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October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Differences and Similarities Between Male and Female Values, Power and Honour in William Wycherley's "The Country Wife"

In 1640 the monarchy was overthrown and during the English Revolution, theaters were shut down. In the year 1649, Charles I was executed and a ten-year period of republican government (or the "Commonwealth") followed. In 1660, Charles II was brought over from France to replace his brother on the throne. In this same year, the theaters re-opened. There was a newfound interest in older plays since not much had been written during this twenty-year period. Before this time, men played all roles on stage, including female roles. However, a new tradition was brought along with Charles II from France: allowing women to perform on stage. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a difference between men and women was acknowledged. Females were still seen as inferior, but they were seen a different from men. William Wycherley's "The Country Wife" was written in 1675 and was considered controversial for its sexual explicitness. This polished comedy of manners applies themes of sexual desire, reputation, honour, wit and virtue. Although this play focuses on the differences between men and women in a patriarchal setting, it also points out the similarities in values and behaviours. Much of this play calls upon the hypocrisy of 18<sup>th</sup> century aristocracy, specifically the difference between the true nature of women (their private activities) and their outward appearance (virtue and honour). This essay will explore the solidarity of same-sex relationships, and the meaning of honour and reputation respectable to the female and male networks.

In the first act, Horner, Dorilant and Harcourt speak about the enjoyment of male relationships and renounce women. Mr. Horner strategically participates in the male network in order to gain the fellow aristocrats' trust. Horner says, "Women serve but to keep a man from

better company; though I can't enjoy them, I shall you the more. Good fellowship, and friendship are lasting, rational and manly pleasures" (2220). Horner implies that female companionship is only good for sexual matter, and he cannot enjoy them because he is a eunuch. Throughout the play, many of the men agree with the concept that wives are fundamentally long-term sexual partners, rather than equals in a loyal relationship. Horner's hypocrisy and lies about his sexual impotence create a false sense of brotherhood between the men. Horner wants the men to bond over the irrationality of women. The idea that male bonding created by speaking ill about their women is used in the play to emphasize the patriarchy and the inferiority of the female personas. Although there is a transition between gender relations at this time, women are still disempowered, and having feminine qualities is considered a negative trait. Dorilant says "Nay, I dare I swear, they won't admit you to play at cards with them, go to plays with 'em, or do the little duties which other shadows of men are wont to do for 'em" (2220). Dorilant explains that the more time they spend with the women, the less masculine they become, hence "shadows of men", meaning shadows of the men they once were. The "little duties" which refer to feminine activities, take away their masculinity. The men believe they outwit the women, they believe they are superior and consider themselves figures of authority and power.

However, the knowledge we gain through Horner and his participation in the female network, gives us the insight that the women are also quite witty themselves. Their most important qualities have absolutely nothing to do with their personalities. As long as they are virtuous, chaste women, then they are good enough to marry within their social class. Therefore, it is incredibly imperative that society know they are virtuous, even if they are not. The women focus on the value of honour, which in this play is synonymous with reputation. In the same way Horner, Dorilant and Harcourt discuss the negative traits of women, Lady Fidget, Squeamish and

Dainty discuss the dishonourable behaviour of the men. They explain that men partake in affairs with women out of their rank which is quite disreputable. Dainty says “They are come to think crossbreeding for themselves best, as well as for their dogs and horses” (2232). Staying within one’s social circle is essential for a virtuous reputation. It is something the women value, yet they point out it is something the men do not, and are rather careless about it. Lady Fidget explains that it is not honourable to lie with someone of a different class, “But still ‘tis an arranter shame for a noble person to neglect her own honour and defame her own noble person with little inconsiderate fellows” (2233). The fellows Fidget refers to are men of a lower class. Squeamish calls the lower class women the aristocratic men lie with “playhouse creatures” (2232). Dainty’s logic is that if one lies with another nobleman it is like being with one’s husband which makes the affair appropriate. However, in contradiction, the women then debate the benefits of laying with men of lower class, “‘Tis true, nobody takes notice of a private man, and therefore, with him ‘tis more secret, and the crime’s the less when ‘tis not known;” (2233). It is more secretive to have an affair with a man of lower class because he is less noticed, and there is less interest in people below their status. Therefore it may be more safe to sleep with private men.

The power structure between men and women in this play is very amusing. In a way, the women have more power and are more successful at outwitting the men. Although marriage is considered a business transaction and women are treated as their husband’s possessions, they find a way to have secretive authority. They keep their reputation of being honourable women, but at the same time can fulfill their sexual desires. Horner’s trickery and position in both female and male networks allows them to do so. In the end, the women bond even more closely than any of the men. Their same-sex solidarity becomes more evident when they all find out they have

been sleeping with the same man. Lady Fidget advises the women to forget their jealousies and instead keep Horner's secret

Well then, there's no remedy; sister sharers, let us not fall out, but have a care of our honour. Though we get no presents, no jewels of him, we are savers of our honour, the jewel of most value and use, which shines yet to the world unsuspected, though it be counterfeit. (2277)

In order to keep each of their secrets safe, and keep their reputations in good standing, they must put aside their jealousies and be agreeable to sleep with Horner. The women are not as different from men in their tactics and sexual desires. They drink and sing and begin to confess their sexual escapades which is typical masculine behaviour.

The theme of appearance versus reality is prominent throughout the play. The men wish to be seen as powerful, witty, married men with loyal wives. The women wish to be seen as honourable, chaste and obedient. However, through Horner and the double-privileged view (we have the same knowledge as Horner that the other characters do not have access to), it is evident that secrecy and hypocrisy play an important role. Although men and women are seen as different, (women still seen as the inferior species), they both desire and value the same – to maintain their reputations and upper class status. Essentially success at sex and wit may mean the same for both genders. For men, success at sex and wit is to not become a cuckold, to own obedient women and to be more intelligent than women (Pinchwife's strategy of marrying a fool). For women, success at sex is to keep their adultery a secret and success at wit is to fool everyone (including their husbands) into believing that they are virtuous and loyal wives. Horner's character exposes the lies behind both male and female networks he participates in. Overall, Wycherley's play comments and critiques on the division of social classes, the

conventions of marriage, stereotypes of male and female behaviours (and challenges them), and 18<sup>th</sup> century hypocrisy within the aristocratic social structure. The power dynamic between the genders is constantly battling but one concept remains the ultimate goal and that is honour.

Throughout all the contradiction and hypocrisy, where does honour truly reside in this play? Can one gender be considered more honourable than the other?