**THE COUNTRY WIFE**

by William Wycherley

**The 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.

**The Country Wife: Act 1**

**Summary & Analysis**

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 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.

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.

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’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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.”

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.”

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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Act 2**

**Summary**

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.

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.”

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.

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. Shee begs to know who the young man is.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.”

**The Country Wife: Act 3, Scene 1**

**Summary**

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.

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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Act 3, Scene 2**

**Summary**

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Act 4, Scene 1**

**Summary**

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 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.

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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Act 4, Scene 2**

**Summary**

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Act 4, Scene 3**

**Summary**

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 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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

**The Country Wife: Act 4, Scene 4**

**Summary**

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.

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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Act 5, Scene 1**

**Summary**

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.

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 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.

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 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.

**The Country Wife: Act 5, Scene 2**

**Summary**

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 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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Act 5, Scene 3**

**Summary**

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 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.

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.”

**The Country Wife: Act 5, Scene 4**

**Summary**

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.”

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.

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.

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.

**The Country Wife: Epilogue**

**Summary**

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.

**CHARACTER LIST**

**1. Harry Horner**

**Character Analysis**

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.”

**2. Margery Pinchwife**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**3. Pinchwife**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**4. Sir Jasper Fidget**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**5. Lady Fidget**

**Character Analysis**

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.”

**6. Mrs. Dainty Fidget**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**7. Mrs. Squeamish**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**8. Sparkish**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**9. Alithea**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**10. Harcourt**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**11. Dorilant**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**12. Lucy**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**13. Quack**

**Character Analysis**

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.

**LITERARY TERMS**

**1. 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.

**2. 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**

**1. 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.

**2. 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.

**3. 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.

**4. 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.

**5. The Untenability of Restoration Marriage Arrangements**

Wycherley presents two marriages that are sadly typical of the Restoration period: Jack Pinchwife cultivates his wife’s ignorance in order to ensure her fidelity and submissiveness, and Sir Jasper Fidget neglects his young wife and seeks to keep her mind off other men by occupying her with trivial pleasures and “safe” companions. Wycherley thus takes two common assumptions about marriage—that wives should be kept in ignorance and that wives can safely be neglected—and shows them to contain contradictions that can only lead to marital breakdown. Women, no less than men, desire gratifying sexual contact; if long deprived, they will gladly avail themselves of someone like Horner, whose aphorism proves right: “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.” As P. F. Vernon points out, Horner is merely a “catalyzing agent,” enabling the married couples around him to fall apart on their own terms: Sir Jasper is so eager to unload his wife that he actually compels Horner and Lady Fidget to spend time together; and Pinchwife leads his own wife into adultery, because the precautions he takes against Horner merely give Margery the means to gratify the very sexual appetite that Pinchwife, the broken-down and tyrannical, stints.

**6. Hypocrisy**

Wycherley was repelled by hypocrisy, above all by the commonplace variety—the ordinary desire of men and women to be thought more virtuous or gifted than they are. Thus, Horner early on curses “all that force Nature and would be still what she forbids ’em; affectation is her greatest monster,” and Dorilant generalizes the critique: “Most men are the contraries to what they would seem.” Not only men but women: Lady Fidget and “the virtuous gang” come in for some of the sharpest criticism in the play, as their public personas conflict egregiously with their private activities. Indeed, the entire play is predicated on the pervasiveness of hypocrisy: Horner’s ruse, on which most of the action depends, would fail without the eagerness of wives and husbands to maintain an extreme disjunction between the true nature of women and their outward appearance.

**7. Town and Country, or Innocence and Experience**

Margery, the country wife of the title, represents a state of rustic innocence that contrasts strongly with the sophistication of the town. She has no natural inclination for deceit, and thus she composes what Horner calls “the first love-letter that ever was without flames, darts, fates, destinies, lying and dissembling in’t”; she takes things at face value, and thus she expresses disbelief that anyone who professes to love her would seek to “ruin” her. Some critics argue, however, that in the course of the play Margery picks up the London tricks of duplicity and pretense, as she tricks Pinchwife into delivering to Horner first the love-letter and then Margery herself. The question of whether these tricks indicate the corruption of Margery is an important one, for if she maintains her ignorance throughout the play, then, as B. A. Kachur puts it, “her remove to Hampshire [at the end] suggests a form of banishment from the real world which cannot accommodate honesty, simplicity, and ingenuousness.” If, on the other hand, Margery in Act V is on her way to becoming a Hampshire version of Lady Fidget, then the thesis of the play would seem to be what is perhaps still more dismal, the idea that civilization is bound to corrupt even such a simple child of impulse as young Margery.

**8. True Wit vs. Foppery**

As David Cook and John Swannell suggest, one of the major themes of the play is “man’s intellectual ascendency over those conditions which tend to hem him in and diminish him.” In this context, the vitality of Horner, which he expresses in the form of intellectual as well as sexual dominance, entitles him as a heroic figure who triumphs (albeit in a morally ambivalent fashion) over the deadening thought-patterns of specious “honor.” By contrast, Sparkish’s feeble pretensions to wit degrade not only the human intellect but the human moral faculties. His brand of cynicism functions not to expose the failings of society but to reinforce them: his attitudes toward marriage, including his desire to feed his vanity by having “rivals in a wife,” reveal moral idiocy rather than moral insight.

**9. The Cash Principle**

Sir Jasper Fidget is a specimen of a new type, the bourgeois man of business. The Restoration saw the rise in earnest of capitalism, as social fluidity and developing markets allowed many entrepreneurs to achieve wealth in the modern way. Whatever admirable qualities may be attributable to the aspiring man of business, the besetting sins of his type are avarice and materialism. Sir Jasper exhibits this debasement of values and priorities, as he is constantly abandoning his wife to attend to “[his] pleasure, business,” placing business contacts and opportunities above the marital bond. The Fidgets, then, typify not only the new economic patterns but also the more specific issue of the commercialization of marriage, the basing of marriage on financial interest rather than love. “Almost certainly contracted as a commercial enterprise,” says W. R. Chadwick, their marriage “has foundered on materialism, and Lady Fidget has every right to feel neglected.”

**10. The Poverty of Loveless Sex**

The basic target of the audience’s laughter in The Country Wife is, most simply, the sexual impulse and the absurdities to which it sometimes drives its human subjects. Not that sex is categorically absurd in Wycherley’s view: the mutual attraction of Alethea and Harcourt, for instance, is ultimately not at all risible. Rather, Wycherley encourages the audience to laugh at sexual relations in which the participants view each other as objects, as means simply to personal pleasure. As B. A. Kachur says, “loveless, mechanical copulation is, as portrayed by a master like Wycherley, embarrassingly titillating, brutally honest, and inherently disquieting.” Horner epitomizes what Wycherley considers the dehumanizing effects of this impoverished view of sex: although he is in one sense the most commanding character in the play, controlling events by means of his ruse, nevertheless his compulsive sexuality renders him, most clearly in the “china scene,” a passive and mechanical sexual instrument, passed among various partners and utilized to the point of physical depletion.

**11. Same-Sex Solidarity**

From the first scene of the play, in which Horner and his friends sound the hackneyed note of derogating women and praising male friendship, there persists a motif of the conventional notion that the truest companionship obtains among members of the same sex (especially the male sex). The three wits, however, never realize that ideal very successfully: Horner keeps an important secret from his two friends, Harcourt’s deepest personal connection is with a woman (Alethea), and Dorilant scarcely exists as a distinct personality. Interestingly, what is perhaps the most successful instance in the play of this clichéd sexist bonding occurs not among the male wits but among the “virtuous gang” of ladies, plus Horner, in the “banquet scene” of Act V. Here, the ladies drink, sing songs, and derogate the opposite sex, quite after the traditional pattern of male tavern behavior, but with more reason and more honesty; as a result, their bonding session ends with the sharing of secrets, as they each admit the relation they bear to Horner, and a swift laying-aside of differences in the interest of collaboration in the ruse. Perhaps Wycherley means to suggest that the men’s commitment to besting each other in the romantic arena precludes any genuine bonding, while the women’s oppression in the conventional sexual scheme gives them incentive to be, as Lady Fidget puts it, “sister sharers” in more ways than one.

**SYMBOLS AND OBJECTS**

**1. 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.

**2. 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.

**3. 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.

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