

Reconsidering Harcourt in Wycherley's The Country Wife

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Reconsidering Harcourt in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*

Wycherley's *The Country Wife* opens on Horner, the lead, telling his physician about his plan to change his reputation from that of a rake (promiscuous man-about-town) to that of a eunuch in order to gain access to women without anyone knowing. He withholds this plan from everyone but the doctor, who becomes his accomplice by spreading the rumor of Horner's impotence to the gossippiest women in London. Horner's sex life constitutes two of the three main plots, in both of which he gains access to a [married](#) woman and cuckolds her husband. He comes close to being found out but narrowly escapes discovery when the women of the play and the doctor reaffirm his condition, thus persuading the cuckolded husbands that they have not been made cuckolds. The other plot involves Harcourt, Horner's best friend, who falls in love with and immediately proposes to Alithea when Sparkish, the would-be wit whom she is arranged to marry, introduces them in an attempt to make Harcourt jealous and thus win his [approval](#). Harcourt then spends the rest of the play making failed attempts to win Alithea away from Sparkish. In the end, Horner's plots [intersect](#) with Harcourt's, and Horner slanders Alithea to keep his affairs secret.

Sparkish had kept Alithea's loyalty because ostensibly he was not jealous and seemed to trust her, but he believes what Horner says about Alithea without waiting to hear her defense and shows that he is not really who she thought he was, nor did he ever really care about her. Harcourt, on the other hand, defends her honor and trusts her, despite the slander, and once again offers marriage. Alithea, who had fallen for Harcourt but had to keep her feelings secret, is now free t...

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...and his insistence on ignoring Alithea's warnings. I assume that Harcourt relies on this stupidity and is thus confident and in control.

[26] Vieth 343.

[27] As Ogden points out, "His [Horner's] most serious mistake is to suppose Margery Pinchwife will share his uncomplicated view of sex." Ogden xxiv.

[28] See note 8.

[29] See note 10.

[30] Pat Gill argues that "Harcourt steps in to redeem Alithea from obloquy, claiming that his name and his word (his sign) will supply any lack she may have. Like Horner's confident play with language, Harcourt's deployment of his name to squelch rumors is a power maneuver, an assertion of dominance over the female domain of gossip." Pat Gill, *Interpreting Ladies: Women, Wit, and Morality in the Restoration Comedy of Manners* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994) 69.

[31] Hume 14-5.

[32] Canfield 254.

[33] Hume 15-23.

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