

## The “Plyant” Discourse of Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*

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In a spirited defense of the excellences of Restoration culture, John Dryden praises King Charles II for having awakened “the dull and heavy spirits of the *English*, from their natural reserv’dness; loosen’d them, from their stiff forms of conversation; and made them easy and plyant to each other in discourse. Thus, insensibly, our way of living become more free: and the fire of the *English* wit, which was before stifled under a constrain’d, melancholy way of breeding, began first to display its force: by mixing the solidity of our Nation, with the air and gayety of our neighbors.”<sup>1</sup> The king may indeed have set a tone in court that counteracted recent Puritanical curbs on speech, but it was the Restoration stage that allowed and popularized the art of ingenious conversation and encouraged the habit of “easy and plyant” discourse. Clearly, Dryden links linguistic habits to behaviors and displays his political and cultural commitments to a “way of living” both “more free” and more closely resembling that of the rest of Europe.

Writing about discourse in novels rather than in conversation, Mikhail M. Bakhtin concurs with Dryden’s assertion of a link between language and society and the possibility of social change: “these processes of shift and renewal of the national language that are reflected *by* the novel do not bear an abstract linguistic character *in* the novel: they are inseparable from social and ideological struggle.”<sup>2</sup> He also insists that the memory of past struggles persists “as congealed traces in language.”<sup>3</sup> This slant on semantic and social history is particularly telling in consideration of the relatively recent (if indeed yet complete in the 1670s) consolidation of London’s dialect as the national language of England, which was so aggressively sought by Elizabethan policy. It follows that the vocabulary of a text can be examined for “congealed traces” of social practices and attitudes across genera-

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tions, and I would like to subject William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* to just such scrutiny.

I want to make use of Dryden's term "pliant" in a couple of different ways. It was no doubt intended to register approval of liveliness or resiliency, and I will rely on this usage later. But I also want to take advantage of a sense of pliant unintended by Dryden. Some of the words in Wycherley's play are pliant in that they belong to two or more ethical and social systems. One result of this fact is that the play was understood differently by various groups in its own time, and another is that critical commentary on *The Country Wife* has reached little consensus about certain interpretative issues even now; Helen Burke refers to its "notorious resistance to interpretation."<sup>4</sup> Its textual features have seemed so pliant to interpretation over the years that the genre of the play has seemed to oscillate between satire and romantic comedy, and its central character, Mr. Horner, between brilliant spokesman for the satiric mode and sinister predator, himself the object of dismissive critique.<sup>5</sup> Laura Brown counts this interpretative impasse as an intended effect of the play: "Wycherley maintains a complete disjunction between social and moral judgment."<sup>6</sup> This essay does not dispute that openness to interpretation, but it will, I hope, highlight the serious and contentious social consciousness on which that openness is based and which the play can still, though under different circumstances, suggest.

It would not be difficult to see the textual pliancy of *The Country Wife* in the guise of postmodernity, especially in its generic instability, equivocation about moral norms, and linguistic slippage. One of my students responded to it just that way, remarking, "This play is so modern," and likening it to certain recent dramatic fare. Her comment impressed me because I had had the same reaction to the production I saw at the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario in 1995. Douglas Campbell, the director of that production, found a brilliant strategy for staging the two-sidedness of the play: throughout the opening dialogue, a very handsome Horner speaks to Quack as he dresses for the day, covering a naked chest scarred by sores (presumably syphilitic) with sumptuous clothing. Nothing further was said or done during the play to revive the metaphor, but, of course, it exerted its influence nonetheless. The oblique reference to AIDS is striking and adds another overtone to my student's observation about the play's modernity.

I am, of course, always pleased when students (and directors) can, as Hans-Georg Gadamer frames it, reach across "temporal distance" to appropriate a text as part of our world, but the point of this essay is that the indeterminacy of the textual effects of *The Country Wife* results from specific seventeenth-century historical conditions, the record of which may be traced

out from its vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the searcher for an original, stabilized reading of the text, I am seeking historically situated difference within the play's earliest reception, especially difference registered in changing linguistic understandings, and, at the same time, suggesting what I think is a richer context for our own reading of the play. Perhaps it is time for particulars.

Several often-repeated words in *The Country Wife* are construed differently by different characters in the play (and also by various readers and critics). The most obvious instance of such paronomasia is of course in the justly praised "china scene," a perfect example of calling a thing (a sexual encounter) by the name of another thing (a china cup). Effects are achieved inside the play: Horner and Lady Fidget deceive Sir Jasper while indulging their desire to refer to their "secret." They are also achieved outside: for the audience—which is party to the "secret"—lines like Horner's "I cannot make china for you all" are simultaneously sobering and funny.<sup>8</sup> But the effects I am even more interested in here are subtler and rooted in broader social concerns than the English rage for chinoiserie. The text of the play takes remarkable advantage of the verbal equivocation inherent in the English language of the seventeenth century. Plays on the words *virtue* and *honor* are, like the china scene, immediately readable as puns, and they serve as markers of the verbal self-consciousness of both the play and the age to and of which it speaks.<sup>9</sup> Attention to some less obviously bifurcated words—I have selected *conversation*, *pinch*, *kind*, *silly*, *honor*, *virtue*, and *wit*—reveals the remarkable verbal intricacy which in part accounts for the widely divergent readings the play has received since its first productions.

To sketch in some of the diversity in its earliest audiences' ideological commitments and structures of feeling, I will rely heavily on Dryden's "Defence of the Epilogue: Or An Essay on the Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age" (1671) and Isaac Barrow's sermons, especially Sermon 14, "Against foolish talking and jesting."<sup>10</sup> The relevance of Dryden's criticism is obvious; his attempts "to determine upon principles the merit of composition," as Samuel Johnson put it, make up some of the earliest systematic criticism in English. His contemporary, Barrow, an Anglican divine and Cambridge don, gave voice to equally informed and coherent attitudes toward language and ethics. Dryden and Barrow do not define the opposing poles of English thought in this generation—much harsher polemics could be cited from the "libertine offensive," on the one hand, and the Puritan camp, on the other—but they do demonstrate different structures of feeling within the segment of society to which the play is addressed.<sup>11</sup> Barrow was a Cambridge-educated Royalist whose family's fortunes had declined "on account of adhering to the king's cause" and who had spent much of the Interregnum

in Europe. Although no friend of the theater, he was said to be “addicted” to poetry. When Charles II made him Master of Trinity College in 1672, he announced he was appointing “the best scholar in England.”<sup>12</sup> The different stances of these two “Royalists,” both writing on wit, should perhaps modify our sense of a univocal Royalist position in the late seventeenth century. The sharp contrast between their views is often directly relevant to problems involved in interpreting *The Country Wife*, and suggests a varied and fluid mix of social perspectives within Wycherley’s audiences.<sup>13</sup> My point is not that members of the earliest audiences of the play consciously weighed the implications of the words I will discuss, but that those words would have certain unmediated resonances for those of Dryden’s persuasion and others for those of Barrow’s. Two quite distinct historically situated readings emerge from the contrasting systems of valuation registered in these semantic histories.

## I

Conversation is both the subject and the medium of *The Country Wife*. James Thompson comments on the extent to which all four of Wycherley’s plays are *made of* conversation and claims that if “these plays are absorbed by language, so is the society for which they were performed.”<sup>14</sup> He points out that a current meaning for *conversation* is “mode of life,” rather than “talk” alone. In both senses, the theater bore particularly great weight in forming the tastes and habits of the segment of society of and to whom it spoke, as Dryden’s argument for conversational wit, which began this essay, suggests. Barrow also valued conversation and was a valued conversant himself. He wrote that speech was given us “as an instrument of beneficial commerce, and delectable conversation.”<sup>15</sup> Like Dryden and Wycherley, he was fascinated by quick-witted speech which was “answerable to the numberless rovings of fancy and windings of language,” and found it an “innocent pleasure . . . to raise our drooping spirits,” as game playing recreates our bodies.<sup>16</sup>

The gallants in *The Country Wife* place a high priority on witty conversation and object to the witless Sparkish’s interference with it: Harcourt complains that “the rogue [Sparkish] will not let us enjoy one another, but ravishes our conversation” (I.i.236–7). Horner, in his attempt to convince Dorilant and Harcourt of his impotence in spite of his having been seen with women, says, “Because I do hate ’em, and would hate ’em yet more, I’ll frequent ’em; you may see by marriage, nothing makes a man hate a woman more than her constant conversation. In short, I converse with ’em, as you do with rich fools, to laugh at ’em and use ’em ill” (III.ii.16–20). For

his on-stage fellows, this reference to “constant conversation” is a clever, misogynist reply. They likely interpret it by combining the older sense “way of life” with its rather new and very fashionable sense “talk,” first invoked in Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1580). For Dorilant and Harcourt, the trouble imputed to wives is that they are always hanging around and, of course, always talking.

But, for the audience, who know that Horner is, in fact, the virile fellow he always was, *conversation* may well suggest its widely current seventeenth-century meaning: “sexual intercourse or intimacy.”<sup>17</sup> The sexual sense is found as early as 1511 and theater people might think of Richard III’s accusation against Hastings for “his conversation with Shore’s wife” in William Shakespeare’s play.<sup>18</sup> A legal dictionary as late as 1809 defines adultery as “criminal conversation.”<sup>19</sup> That meaning is also consistent with something we know about Horner’s amorous proclivities. Once he has seduced a woman, he quickly loses interest in her: “next to the pleasure of making a new mistress is that of being rid of an old one,” he tells Quack (I.i.138–40). His liaisons with women provide, presumably, sexual pleasure, but the emotional satisfaction Horner experiences has more to do with successful competition with the men than any connection with the women involved, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued.<sup>20</sup> Horner achieves his victories over men through disguise and verbal dexterity.<sup>21</sup> His are the arts of playful and extravagant conversation, praised by Dryden and, as he saw it, forsworn by the “constrain’d” discursive styles of the previous era.

If the king sponsors this new pliancy, as Dryden suggests, the stage is an agent for indulging and teaching those habits of social exchange that reject the Puritan curbs on discourse and behavior during the Interregnum. An elite, sophisticated circle of adepts would release England from its isolation from Europe, a Europe the king understood through his “gallant and generous education” abroad.<sup>22</sup> *The Country Wife* may play a role in this cultural reorientation, for it is on record that Charles II saw three performances of the play during its first run.<sup>23</sup> One of the most important resources of this new mode of conversation is the sophisticated management of just such bifurcated words as *conversation*. But where does the play weigh in on the issue which its self-conscious use of language introduces? Comedy has always needed paronomasia; what is different here is not equivocation itself, but the damage done to the gaiety and naturalness (of which more later) of sex in the play if Horner is taken to mean that sexual conversation with a woman leads a man to hate her—that, and the play’s stubborn refusal to mark Horner’s cynicism unequivocally as “wrong.” Barrow would read the gallants’ self-congratulatory display of wit admired by Dryden as a blamable overvaluing of it as “a brave or fine thing . . . a

transcendent accomplishment."<sup>24</sup> Norman Holland's interpretation of Wycherley's ethical structure as a reliable, readable map of "right-way-wrong way" language and plotting will not, I think, explain the fluid comic effects of the play.<sup>25</sup>

No matter which sense of Horner's *conversation* is accepted, his pronouncement on it is altogether dismissive of women and marriage. If staging presents him as the hero of the play—flawed but smarter and more self-aware than the others—the play itself must be seen as attacking not only the hypocrisy of pretended marital faithfulness such as Lady Fidget's, but also the plausibility of Alithea's presumably straightforward desire to remain faithful after marriage (I.i.81, IV.i.45). If, on the other hand, the courtship of Harcourt and Alithea is taken as the admired image of love and marriage, Horner, the Fidgets (all of them), and the Pinchwifes (both of them) are dismissed morally even as they inhabit the center of the comedic action. This is not an impossible dramatic structure, but it is unstable and, as Northrop Frye argues in discussing *Volpone*, creates an uncomfortable dilemma for audiences.<sup>26</sup> Within the framework Dryden sets out, the age has made such a praiseworthy advance in civilized accomplishments that "Our Ladies and our men now speak more wit / In conversation, than those Poets writ."<sup>27</sup> The cynical conclusions which this wit might signal scarcely matter.

## II

*Pinch* is another nicely bifurcated word. Mr. Pinchwife is at the most obvious level a caricature of the dull, heavy, and constrained Puritanism of the cultural style Dryden castigates in the previous generation—except that Horner alleges from the beginning that Pinchwife's obsession with sexual purity applies only to wives, that he is a libertine who only married to keep a whore to himself (I.i. 433). Pinchwife is also, again quite openly, the often satirized well-off citizen who attempts to protect his wife from idle aristocratic gallants. As it applies to both the debased Puritan and the self-protective citizen, *pinch* will suggest excessive frugality, a usage which extends back to the Middle Ages, but which was particularly associated with the overvaluation of thrift by Protestant ethics. The term *pinchpenny* was already current when the play was first produced. Part of the same cluster of associations for the word included the early modern sense "to compress, confine, or restrict narrowly," as in Barrow's "That doctrine which pincheth our liberty within so narrow bounds."<sup>28</sup> Pinchwife's continual attempts throughout the play to lock Margery in a room give this

sense a particular relevance. His characterization may thus be seen to revolve around guarding a woman's sexual actions as possessions which might be pilfered by another man to the husband's loss of both capital and respect, connecting Pinchwife's concern for Margery's "innocence" to the cultural theme of entrepreneurial citizen pitted against indolent aristocrat.

For some members of Wycherley's audiences, however, the word may suggest more extreme venues. *Pinching* in Mary's and Elizabeth's day referred to the use of red-hot pincers to tear flesh from a suspect or informant. When Caliban fears *pinching* as punishment, he is alluding to that cruel practice.<sup>29</sup> Nor was that sense unfamiliar to William Taylor's readers as late as 1799.<sup>30</sup> Margery fears something more than erotic playfulness when she warns Horner in a postscript to her letter "let him not see this, lest he should come home and pinch me, or kill my squirrel" (IV.iii.278–9). Although her husband has threatened mutilating violence—slashing her face with his knife and blinding her—none is actually carried out in the play. But pinching (with hands, not tongs) was a common form of spousal abuse in this period, as records of divorce hearings suggest. Catherine, countess of Anglesey, for example, gave evidence that her husband had pinched her so that her arms bore the black and blue prints of his thumb and fingers, at one time so severe that they required a doctor's attendance.<sup>31</sup> My point is that the name Pinchwife places the character in two quite different positions in relation to the plot. To read *pinch* as "strait-laced, anal" places him as the citizen, capitalist, and debased Puritan who cannot compete with the suave gallants of Horner's circle. To read it as "ready to torment by pinching" places him as at least potentially a wife abuser, the focus of a quite different problem, one which aroused great public interest in connection with highly publicized divorce trials.<sup>32</sup>

Again, we must ask what the design of the play makes of this equivocation. In any view, Margery is the virtual captive of a potentially abusive man. In a frame that privileges witty language, her cleverly conducted seduction by Horner may be seen as a release from this captivity, however brief, and her sexual compliance as a "natural" inclination brought to the surface by the events of the play. On the other hand, Horner's cynical victory over Pinchwife carries with it enormous potential harm to Margery, and the play scarcely projects a quiet future for her in either the country or the town. Those who make the harsher interpretation of Mr. Pinchwife's name, connecting it to the contemporary divorce trials or the older regime of state torture, cannot return him to the familiar comic role of cuckold-who-deserves-his-fate, and the tone of the play is darkened.

## III

Wycherley's use of *kind* is another significant equivocation. *Kind* as the adjective "beneficent" came into its own as an early modern expression. It was a sense available but not common in Middle English usage, which ran strongly to *kind* as the noun "nature," related to "kin" and closely connected with racial stock, sex, and sometimes semen. "Love of kynde" is a common expression for sexual activity. In the sixteenth century, the epithet "cruel fair" or "fair unkind" for the beloved of the sonnet tradition wittily exploited the paronomasia "natural"/"beneficent." So does Hamlet in his biting reply to Claudius's "cousin Hamlet," "A little more than kin and less than kind," obliquely suggesting incest between Claudius and Gertrude.<sup>33</sup> In *The Country Wife*, Lucy struggles to evade Dorilant's advances, and he persuades (or threatens): "Thou shalt not stir, thou robust creature; you see I can deal with you, therefore you should stay the rather and be kind" (III.ii. 506–7). Lucy should be nice to him and/or show herself a natural (sexually inclined) woman. The equivocation here is balanced, but it tilts sharply toward the carnal in Pinchwife's little warning poem addressed to Sparkish: "Hows'e'er the kind wife's belly comes to swell, / The husband breeds for her, and first is ill" and in Mrs. Squeamish's confession that "the demureness, coyness, and modesty that you see in our faces in the boxes at plays, is as much a sign of a kind woman as a vizard-mask in the pit" (V.i.81–2, V.iv.104–6). Most of the instances of *kind* in the play concern the "virtuous gang." These women use the equivocation themselves and hear it used to characterize them. Indeed, it becomes something of a leitmotiv for them. In this case, the irony of the play is straightforward, for these women are satiric targets from the beginning.

*Kind* is also used between the men in the story claiming to be beneficent to one another, when the audience knows they are actually plotting elaborate competitions. Sparkish, Harcourt, Pinchwife, and Alithea all use the word to describe Harcourt's address to Alithea, and each understands the *kindness* being offered in a different way (II.i.172–6). The comic point of the bitter exchange between Pinchwife and Horner in act IV is similarly based on misrecognition (iii.267–87). The interesting questions connected with *kind* are posed in the thematic layers of the play; in association with *silly* and *wit*, the play insists on asking what is natural (innocence or indulgence) and what is sophisticated (chicanery or self-control). Margery is either liberated into the "natural" exercise of her sexual freedom or robbed of her "natural" modesty and inducted into a fallen urbanity.<sup>34</sup> Both alternatives are contradicted by some features of the play, and the whole issue

is, of course, linked with (but not stabilized by) the overarching binary opposition between country and city.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV

*Silly* is important to the play because of its repetition. There are ten instances of its use to describe Margery Pinchwife scattered through the play; it becomes and remains a leitmotiv for her.<sup>36</sup> A second, less frequent, set of instances concerns Sparkish's disparagement of "silly poets" who write the plays which he attends and talks throughout.<sup>37</sup> I would be surprised to find another Restoration play with so many instances of the word; there is certainly no earlier play with more than two.

The conversation between Sparkish and Horner on "silly poets" is one of those self-reflexive riffs with which many Restoration plays abound. Sparkish insults the professional playwrights, whose offerings are attended only so the gallants can carry their own wit to the theater and fault the play for bawdry while they themselves speak "nothing else" (III.ii.96–7). So far, *silly* just means "foolish, contemptible," and the poets are spared because Sparkish himself is the very embodiment of folly. Horner even gets him to admit that he too writes poems because the age demands it, that his poems were ridiculed by the "silly poets," and that he resents the way the stage lampoons knights.<sup>38</sup> This exchange reminds us of the ways in which both poetry and theater were integrated into the lives of the class for which Wycherley's work was first performed.<sup>39</sup>

But the case is different when *silly* refers to Margery. Early modern *silly* is the spelling given to Middle English *sely* or *cely*, a term used positively and respectfully for women, especially for saints and the Virgin Mary. Its oldest uses meant "happy," "fortunate," and especially "spiritually favored, carrying blessing."<sup>40</sup> Saintly Custance in *The Man of Law's Tale*, martyred Virginia in *The Physician's Tale*, and patient Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale* are all referred to as *sely* in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. That usage faded quickly under pressure from the more this-worldly concerns of vigorous, self-determined early modern Protestantism. Between Chaucer and Wycherley, *sely* or *silly* became associated with helpless animals, especially sheep, in pastoral settings; Shakespeare has fun with this convention in phrasing Proteus's reply to a servant: "a silly answer, and fitting well a sheep."<sup>41</sup> Yet the medieval sense, only slightly weakened, is heard on the stage in 1680 in Thomas Otway's *The Orphan* and must have been current enough to be understood there.<sup>42</sup>

Some critics regard Margery as worthy of that older sense when she is called *silly*. They regard her straightforward self-disclosure as the oppo-

site of and antidote to the rampant hypocrisy and scheming of the other characters. Thompson calls her a “Restoration Eve,” defining one pole of the thematic interest in linguistic deceptiveness (often through metaphor) versus (literal) simplicity. He points out, however, that the plot does not carry out a neat link between complete honesty and moral rectitude, since no one, not even Margery, avoids duplicity altogether.<sup>43</sup> For Charles Hallet, Margery represents Thomas Hobbes’s “state of nature,” which, although it emphasizes her innocence of intention, is not the valorized moral position of the play.<sup>44</sup> Alan Roper alleges that Margery “has no difficulty with words, uses them indeed, quite fearlessly” to describe things and events—what she does not grasp is the relevance of those things and events to issues, like her husband’s reputation.<sup>45</sup> Although these three assessments were generated from different claims for thematic contrast in the play, they converge on an insight important to Margery’s characterization: innocent (*sehy*) normally has two potential opposites: “guilt” and “experience.” At the beginning of the play, Margery is both guiltless and inexperienced. At the end, she is neither.

Finally acknowledging that he has a wife, Pinchwife describes her to the gallants as “too awkward, ill-favored, and silly to bring to town,” in order to avoid inviting competition (I.i.368). Horner takes his *silly* as “witless,” and wonders why Pinchwife has married her (I.i.385); Pinchwife declares her so inexperienced as not to notice his forty-nine years as disabling. Horner replies that she will then expect as much from an older man as she would from a younger, using the sense inexperienced, but assuming a kind of untutored knowledge as well. Pinchwife goes on to reveal that he wants a wife not just innocent, but stupid (I.i.402). He blames personified “love” for ruining women, whom nature and heaven intended to be “plain, open, silly, and fit for slaves” (I.ii.50–1). Pinchwife values both inexperience and witlessness in his wife, equating that combined sense of *silly* with sexual innocence (medieval), social foolishness (early modern), and a will subservient to command (sheeplike).

It is not so much Margery’s lack of experience, but her apparent helplessness that tempers Horner’s enthusiasm for bedding her. He calls Pinchwife’s “kindness” into question because “she’s a silly innocent” and says that though “the poor creature [is] willing, she is silly too” (V.ii.24–5, 27–8). Of course these lines may signal his fear that Margery’s lack of worldly acumen will get him into serious trouble—this is another choice point for directors and actors. Later, Horner finds Margery only too apt in lovemaking itself; it is her lack of citified sophistication that makes her *silly*, “foolish,” in not attempting to cover up her adultery (the urban women are never called *silly*). In the final scene, his comment that a “silly mistress

is like a weak place, soon got, soon lost” acknowledges the practical difficulties of making love to a woman who brings little tough-minded discretion to the affair, and, in this scene, he refers to Margery as “changeling” and “idiot” (V.iv.214, 280, 328).<sup>46</sup> At the end of the play, he is presented with a serious dilemma: exculpating Alithea will mean implicating Margery and himself. His decision shifts the word *innocent*, elsewhere in the play associated with Margery, to Alithea, who is, in fact, sexually innocent: “in these cases, I am still on the criminal’s side, against the innocent,” Horner says (V.iv.224–5).

As with the alternative senses of *pinch*, the play is darkened if Margery’s innocence as *sely-ness* is added to the equation. Reading her husband merely as the stock jealous fool and Margery’s *silliness* as merely a lack of laudable sophistication allows consideration of Margery’s sexual adventure with Horner as an inevitable move in an elaborate competition between men. But, if Margery’s innocence is valued by giving *silly* a trace of its older meaning, it becomes less clear that Horner’s lovemaking has provided any desirable liberation for her. She is decidedly undervalued by Pinchwife, but Horner undervalues her too. Horner’s jaunty “soon got, soon lost” indicates his short-lived commitment to her, even if we had forgotten that to him a woman’s “constant conversation” (which Margery certainly promises her “second husband”) only produces hatred. Holland excuses Horner from any injury to Margery because she does not feel that she has been harmed, but what the audience knows and Margery does not is that her “naive assumption that because he wants to cuckold her husband he must therefore want *her*, threatens the very basis of his [Horner’s] strategy,” as Sedgwick puts it.<sup>47</sup> The final scene cannot fully turn to comic ends the unease the play has produced concerning Margery’s fate.

## V

The bifurcation of the word *honor* in Renaissance usage is a sign of the vacillation in seventeenth-century thought and feeling between a shame culture in which one’s moral identity rests on public esteem or disgrace and a guilt culture which stresses inward awareness. Wycherley’s uses for *honor* have been discussed at length by others.<sup>48</sup> The ironies produced when the “virtuous gang” speak of *honor* in its public, social sense, as “reputation,” but expect to be understood as meaning a more personal and intimate ethical probity are deliberately exposed by Horner in his role as satirist. As he presents his disguise scheme to Quack, it is based on his observation that “your women of honor, as you call ’em, are only chary of their reputations, not their persons . . . Now may I have, by the reputation

of a eunuch, the privileges of one" (I.i. 153–6). In the logic of the play, he is, of course, right about this, as Lady Fidget confirms to him in an aside: "poor gentleman, could you be so generous, so truly a man of honor, as for the sakes of us women of honor, to cause yourself to be reported no man" (II.i.525–7). When Horner assures her that he is unimpaired and asks to be "tried," she replies: "Well, that's spoken again like a man of honor; all men of honor desire to come to the test" (II.i.535–6). Her reference to "the test" strongly recalls the medieval trial at arms, which, sometimes in practice and often in romances, settled legal disputes through combat, adjudicating ethical questions through a highly public performance. In this exchange, both conversants understand the delicious pun on public and private meanings of *honor* and types of trial the two of them have conspired to construct.

Later in the play, his acuity about Lady Fidget and her circle makes Horner a merciless (and hilarious) deconstructor of their hypocrisy: "If you talk a word more about your honor, you'll make me incapable of wronging it. To talk of honor in the mysteries of love is like talking of Heaven or the Deity in an operation of witchcraft, just when you are employing the devil; it makes the charm impotent" (IV.iii.42–6). In this scene, he seems to insist on a sort of confession from Lady Fidget before he will perform his services as a lover. Here he comes closest to filling out the role of satirist to unmask affectation; he even risks offending her and losing his erotic opportunity, so confident is he of her love of "the sport."

For Margery, at the opposite pole in the nature/culture binary, such verbal equivocation is, until near the end of the play, literally unthinkable. She never utters the word *honor* that looms so large in the discourse of all the others (there are over fifty instances of the word *honor* in *The Country Wife*). She leaves "nauseous" and "loathed" out of the letter Pinchwife makes her write because they do not seem consonant with her direct experience of Horner's "sweet breath," and besides, they are "filthy words," suggesting that she holds herself to a rigorous standard of truth-telling. None the less, rather than send the dictated letter to Horner, she devises a substitution that has the same effect as the various verbal miscues of the more sophisticated characters: Pinchwife thinks she has said one thing in the letter; Horner knows she has said another. Margery's straightforward use of language, then, does not align her with a culture of guilt; rather, it places her as yet another kind of deconstructor of the language games everyone else is playing.

The more complicated case of Alithea is well described by Thompson, who argues that she has the most trouble with the concept of *honor* because she takes it most seriously.<sup>49</sup> She does, of course, overvalue the

keeping of her publicly-given word, and she does misunderstand Sparkish's lack of concern with her inner qualities as generous trust. Lucy calls Alithea's "rigid honor" a "disease in the head, like the megrim, or the falling sickness, that always hurries people away to do themselves mischief" (IV.i.29–31). But Alithea's attention to her public image is not entirely without justification in her own world (however just Lucy's assessment may seem as a comment on world history). The matrimonial system which validates keeping one's word (or one's father's) rather than following one's heart is very much in force, and the plot does not demand that Alithea abandon Sparkish until after his public repudiation of her. The play situates Alithea as a mediation point between the public and private meanings of *honor*, creating in her the potential victim of a society divided between two versions of ethical reasoning.

## VI

The fissure between public and inward assessments of morality is also involved with Wycherley's use of *virtue*. In Horner's conversation with Lady Fidget in act I, he accuses her of merely affecting virtue. The frank confession of Lady Fidget in act V underlines that strand of humor: "Our virtue is like the statesman's religion, the Quaker's word, the gamester's oath, and the great man's honor—but to cheat those that trust us" (V.iv.100–3). But the semantic history of *virtue* is linked with the plot device of Horner's pretended impotence to produce a further irony. Throughout the Middle Ages, *virtue* bespoke "power" far more often than "goodness." Its derivation is from the Latin *vir*, "man," and by extension, "manly powers," "efficacy." Current usage retains this sense in the phrases "by virtue of" and "the virtue of this herb," and its prevalence was greater in the seventeenth century than it is now.

What makes the term such a powerful participant in the language games of the play is that it is precisely Horner's *virtue* in the old sense on which the comic turns of the plot revolve. Horner devises to trade public recognition of his manly virtuosity for private sexual and competitive satisfactions. (There may be a further irony in this for the seventeenth-century stage: as Kristina Straub argues, acting itself, putting the male body on display, brought with it suspicion of effeminacy in an era of changing gender economies.)<sup>50</sup> When the "virtuous gang" believes Horner to be potent as a man, they secretly value him because they love the sport, and the rest of the world thinks him impotent, "a privileged man among virtuous ladies," as Jasper Fidget taunts (II.i.439). He is, of course, more "privileged" than Jasper knows, since he can be virile (virtuous in the old sense) with-

out challenging the reputation of his mistresses for virtue.<sup>51</sup> The witty play with *virtue*, calling up both its old sense “power,” which describes Horner directly, and its new sense “goodness,” which describes Alithea directly and the other women ironically, produces almost dizzying equivocation.

## VII

The word *wit* takes us back to the issues raised in discussing *conversation*, as well as to the overarching ethical and social themes of the play. In fact, if any word, idea, or ethical concern has a chance of stabilizing the diverging sympathies the play arouses, it is *wit*. All the characters in the play admire wit (except Pinchwife, who deplores it in a wife and distrusts it in general) and all of them attempt to display it (except Margery, and she does display it under duress).<sup>52</sup> In one reading of the play, wit rather than goodness is rewarded, and the characters are arranged in a readable economy of wittiness. It may not be easy to see who represents rectitude in this play, but it is easy to see who controls witty discourse. To read the play this way is to evoke a specific cultural configuration: Dryden's “freed” and “wakened” English spirit, instructed by king and court to live up to the elegance of Europe, writing and reading books and treatises on witty conversation, learning from plays. But Barrow, although he recognized the acceptability of witty speech and mentioned paronomasia specifically, inveighed against its overvaluation in his “pleasant and jocular age,” or its substitution for the greater projects of “reason and virtue.”<sup>53</sup>

*Wit* is, of course, a word with two distinct senses, one older than the other. The old one derives from Old English *witan*, “to know,” and refers to mental capacities in general, including “wisdom, good judgment, discretion, prudence” and the like.<sup>54</sup> This sense survives and, by the eighteenth century, has deepened into what William Empson, discussing Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, calls “the high sense of wit.”<sup>55</sup> *Wit* as “quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, especially in an amusing way” does not turn up until John Lyly uses it in *Euphues* in 1579, but that was certainly its fashionable sense during the Restoration.<sup>56</sup> Thompson recognizes the split in the significance of the word *wit*, but declines to discuss the alternatives open to Wycherley. He quotes with approval Dryden's definition, “a propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject.”<sup>57</sup> My position is that *The Country Wife* manages its instances of *wit* most elegantly, not to suit one thought to its proper word, but often expressly to equivocate between two systems of

thought. The word is often adapted, in its different senses, to more than one character's discourse, or to more than one social or ethical stance available to the audience.

The earliest instance of *wit* in the play—Horner's description of Sparkish as "one of those nauseous offerers at wit"—brings up a meaning which continues to be drawn on throughout the play (I.i.228). Its class-specific social situatedness in the environs of the court and the theater is clear from the gallants' discussion, as they distinguish between Sparkish, that "pert rogue of a wit," and themselves in a series of metaphors which demonstrate their own sparkle (I.i.259). Rudely as they deal with him, Sparkish seems to prefer their company to that of his (alleged) friends at court: "wit to me is the greatest title in the world" and necessary to the enjoyment of dinner (I.i.303 and 317). (Barrow could be speaking about Sparkish when he castigates those "addicted" to wit, who do not "affect or prize any thing near so much; all reputation appearing now to veil and stoop to that of being a wit.")<sup>58</sup> This long conversation ends in the naming of a recognized group of wits, who, like Sparkish, sit in the "wits' row" at plays. This self-reflexive phrasing serves as a reminder that the gallants too are "offerers of wit"; unlike the well-off citizen Pinchwife and even Sir Jasper, both of whom have business to conduct, the gallants seek pleasure and justify their wealth by their clever conversation within their social circle. And similarly, theater itself offers wit and justifies its claim on social attention by valuing amusing "liveliness of fancy," with apparent success, to judge by King Charles's return visits.<sup>59</sup>

Horner claims to value wit in woman: "methinks wit is more necessary than beauty," which may explain his reluctance to sleep with Margery (whose resourcefulness he is largely unaware of) when the opportunity presents itself (I.i.395). Some of Horner's funniest dialogue is shared with the "virtuous gang," who keep up the verbal competition with him pretty well without actually winning. Harcourt also values wit in women, and Sparkish is eager to convince him of Alithea's. The joke in act II is that Alithea demonstrates plenty of wit in the sense the play has so far established; her verbal dexterity is equal to that of any other character. The problem is that both she and Harcourt have included in their expectation of wit, the older meanings "judgment," "discernment," and "prudence." Alithea cannot listen to Harcourt's protestations of love without responding as if he means something life changing by them, nor does he want her to respond differently. When she sees that he is serious and yet insists on her prior commitment, Harcourt replies to Sparkish's query, "has she not wit?" with "Not so much as I thought, and hoped she had" (II.i.245–50). He hoped she could not only speak cleverly, but see the error of persisting in her mar-

riage promise to the monumentally unwitty Sparkish. This weightier sense for wit is continued in Alithea's conversation with Lucy in act IV, when she clearly indicates that she understands Harcourt's greater claim to wit. Harcourt's disguise as the chaplain who will marry the affianced pair gives him a showcase for his witty equivocation, aimed at proposing to Alithea while keeping Sparkish in the dark. His "soul," "heavenly," and "divine," good evidence to Sparkish that he is "canonical," are of course also the familiar currency of the sonnet love style, as Alithea shows her wit by discerning.

Once the two senses of *wit* have appeared in the play, the conflict between them can be staged. The verbal facility of Horner, which has entertained the audience for the duration of the play, is taxed beyond its capabilities when he must decide whether to protect Margery or Alithea. He chooses lying, just as he has chosen it from the beginning of the play. Harcourt's claim to wit at this moment contrasts sharply with Horner's; his trust in Alithea, without the support of his friend, suggests wisdom, while Horner's lie underscores his ingenuity. (Many of the contrasts on which the plot depends come together here, including that between male bonding and the courtship of women. Harcourt chooses his future household in spite of his old friendship.) Lucy, heiress of the clever servant role in Roman comedy, saves the rest of them from disaster and confirms the rightness of Harcourt's trust. Although the word *wit* is not used of her, the garland for it belongs to her in this scene.

## VIII

To return to the related questions of Horner's role and the genre of the play, we might consider Ronald Berman's "Is it too much to suggest that, protected and emboldened by this magical disability, Horner is really an analogue of the satirist himself?"<sup>60</sup> Horner *has* made us laugh at nearly everyone else, primarily by his nimble wit. He is exposed to the audience in the last scene, but not to his most relevant rivals—the cuckolded husbands. He gets the last word, and, with it, praises his clever plot: "But he who aims by women to be priz'd, / First by the men, you see, must be despis'd" (V.iv.410–1). Horner regards the action of the play as a victory for him, and the back cover of the Nebraska Regents edition advertises him as "The resourceful hero . . . the scourge of stupid husbands and the hope of unhappy wives." A director can, by choosing certain inflections for *conversation*, *pinch*, *kind*, *silly*, *honor*, *virtue*, and *wit*, produce that satire, aligning Horner himself with satiric unmasking. In this mode, Alithea's loyalty to her promise is merely outdated ("bankrupt" is Robert Markley's term), delivering no serious moral censure on the world of the play.<sup>61</sup> Dryden may

well have seen the play in this light; its freedom from the melancholy brooding of the pre-Interregnum playwrights would have confirmed his pronouncements in "Defence of the Epilogue." The immediate and continuing (until the 1750s) success of the play in performance suggests an audience which could appreciate its intellectual sparkle and ethical detachment.<sup>62</sup> Such readings locate Horner clearly at the center of the play and the play at the far satiric end of the continuum between satiric and romantic comedy.

Barrow's position, however, can produce an equally coherent reading of the play. "Facetiousness is allowable, when it is the most proper instrument of exposing things apparently base and vile to due contempt. It is many times expedient, that things really ridiculous should appear such, that they may be sufficiently loathed and shunned; and to render them such, is the part of a facetious wit."<sup>63</sup> Had he deigned to see or read the play, Barrow could have interpreted it as an exposé. Horner, in this view, is not "worthy" of Margery's sexual favors simply because Pinchwife is unworthy of them.<sup>64</sup> Such a reading enables a centering of the festive potential of the bond between Alithea and Harcourt, displacing the detached Horner, who "alas, cannot" be a husband, in favor of Harcourt, who is "impatient to be one" (V.iv.386, 383). This performance would stress romantic comedy, a plot that "brings hero and heroine together [and] causes a new society to crystallize around the hero" usually by the formation of a new family.<sup>65</sup> Alithea is appropriate for this ethically central role because she has rejected the promiscuity and duplicity of the others all along, and Harcourt because he has renounced them in choosing her. The play itself may be said to invoke a structure of feeling which shares Barrow's view of wit without rejecting the theater: this is the subject position inhabited by Alithea. Barrow uses the phrase "innocent pleasure" to characterize just those aspects of playfulness and curiosity Alithea defends as "the innocent liberty of the town" (II.i.42).<sup>66</sup> Neither of them renounces the city or verbal sophistication; both insist on ethical ends for wit. In this reading, the balance in weighting bifurcated words would shift; honor would imply more than "reputation" and *wit* more than "apt expression." *Pinch* would have some force as actual violence, for older viewers political torture, for younger the domestic violence of the scandal sheets on divorce cases. *Silly* would suggest a valuable innocence as well as risible foolishness. Although these semantic inflections construct a weightier ethical universe, they enable a more festive concluding scene centered on an appropriate marriage.

I have attempted to ground two competing readings of *The Country Wife* in positions on society and language available in the late seventeenth century. Current debates about the effects of television on our cultural land-

scape rely on some of the same oppositions we have noted in the contrast between Dryden's views and Barrow's. In raising serious questions about the uses of wit and play in public discourse, Wycherley's play addresses "our own" concerns directly. But his practice is even more relevant in the balance and oscillation it achieves between the claim that wit is entertaining and enlightening in its own right and the notion that it exposes the follies and vices of an age to "due contempt."<sup>67</sup>

Campbell's production at Stratford emphasized all the heady, sophisticated wit the text of the play so amply provides, but his initial metaphor, Horner's scarred chest under his elegant clothes, lingered in memory, darkening its world. Watching it demanded a split subjectivity, which simultaneously enjoyed the triumph of Horner's witty immorality and counted its personal and social costs. This "postmodern" effect is produced neither by the predictable, because universal, structure of the human condition nor by the inevitability of verbal slippage, but rather serves as an example of how socially symbolic forms can be "reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social contexts," how a formal message encoded for urbane seventeenth-century English theatergoers may be resituated.<sup>68</sup> The "postmodern" effect is also not the one I am positing for Wycherley's original audiences, who were likely to have seen either a Drydenesque witty unmasking of hypocrisy or Barrow's exposure of the devotees of wit to "due contempt." Historical scholarship allows us to see those competing readings in the "congealed traces" of the linguistic record.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Dryden, "Defence of the Epilogue: Or An Essay on the Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age," in *Dramatic Works*, ed. Montague Summers (London: Nonesuch Press, 1932), 3:175.

<sup>2</sup>Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 67–8. Robert Markley also identifies Bakhtin's theory of language as appropriate for the study of the drama of this period, see his *Two-Edg'd Weapons: Style and Ideology in the Comedies of Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Bakhtin, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup>Helen M. Burke, "Wycherley's 'Tendentious Joke': The Discourse of Alterity in *The Country Wife*," *ECent* 29, 3 (Fall 1988): 227–41, 239.

<sup>5</sup>Ronald Berman asks, "Is it too much to suggest that, protected and emboldened by this magical disability, Horner is really an analogue of the satirist himself?" ("The Ethic of *The Country Wife*," *TSL* 9, 1 [Spring 1967]: 47–55, 55). Bonamy Dobrée went furthest in the sinister predator direction, calling Horner "a grim, nightmare figure" (*Restoration Comedy: 1660–1720* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924], p. 94). Genre is not offered here merely as a formal category, but as a clue to the situation or horizon of understanding—in this case, a divided one—which can be shown to characterize the writing and recep-

tion of a particular social formation. Fredric Jameson's contention that genre is "essentially a socio-symbolic message" and that "form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right" suggests that the genre markings of *The Country Wife* can be read to illuminate seventeenth-century social and cultural conditions (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981], p. 141).

<sup>6</sup>Laura Brown, *English Dramatic Form, 1660-1760: An Essay in Generic History* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup>Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: Univ. of California Press, 1976), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup>Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, ed. Thomas H. Fujimura (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), IV.iii.195. Hereafter, all references will be to this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>9</sup>James Thompson stresses the legal and ideological force of words in terms of the seventeenth-century's many loyalty oaths, whose phrasing was hotly debated. He writes, "The Restoration was a world in which civil and ecclesiastical appointment depended upon one's willingness to speak specified words" (*Language in Wycherley's Plays: Seventeenth-Century Language Theory and Drama* [University: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1984], p. 115). See Markley's second chapter for a view of late-seventeenth-century language theory that stresses division and controversy over theory itself as well as over specific verbal formulations (pp. 30-55).

<sup>10</sup>By "structures of feeling," I mean "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone . . . not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought . . . a structure . . . with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977], p. 132).

<sup>11</sup>The term "libertine offensive" is Maximillian Novak's in "Margery Pinchwife's 'London Disease': Restoration Comedy and the Libertine Offensive of the 1670s," *SLiit* 10, 1 (Spring 1977): 1-23.

<sup>12</sup>Isaac Barrow's life, written by Abraham Hill in 1683, is included in the first volume of his *Works*, 3 vols. (New York: John C. Riker, 1845), p. xiii.

<sup>13</sup>I was led to think about Dryden in this connection by Novak's essay and about Barrow by Thompson's references to his works.

<sup>14</sup>Thompson, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Barrow, 1:186.

<sup>16</sup>Barrow, 1:151.

<sup>17</sup>OED, sense 3.

<sup>18</sup>William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 708-64, III.v.30.

<sup>19</sup>OED, s.v. "adultery."

<sup>20</sup>Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Sexualism and the Citizen of the World: Wycherley, Sterne, and Male Homosocial Desire," *Criti* 11, 2 (December 1984): 226-45, 232-3. Such homosocial involvements are, of course, nothing new on the English stage; displayed quite openly, for example, is Volpone's exultant response to deluding the Scrutineo about his fraud and attempted rape: he is taken with his victory "more than if I had enjoyed the wench: / The pleasure of all woman-kind's not like it" (Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. Philip Brockbank [London: New Mermaids, 1968], V.ii.10-1).

<sup>21</sup>As Thompson argues, "Horner gains ascendancy over others by appropriating and exploiting their words" (p. 74). He is right, in the main, about his mastery of men, but Horner wins women the old-fashioned way, by being "dangerously attractive," as John Harold Wilson (*Six Restoration Plays* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969]) calls Charles Hart, the first actor to play the role, and by giving them his admiring attention, albeit briefly.

<sup>22</sup> Dryden, 3:175.

<sup>23</sup> See Robert D. Hume, "William Wycherley: Text, Life, Interpretation," *MP* 78, 4 (May 1981): 399–415, 402.

<sup>24</sup> Barrow, 1:159.

<sup>25</sup> See Norman N. Holland, "The Country Wife," in *Restoration Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. John Loftis (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 82–96.

<sup>26</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 165. Exposure and disgrace "make for pathos, or even tragedy" in a case like Volpone's, but Horner's destructive nature is exposed only to the audience, as they watch him fraudulently sacrifice Alithea's good name in act V. Most of the characters do not understand his gesture. Nor is he disgraced within the world of the play for it.

<sup>27</sup> Dryden, 3:174.

<sup>28</sup> OED, sense 11.

<sup>29</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, pp. 1606–38, I.ii.328, II.ii.4.

<sup>30</sup> William Taylor, "That blacksmith, / Who on his wall had drawn the devil's picture, / And us'd to pince at it with glowing tongs" (OED).

<sup>31</sup> Paula R. Backscheider, "Endless Aversion Rooted in the Soul: Divorce in the 1690–1730 Theater," *ECent* 37, 2 (Summer 1996): 99–135, 121. The countess's husband, a nail-biter, testified he could not have left such marks, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Even wives with clear grounds for separation from their husbands feared the public humiliation that attended their pleas, feared becoming, in the countess of Anglesey's words, "a deplorable spectacle" (quoted in Backscheider, p. 110). Because such cases had to be argued before Parliament, they did make their participants spectacles, but drama rarely presented abuse as *comic* spectacle. *The Taming of the Shrew* does dramatize the violence and humiliation of a wife; more often, such violence is threatened, as in Corvino's treatment of Celia in *Volpone*. It should be noted that the conclusion of the play removes Celia from Corvino's power, while Margery remains under Pinchwife's control at the end of the play.

<sup>33</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, pp. 1135–97, I.ii.63–5.

<sup>34</sup> Dryden is notably unclear about what is "natural" to the English. Their "dull and heavy spirits" result from "their natural reserv'dness," but their "fire" was in earlier generations "stifled under a constrain'd, melancholy way of breeding," suggesting that "fire" too was natural before it was culturally liberated in his generation.

<sup>35</sup> Francis Beaumont, writing to Jonson in verse, claims that, by being in the country, "the lilit witt I had is lost" (Jonson, *Works*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926–52), 2:375).

<sup>36</sup> See instances at I.i.368, I.i.384, I.i.390, I.i.393, III.ii.381, III.ii.382, IV.ii.51, V.ii.25, V.ii.28, and V.iv.214.

<sup>37</sup> See instances at III.ii.96, III.ii.99, and III.ii.132. Sparkish also uses the word to disparage Pinchwife, and Alithea to accuse Pinchwife of being like the confessor who taught the "silly ostler" to grease the horse's teeth by forbidding him to do it (II.i.202, III.i.20). In one instance, Pinchwife uses "silly" on himself. When Margery appears in public disguised as a boy, he is not pleased that she carries off the deception "so sillily," but cannot break in lest he "should be more silly to discover it first" (III.ii.381–2).

<sup>38</sup> One thing that any reading of the play notices about Sparkish is his earnestness about wit. Barrow makes a point that could be a comment on this scene when he writes: "if we must be venting pleasant conceits, we should do it *as if we did it not*, carelessly and unconcernedly; not standing upon it, or valuing ourselves for it" (1:160). In this formulation, Barrow resembles Baldassare Castiglione and his admiration for the courtier's *sprezzatura*.

<sup>39</sup>The pervasiveness of poetry writing by both men and women and the way it made up a kind of conversation through answer poems and satires is the subject of Arthur F. Marotti's *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), esp. chap. 1, pp. 1–73.

<sup>40</sup>MED, s.v. "silly."

<sup>41</sup>Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, pp. 143–73, I.i.81.

<sup>42</sup>Thomas Otway, *The Orphan*, II.310.

<sup>43</sup>Thompson, p. 74.

<sup>44</sup>Charles A. Hallet, "The Hobbesian Substructure of *The Country Wife*," *PLL* 9, 4 (Fall 1973): 380–95, 384.

<sup>45</sup>Alan Roper, "Sir Harbottle Grimstone and *The Country Wife*," *SLitl* 10, 1 (Spring 1977): 109–23, 118.

<sup>46</sup>Pinchwife has called her "changeling" earlier, when she misunderstands his accusation that she was complicit in Horner's flirtation with her (IV.ii.42).

<sup>47</sup>Holland, p. 85; Sedgwick, p. 232.

<sup>48</sup>See Curtis Brown Watson, *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960) and Thompson, pp. 75–80. Markley suggests that Horner is a "walking pun," his name identifying him both as the "chief cockold-maker of his society" and playing upon the corruption of 'honour" (p. 159).

<sup>49</sup>Thompson, p. 76.

<sup>50</sup>Kristina Straub, "Actors and Homophobia," in *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theater*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah C. Payne (Athens and London: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 258–80.

<sup>51</sup>A closely related semantic bifurcation occurs in the word *honest*, as it is used in the play. When Lucy assumes that Alithea will be honest in her marriage, she clearly means "chaste," as when Hamlet asks Ophelia if she is *honest* (IV.i.54). That is what Horner means too, but with a glance at "truth-telling" he responds to Lady Fidget's "you were so notoriously lewd" with "And you so seemingly honest" (V.iv.120–1).

<sup>52</sup>Pinchwife upbraids Sparkish thus: "Be a pander to your own wife, bring men to her, let 'em make love before your face, thrust 'em into a corner together, then leave 'em in private! Is this your town wit and conduct?" (II.i.198–201).

<sup>53</sup>Barrow, 1:160.

<sup>54</sup>OED, senses 1–6.

<sup>55</sup>William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 91.

<sup>56</sup>OED, sense 7.

<sup>57</sup>Thompson, p. 128 n. 20.

<sup>58</sup>Barrow, 1:150.

<sup>59</sup>I am, of course, suggesting here a self-critical form of satire. The most obvious satiric targets are those who are not as good at being witty as Wycherley is; but, by the end of the play, this sense of *wit*, however pragmatically successful, is thoroughly interrogated.

<sup>60</sup>Berman, p. 55.

<sup>61</sup>Markley, p. 169.

<sup>62</sup>Novak presents the case for the comedies of the 1670s as advocates for libertine ideals.

<sup>63</sup>Barrow, 1:152. This is, of course, a traditional defense of comedy, available in Lucian, Jonson's favored classical writer, and in Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*.

<sup>64</sup>Volpone tells Celia that she has “in place of a base husband, found / A worthy lover,” but no one reads the play as suggesting that Celia should buy that logic (Jonson, *Volpone*, III.vii.186–7).

<sup>65</sup>Frye, p. 163. Shakespeare wrote a good many of such comedies, but Jonson, the more popular playwright on the Restoration stage, tended to omit or downplay the final marriage.

<sup>66</sup>Barrow, 1:151.

<sup>67</sup>Barrow, 1:160. The long-running television situation comedy *Seinfeld* replicates this emotional structure. The characters are all eccentrics and hypocrites, in various degrees celebrated for their witty self-absorption, while the character of Jerry Seinfeld himself is only a little cleverer and slightly more detached than the others, enabling a reading of his as the satirist's voice. The viewer often finds humor in suggestions normally appalling (George's not-quite-expressed smile at the announcement of his fiancée's death, for example), forcing the audience member into a “postmodern” split subjectivity.

<sup>68</sup>Jameson, p. 141.