinchwife will not let Margery go to a dinner where there will be other men but persuades Horner to come with him anyway, as his aunt's house, where the dinner is being held, is near Pinchwife's. Horner makes to follow Sparkish out and, on his way, tells the Quack that Margery has begged for his help and that he is most willing to oblige.

Horner realizes that Margery has tricked Pinchwife somehow with the letter and views this as a cry for help and a sign that she is unhappy and unfulfilled in her marriage. He, therefore, intends to liberate her by making her his mistress.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

In her chamber, Margery longs to see Horner and realizes that she is in love with him. She has heard that town ladies fall in love with "gallants" and now knows this experience herself; the thought of Horner fills her with desire whereas the thought of Pinchwife makes her sick. She decides to write a letter to Horner, now that she knows how to, but Pinchwife interrupts her and steals the letter from her.

Margery is suffering from "lovesickness;" a stock theatrical trope and a condition associated with love between nobles. It was believed to have physical symptoms like an illness.

Pinchwife keeps Margery in the room while he reads the letter. She has written to Horner that she loves him, is disgusted by her husband, and that she wishes that Horner will free her from her marriage. The letter is unfinished, but it asks Horner to help her before something takes place and Pinchwife assumes that this thing is his and Margery's return to the country. Pinchwife is horrified; he laments that women are so corrupt, deceitful, and affected and pulls his sword on Margery.

Pinchwife shows his misogynistic attitude towards women. He has married Margery because she is from the country and, therefore, he believes she is stupid and ignorant and will be easy to control. This is all Pinchwife really wants in a wife; someone who will make him look good, be totally faithful to him, and expect nothing in return.

Sparkish enters and is startled by the scene; he has come to collect Margery for the wedding dinner. Pinchwife refuses to let her go, as Sparkish anticipated, and locks her in her chamber instead. Sparkish asks where Alithea is and Pinchwife tells him that she is probably with another man, as all women do is cheat on their husbands. Sparkish ignores him and the two go for dinner.

Sparkish does not care where Alithea is and does not believe that she will cheat on him because he is convinced that he is such a catch and that she cannot do better.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Later that night, in Pinchwife's house, Pinchwife corners Margery and demands that she finish writing the letter to Horner; he wants to see how she intends to conclude it. Margery resignedly agrees and Pinchwife is shocked when she signs the letter from Alithea. Pinchwife is amazed and Margery tells him that Alithea had Margery write the letter for her so that, if Horner tried to use it to shame her, it would not be in her handwriting.

During their separation, Margery has come up with a plan to protect herself from Pinchwife's violence if he believes she has tried to "cuckold" him. She passes the blame for the letter onto Alithea because Pinchwife does not care as much about his sister's honor as he does about his wife's and Alithea is not yet officially married to Sparkish.

Pinchwife believes that Margery is telling the truth because he does not believe that she could concoct a story like this. He believes now that Horner is the "rival" that was mentioned to Sparkish and that Alithea has thrown off her marriage because she is in love with him, too. Pinchwife asks where Alithea is and Margery says that she has been crying upstairs all day.

Pinchwife underestimates Margery's intelligence and so falls for her trick. Margery thinks quickly and demonstrates that, although she is young and naïve, she is clever and a fast learner.

Pinchwife wants to go and speak with Alithea but Margery stops him and says that she had better go instead. As she leaves the room, Margery wonders how she will get out of this confusing web of lies. While she is gone, Pinchwife thinks happily that he will let Horner marry Alithea because then he will not be interested in Margery, as she will be his sister-in-law.

Pinchwife only thinks about his own reputation and comfort, and not of his wife and sister's feelings. He wishes to marry Alithea off to Horner, although he believes him to be a dishonorable rake, because it will be convenient for him and set his mind at rest about Margery.

Margery returns and says that Alithea wants to be taken to Horner's house so that she can decide the matter with him first. She is so ashamed, Margery says, that she will only come if she is allowed not to speak and to wear a mask and if all the lights are put out. Pinchwife hastily agrees and blows out the candle.

Margery tricks Pinchwife into blowing out the candles so that she can conceal her identity in the darkness.

Margery slips out again and comes back masked and dressed as Alithea. Pinchwife goes to lock Margery back in her room and, in the dark, she steals behind him so that he thinks he has locked her in when, in fact, he has not. He then takes Margery by the hand and leads her away to Horner's.

She returns disguised as Alithea and tricks Pinchwife again. He thinks he has locked Margery in the room and that Alithea is with him, when really it is Margery. These types of identity swaps are common in farce.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Horner and the Quack are back at Horner's house. They discuss the unexplained letter from Margery that Pinchwife brought to Horner. While they are talking, Pinchwife leads Margery in. She is disguised as Alithea and a mask covers her face. Horner is baffled when Pinchwife says that he has brought Horner a mistress.

Horner does not understand Pinchwife's intentions.

Horner asks if the lady Pinchwife has brought is "sound" and Pinchwife is offended. Horner assumes that Pinchwife has brought him another woman so that he will not be tempted to seduce Margery and Pinchwife is confused and thinks that Horner is joking. Horner insists that he does not know who the woman is or why Pinchwife has brought her to him. Pinchwife tells Horner that the woman is related to him and Horner asks if he can remove her mask. Margery whispers to Horner that she will speak to him if they are left alone.

Horner wants to know if she has venereal disease and if she is reliable; he wants to know that she will not expose his secret, that he is not impotent. Pinchwife thinks that Horner knows this woman is Alithea. Margery cannot remove her mask in front of Pinchwife, as this would reveal her identity.

Pinchwife agrees to leave the pair alone. He says that he will go and get a chaplain to marry them and tell Sparkish that his marriage is off. As he leaves, the servant enters and announces Sir Jasper Fidget, who is on his way up. Horner tells Sir Jasper he is busy, but Sir Jasper tells him that his wife and the "virtuous gang" of ladies are on their way up, dressed for a masquerade ball. Horner tells Sir Jasper he is not interested, but Sir Jasper only laughs, and Horner realizes there is nothing he can do.

Pinchwife believes that Alithea has thrown Sparkish over for Horner and, therefore, the wedding will be off. Masked balls were regular entertainment in Restoration society. They provided the perfect opportunity for wealthy people to flirt and socialize, without revealing their identities and risking their reputations. The masks added a theatrical element which was frequently exploited by playwrights because of its possibilities for narrative intrigue and disguise.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

In Covent Garden, in the heart of London, Pinchwife shows Sparkish the letter that, signed with Alithea's name, confesses her love for Horner. Sparkish is shocked but wonders if the letter was really written by Alithea because he does not know her handwriting. Pinchwife says that, if Sparkish doesn't believe him, he should go and check Horner's house and he bids Sparkish good day.

Sparkish is reluctant to believe Alithea would cheat on him, not because he believes she is unusually virtuous, but because he is so arrogant and thinks that she cannot do better than him.

Sparkish is left alone in the street where he sees Alithea and Lucy walking in the direction away from Horner's house. He takes this as proof of her infidelity and confronts her about it. Alithea is shocked and confused; she thinks that he must be drunk. Sparkish will not hear her protests, however. He accuses her of being "false" to him and haughtily wishes her luck in her marriage to Horner, which Pinchwife has just informed him of.

Sparkish assumes the worst about Alithea (that she has cheated on him with Horner) but does not listen to her side of the story or give her a chance to explain.

Alithea watches Sparkish storm of and believes that Pinchwife has decided to break off their engagement. She is relieved, as she sees now that Sparkish is capable of jealousy. She cannot believe that Pinchwife really wishes her to marry Horner and confesses to Lucy that she would rather marry Harcourt instead. The pair set off to find him while Alithea remarks on her luck; she has avoided being married to a man who would spend freely, ignore her in the town and, probably, send her out to live in the country so that he could do as he liked. She hopes that he is never known by any "title" except that of a "cuckold."

Alithea sees now that Sparkish does not respect her or believe in her virtue. She thinks that Pinchwife has broken off the engagement because he cares about her and does not want her to marry Sparkish, who does not truly love her. She feels she has had a lucky escape as she, rightly, believes that Sparkish would have dispensed with her as soon as he got bored and sent her to live in the country where she would have no opportunity to socialize or enjoy herself.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

At Horner's house, Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish arrive dressed in masquerade costumes. Horner curses their appearance, as he has not yet had chance to send Margery away and must lock her in another room to avoid her being seen. The ladies have brought alcohol and plan to get very drunk. In fact, they seem tipsy already and decide to be very honest and open with each other since they are only in Horner's presence.

Convoluted plot structure and layers of confusion which build over time were typical elements of Restoration comedy. The ladies are free from social constraints when they are with Horner.

Lady Fidget begins to sing a bawdy drinking song which curses the "tyrants" who oppress them and leave them alone in bed every night. After all, men often choose wine over women and so why shouldn't women drink too? Men are only considered witty and brave when they drink, whereas women are weak and powerless against men because they abstain. Therefore, Lady Fidget concludes, women should retaliate by drinking, forget their figures, and rely on wine instead of men to have fun. The women drink and continue to curse theirs husbands and keepers.

The tyrants are their husbands. This suggests that Restoration wives, despite their infidelities, feel mistreated and neglected. They have less freedom than their male spouses and cannot be publicly seen to have affairs, or distract themselves with work, as men can. Therefore, drink is their only comfort, and, through drink, they can gain some of courage that drink gives men. This will allow them to be honest and brazen about their pleasure, which usually they are too timid to flaunt. This scene demonstrates genuine sympathy for women of this type and suggests that, to a certain extent, they are trapped in a life of hypocrisy by society's double standards.

Horner asks if they curse these people for his sake, but the women scornfully reply that they curse them "for their own." They complain bitterly that they are passed over in favor of common women and ask Horner why this is the case. Horner responds that pomp and "ceremony" makes men uncomfortable and that "honorable" ladies seem to scorn "wild" men. The ladies dismiss this suggestion; they hate tame men more than anything. Horner confesses that he was often put off by a woman's reputation and the ladies reply that women use their reputations just as men do; to "cheat those that trust" them.

Horner thinks that they are sad because he has lost his reputation, but they are sad because they have to maintain their own. Their reputations work against them. As noble women, they have to pretend to be very virtuous, and this façade of virtue puts off the men that they want to sleep with, as these men assume that they will not be interested. Although they pretend to hate "wild," sexually aggressive men, they really love them. There is a purpose to their virtuous reputations, however. These reputations hide their promiscuity from their husbands and from a society which would judge them.

Horner asks why they did not send him a secret sign if this was the case, and the women reply that they were frightened by his reputation as much as he was by theirs. Horner says that it is not only this that put him off; "honorable" women are, after all, notoriously expensive to keep. The women reject this as a trifle and say that their lovers should want to buy them things to prove their love. To be generous in love, they say, is better than to be jealous.

The women did not approach Horner because he had a reputation as a "rake" and was generally known to be untrustworthy. Therefore, they could not afford to risk their reputations, even if they did want to sleep with him. The women are materialistic and expect their lovers to compete with their husbands financially.

Speaking of jealousy, Lady Fidget suddenly announces that she can no longer conceal her secret and tells the other ladies that Horner is her lover. Mrs. Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish are horrified; they each protest that Horner is also their secret lover and that he has destroyed his reputation for their own sake. Horner deflects their anger by reminding them that they are his "false rogues" too, and the women resign themselves to keeping each other's secrets as they must protect their most prized "jewels" (their honor), even if it is based on a lie. Horner says that it doesn't matter whether their "honor" is real or not; all that matters is that other people think it is.

Lady Fidget is drunk and reveals her secret. Although the women are angry with Horner for lying to them, they cannot expose him because he could expose them, too, and their virtuous reputations would be lost. Basically, they are all as bad as each other. Like the ladies, Horner knows that what is important in Restoration society is not how they behave, but how people think they behave. None of them have any intention of being virtuous, but they are prepared to protect their reputations as these are the disguises that they use to have their fun and keep their social status.

Sir Jasper and Old Lady Squeamish arrive to take the ladies home and Horner hurriedly removes Margery from the chamber she has been locked in. He begs her to go home but Margery refuses. Horner tells her that she must so that her husband does not find out that she has been to see him, but Margery announces that Horner will be her husband from now on. Horner tries to explain that this cannot be the case, because she is already married, but Margery angrily states that she sees that women in London spend time with men they are not married to all the time.

Margery naively believes that, because she loves Horner, he will be her husband. She still does not understand the rules around marriage. Wycherly implies that the idea that couples must be faithful to each other and must marry for social reasons rather than for love are stupid and unintuitive. Therefore, it is society that is stupid and not Margery. She unknowingly exposes the hypocrisy of the town wives who are always cheating on their husbands.

As they argue, Horner hears someone coming up the stairs. Pinchwife, Sparkish, Alithea, Lucy, and Harcourt enter with a parson. Pinchwife asks Horner if it is true that he recently brought Alithea to his house. Horner quickly decides to betray Alithea for Margery's sake, as lying about women is nothing new to him, and agrees that Pinchwife did bring him Alithea. Sparkish believes this confirms Alithea's guilt, but Harcourt professes that he believes her and that he will restore her reputation.

Horner lies to protect Margery because she wants to be his mistress and, therefore, he can get something (sex) from her. He can get nothing from Alithea and so, looking out for his own interests, he betrays her, even though she is genuinely innocent. Harcourt shows he is a true lover, and a better match for Alithea than Sparkish, because he trusts her and believes in her virtue without proof.

Pinchwife hustles the parson forwards to marry Alithea and Horner, but Harcourt says that he will marry her instead if she will have him. Pinchwife and Sparkish are confused, but Horner says that he is willing to give Alithea up to Harcourt. Pinchwife is insulted on his sister's behalf and goes to draw his sword. Seeing this, Margery rushes out to defend Horner.

This type of ending is common in farce, in which multiple characters with conflicting information gather in one scene and gradually untangle the many, confusing plots. Margery genuinely cares about Horner and is concerned for his wellbeing.

Alithea points out that Margery is dressed in her clothes and all becomes clear to the party. Pinchwife damns his wife and tries to attack her and Horner with his sword. Harcourt stops him. Just then, Sir Jasper, Mrs. Squeamish, Mrs. Dainty Fidget and Old Lady Squeamish re-enter and are surprised by the commotion. Pinchwife tells Sir Jasper that Margery has been sleeping with Horner, and that Sir Jasper's wife may have been also. At first, Sir Jasper falls about laughing but, seeing Pinchwife's sincerity, he turns and confronts Horner.

Alithea is the voice of wisdom in the play because she sees through the disguises of others. For a moment, Sir Jasper doubts himself and wonders if he has been too quick to believe gossip.

Lucy then tries to make peace and suggests that all the confusion stems from her efforts to break up Sparkish and Alithea. Margery objects to this, however, and claims that she does love Horner. Pinchwife threatens her again and Dorilant and the Quack enter the scene and demand to know what is going on. Horner begs the Quack to restore his own and the lady's reputation and the Quack, understanding immediately, whispers to Sir Jasper and gives his word "as a physician."

Lucy tries to deflect the tension between the group, but Margery does not realize that it is in her own best interest to lie, so she naively announces that she does love Horner. Sir Jasper trusts the doctor's word because he is a medical man. However, the doctor is "a quack" and therefore untrustworthy, so this is ironic and makes Sir Jasper look a fool.

Hearing this, Sir Jasper apologizes to his "virtuous" wife. The Quack informs Pinchwife that Horner is a eunuch. Pinchwife is stunned and wonders whether this report is true. The company confirms that everyone in the town knows it and that, although Horner was a womanizer in the past, his trip to France has changed all that. Dorilant backs up the Quack's story, but Margery tries to protest and claim it is not true. Mrs. Squeamish whispers to Lucy to silence her and Dorilant comes forward to tell Margery "the truth" about Horner.

It is ironic that Sir Jasper apologizes to Lady Fidget as, of course, she has wronged him. When Pinchwife hears that everyone knows the rumors, he is inclined to believe them. This suggests that people will usually follow the crowd when, really, they should look more closely at the "truth" and decide for themselves. Margery still does not understand and thinks she is doing Horner a favor and protecting his honor by telling the truth.

Margery is disappointed and realizes that she cannot escape from Pinchwife. Alithea reprimands her brother for suspecting Margery, who, she says, is clearly extremely naïve. Harcourt rejoices that he will soon be married to Alithea and promises not to be a jealous husband, and Dorilant and Sparkish share their relief that they are bachelors. Horner laments that he could not marry even if he wanted to and even Pinchwife is a little disappointed that he cannot be rid of Margery, who seems even more innocent than even he suspected.

Although Alithea thinks that Margery has ended up at Horner's house in the confusion of Lucy's plan, she too underestimates Margery and her part in the plot. Although Pinchwife has been obsessed with keeping Margery faithful throughout the play, now that he is certain that she is not having an affair he seems to regret it. This suggests that Pinchwife and Margery will likely grow bored of and be unfaithful to each other.

Horner suggests that they go to the theatre and Lucy presses Margery to tell Pinchwife that she only came out of the house in disguise to witness Alithea's wedding to Sparkish, which she feared Pinchwife would not let her go to. Margery whispers to Lucy and Horner that she knows they are lying but agrees to play along with the story. There is a "dance of cuckolds" and Horner concludes by saying that only vain men want to be seen as womanizers by other men, whereas those who really want to *be* womanizers must let other men look down on them.

Margery now understands that the others want her to lie and she disapproves of this. She goes along with it, however, because of social pressure. This suggests that, in a society where most people are hypocrites and liars, it pays to be one, too. The "dance of cuckolds" is a theatrical spectacle to conclude the action.

EPILOGUE

The Epilogue is "spoke by Mrs. Knepp." In her speech, she ridicules unsuccessful lady's men. She despises the ones who lead women on but will not follow through once they seduce them, and older men who flirt with younger women and try to impress them with riches, while the young women just laugh at them and take advantage. She disdains men who simply wish to show off and use wealth and appearances to substitute for real vigor. She warns these men, who may be tempted to imitate Horner, that, although other men might be fooled by the appearance of great prowess, women never will be.

Mrs. Knepp was a famous, Restoration actress whom the part of Lady Fidget was written for. The epilogue suggests that, although men may be able to convince other men that they are impressive, with shows of wealth, power, or by keeping company with young women, women are only impressed by men who can genuinely satisfy them as lovers.

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