

The Art of Adultery: Cuckoldry and Disguise in William
Wycherley's *The Country Wife*

Motto: The Masters of Manipulation

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Introduction

In William Wycherley's Restoration comedy *The Country Wife*, cuckoldry – that is, the extramarital relations of wives and seducers – constitutes one of the central themes in the play, and, in manipulating the various games of cuckoldry, disguise becomes the characters' most important instrument. Although the main characters display a wide variety of disguise techniques – including cross-dressing, pseudo impotence, pretence of honour, and manipulation of letters –, they are united by one major aim: with the help of concealment, they all seek to establish love affairs that would otherwise collide with the social rules. Therefore, disguise becomes a central organizing function through which characters take part in the game of cuckoldry; and the present essay is going to examine how two female characters in the play use disguise in order to gain control in the system of cuckoldry.

Before examining the two individual cases of disguise, however, in Chapters 1 and 2 I will present a theoretical framework, which I will use to interpret Wycherley's play. In Chapter 1 I am going to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential study of the play to give a structural analysis of how cuckoldry functions in Wycherley's world and will introduce the notion of homosociality. In Chapter 2 I will explore the function of disguise in the game of cuckoldry, tracing the origins of Wycherley's use of disguise in the play in Restoration society and the Restoration theatre.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I am going to analyse two individual cases of the use of disguise in Wycherley's play. I will argue that the female characters who use disguise in these instances manage to break out of the role that the system of cuckoldry imposes on them: they become more than mere objects by taking control of their husbands. In Chapter 3 I will demonstrate how one of the London ladies, Lady Fidget uses pretence of honour as a concealment that enables her to manipulate the male-driven system of cuckoldry as well as to achieve her own homosocial aims. Finally, in Chapter 4 I will demonstrate how the title-character of the play, Margery Pinchwife, despite her initial lack of experience, gradually learns how to master the art of adultery while displaying four instances of disguise, and, in this way, also subverts the male-dominated system.

Chapter 1: Cuckoldry and Homosociality

1.1 Cuckoldry

As I have argued above, in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, cuckoldry becomes a primary driving force behind the plot as the play demonstrates various instances of characters making efforts at accomplishing extramarital affairs. Nevertheless, in order for us to understand how cuckoldry functions as a chief social engine in the play, we first need to elucidate the different elements, aims and rules of the concept in question. With the help of recent sociological approaches to Wycherley's play, in this chapter, I am going to discuss the structural features of cuckoldry from the perspective of how it correlates to the notion of marriage in the first place.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, American writer and critic specializing in the field of gender studies, interprets cuckoldry as a form of "male traffic in women" and describes it as "the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (*Between Men* 25-6). In other words, cuckoldry is a fundamentally male-dominated system where women are reduced to mere objects in the symbolic exchange between men who thus seek to form bonds with other males. The aim of these men is to obtain recognition: they simply use sexual contacts with married women in order to establish reputation among other male members of the society, and thus strengthen the male ties. For cuckoldry to come into being, however, there is an essential criterion without which it simply could not function, that is marriage.

Sedgwick bases her analysis of cuckoldry on Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of marriage, who discusses marital customs in his study entitled *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. According to Lévi-Strauss, marriage – similarly to the system of cuckoldry –, is based on the exchange of women between males. He explains the gender structure of marriage as follows: "The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, [...] but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place" (117). In making this comment, Lévi-Strauss suggests that in marriage, the bond between males becomes primary to that of man and woman, therefore marriage is not established between the male and female but between the males where the female

constitutes a kind of “channel” between the male partners, making the male bonding possible. This male bonding, in fact, comes into existence between the father of the woman and the man whom she marries; thus marriage becomes the treatment of women as property that is given to other males in order to form patriarchal alliances.

Sedgwick’s idea of cuckoldry and Lévi-Strauss’s concept of marriage seem to agree at two major points: both concepts are based on a fundamentally male bond and both rely on the objectification of women. In Sedgwick’s analysis, marriage, in fact, becomes the basis of cuckoldry: since the wife is treated as a property, the husband can be dispossessed of it. The dispossession of the wife means the loss of reputation, power and social status for the husband (which is why husbands are afraid of being cuckolded); while it also means triumph and reputation for the seducer (which is why men decide to cuckold other men).

Nevertheless, although both cuckoldry and marriage serve as examples of the male traffic in women and of male bonding, there are three significant points in which Sedgwick’s concept of cuckoldry diverges from Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of marriage relations. First, while Lévi-Strauss’s approach to marriage is based on equality between the male partners, cuckoldry is established on a fundamentally hierarchical structure. As Sedgwick claims, the bond of cuckoldry between males is

necessarily hierarchical in structure, with an “active” participant who is clearly ascendant over the “passive” one. Most characteristically, the difference of power occurs in the form of a difference of knowledge: the cuckold does not even know that he is in such a relationship. [...] The bond is entirely structured by the unequal power of unequal knowledge. (*Between Men* 50)

Therefore, in order for cuckoldry to be successfully implemented, the passive one of the male participants needs to be unaware of being in the position of the cuckold; thus cuckoldry is based on inequality in knowledge, where the one who cuckolds gains the upper hand, and gains recognition for his success among other (knowing) male members of the society.

Consequently, Sedgwick’s approach to cuckoldry seems to diverge from Lévi-Strauss’s concept of marriage in yet another point: while marriage facilitates the bonding of two males, in the case of cuckoldry, male bonding is established not only between the cuckold and the one who cuckolds him but also between the men who acknowledge each others’ successful acts of cuckoldry.

The third and perhaps most relevant divergence from Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of marriage derives from the first two differences. As Sedgwick points out: unlike the institution of marriage, cuckoldry – because of the complications in its structure – allows an opportunity

for the active participation of the women involved in the transaction. While the symmetrical structure of marriage unequivocally excludes the possibility of women taking control, the asymmetry in the illegitimate system of cuckoldry (deriving from the inequality of knowledge, and the involvement of a second type of male bond) makes this possible – even if cuckoldry is a male-dominated system, just like marriage. It is exactly this possibility of women taking control over the triangular transaction of cuckoldry that Sedgwick focuses on in her analysis of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*.

Indeed in Wycherley's play, the hitherto described male traffic in women in the form of cuckoldry becomes the chief concern of the play. We can agree with Sedgwick when she states that "The programmatic emphasis on cuckoldry in *The Country Wife* means that the triangular transaction between men of the possession of a woman [...] is simply the most patent subject" (*Between Men* 50). Nevertheless, the triangular system of cuckoldry is disrupted: as Sedgwick points out, the male-dominated triangular transaction – expressed in the various versions of cuckoldry – is undermined in Wycherley's play by the women who refuse to be the passive objects of symbolic exchange between the men. Sedgwick claims,

The status of the women in this transaction is determiningly a problem in the play: not their status in the general political sense but their ambiguous status of being at the same time objects of symbolic exchange and also, at least potentially, users of symbols and subjects in themselves [...] The play teaches that women are in important senses property, but property of a labile and dangerous sort. (*Between Men* 50)

In other words, despite cuckoldry being a male-driven bond in Wycherley's play, not only males but also females take part in manipulating it. Therefore, the status of women in Wycherley's play is contradictory: on the one hand, they are the above-mentioned objects to be exchanged, essential elements to the bonding of males; on the other hand, they are also capable of influencing the triangular system of cuckoldry, and it is necessary for males to recognize this twofold nature of women, otherwise they run the risk of losing their own position as able subjects in the triangular transaction of cuckoldry. According to the rules of cuckoldry, women have to be treated as objects; however, since they are also potentially capable of manipulating the transaction, men must be careful not to let women take control and thus threaten the male power structure. If males fail to do so, they also fail to establish bonds with other males, and thus fail to assert their masculinity.

To conclude, cuckoldry, which becomes one of the central concerns in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, can be interpreted as a form of male traffic in women where women are

treated as mere objects that facilitate the establishment of male bonding. The foundation of cuckoldry is marriage, which is also a form of the exchange of women; however, despite the common roots, cuckoldry seems to differ from marriage in three important ways. First, while marriage is based on the equality of male partners, cuckoldry is always hierarchical in structure because of the inequality of knowledge; second, whereas marriage establishes bonds between two males, the aim of cuckoldry is to seek recognition among a wider circle of males for the successful act of cuckoldry; and third, in the case of Wycherley's play, cuckoldry becomes not just a means of the males but also a means of the females who are given a chance to learn how to manipulate the triangular system of cuckoldry. Thus women become dangerous destabilizing elements in the process of men forming ties with other men, or, to put it another way, of male "homosocial" bonding.

1.2 Homosociality

Cuckoldry, as I have explained above, primarily functions in the play as a means of establishing and maintaining the male ties, which Sedgwick calls male "homosocial" bonding. She clarifies the idea of homosociality in the following way:

"Homosocial" is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.' In fact, it is applied to such activities as "male bonding" [...]. (*Between Men* 1)

That is to say, "homosocial" is a relatively new term that has been in use in the last few decades and is used to refer to the various relationships between people of the same sex; and, although both "homosocial" and "homosexual" are used in terms of same-sex relationships, "homosocial" involves strictly social relationships, especially between heterosexual men.

Sedgwick derives the phenomenon of homosociality from what she calls "male homosocial desire," by which she means "the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual genitality, and economic exchange – within which the various forms of the traffic in women take place" (*Sexualism* 227). Thus male homosocial desire comes to stand for the various social relations between the male members of society, one major manifestation of which is the system of male traffic in women in marriage and cuckoldry. As Sedgwick points out, the various transactions

of cuckoldry in Wycherley's play are strongly homosocial in nature; she claims that "'To cuckold' is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man. Its central position means that the play emphasizes heterosexual love chiefly as a strategy of homosocial desire" (*Between Men* 49).

The way cuckoldry functions in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* is indeed a perfect instance of the male homosocial bonding as described by Sedgwick. Marriage as a transaction between men is the basis of cuckoldry; and cuckoldry in turn makes use of marriage to strengthen the homosocial ties. H. W. Matalene agrees when – quoting Gagnon and Simon – he states: "they [Horner and 'all the young Fellows of the Town'] use 'sexual contacts with females as a device for confirming social status among males' – not as 'acts that value the women [involved] and bind together males and females'" (402). In other words, these male figures are heterosexual, but they pursue homosocial aims; and their main tool in acquiring their homosocial aims is cuckoldry: they seduce wives in order to verify their status among other males.

The main purpose of men attaining a steady homosocial status is to confirm sexual identity. Sedgwick emphasizes the importance of males proving their masculinity when she claims that "the men's heterosexual relationships in the play have as their *raison d'être* an ultimate bonding between men; and [...] this bonding, if successfully achieved, is not detrimental to 'masculinity' but definitive of it" (*Between Men* 50). By making this comment, Sedgwick implies that, in fact, all instances of cuckoldry in the play exist primarily to make the male homosocial bonding possible; and, more important, this bonding is a quintessential element of confirming male sexual identity.

As I have argued in the preceding subchapter, however, the potential intervention of the women disturbs the system of cuckoldry and male homosocial bonding in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*; as a matter of fact, women establish a kind of female homosociality, too. Since women are potentially capable of becoming active subjects in the triangular transaction of cuckoldry and thus undermining the male power structure, they may also pursue homosocial aims similar to those of the male characters. For instance, Lady Fidget, one of the gentle ladies of London, seizes control of the triangular transaction of cuckoldry by establishing an extra-marital affair with Horner, the protagonist, under the guise of honour, and so confirms her status among the London ladies as an able subject within the system of cuckoldry.

In conclusion, the primary function of the triangular exchange of females as objects in the transactions of cuckoldry is to help men establish male bonding and confirm their

masculine ability among other males – in other words, to facilitate what Sedgwick and other scholars call a form of male “homosocial” bonding. In Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, cuckoldry becomes a major means in strengthening male homosocial ties through cuckoldry; nevertheless, it turns out that not only males but also females are pursuing homosocial aims, as the example of Lady Fidget illustrates.

Chapter 2: Disguise

The analyses in the previous chapter have demonstrated that both marriage and cuckoldry are, in fact, disguised ways of establishing male homosocial bonds. Lévi-Strauss's analysis has shown that the institution of marriage primarily functions as a disguise to conceal the bond it creates between two men (that is, the husband and his father-in-law). We could argue that cuckoldry, in turn, reveals this disguise by drawing attention to the object-like status of women in marriage: since the wife is a property of which the husband can be dispossessed, cuckoldry can potentially undermine the disguise, thus interfering with the male bond it conceals. However, as Sedgwick's analysis reveals, cuckoldry serves as a form of disguise, too: while the seducer pretends to be interested in stealing the wife, he, in fact, seeks to fulfil his homosocial desire of attaining respect among other members of the male society. Therefore, we could say that the relation between marriage and cuckoldry – the relation that can be identified as the “most patent subject” of *The Country Wife* – is, in fact, a relation of disguise against disguise.

It is no wonder thus that in Wycherley's play, disguise functions as the characters' major device in playing, or interfering with, the homosocial game of cuckoldry: they display a wide variety of disguise techniques, including cross-dressing, pseudo impotence, pretence of honour, and manipulation of letters. It seems that in the world of the play, in fact, any form of self-assertion is only possible through the (successful) use of disguise; which, nevertheless, is a contradiction in terms: while the characters pretend to be someone else or manipulate others through some sort of disguise, it is just the disguise that enables them to fulfil their homosocial desires as well as to escape the social constraints that otherwise would suffocate them. In the subsequent chapters, I will examine how concealment, although temporarily, allows the characters to step into a position that allows them to take control over the triangular exchange of women, and, more specifically, how the fight of disguise against disguise enables the women to take control in the homosocial game of cuckoldry. Before the analyses of the individual cases of disguise in the play, however, I will briefly examine the function and use of disguise in Restoration society and the Restoration theatre.

The need for disguise originates in a newly emerging phenomenon in Restoration society, that is, the growing need for anonymity. Christoph Heyl identifies this new tendency in Restoration society as the so-called “incognito ritual” where, he claims, “the privacy of strangers or of people who wanted to be treated as strangers had become something to be respected” (120). In other words, regardless of whether a person was recognized or not, in the

Restoration era it became socially accepted to conceal one's identity in order to protect the personal life from being exposed to public interest. The incognito ritual primarily involved the concealment of the face, because, as Heyl explains,

It was a common notion that looking closely at someone's face enabled one to 'read' this face and thus to find out about a person's abilities, inclinations and motivations. The new taboo concerning eye-to-eye contact really meant that it was now regarded as a violation of peoples' private spheres to snatch their secrets from them by 'reading' their faces. (121)

According to contemporary view, therefore, the human face was considered as the most revealing part of the body, which could disclose one's inner secrets, thus making the person vulnerable to the public. Consequently, as Heyl continues to explain, eye-to-eye contact became a taboo in Restoration society, and, in order to protect their private spheres and to conceal their identity, people began to wear masks.

Originally a winter apparel, the mask (also called "vizard") became the most common way of disguise primarily among females; as Ian M. Borden claims, "Solely the province of women, the vizard was a commonly worn item" in Restoration society, "providing anonymity when away from her residence, thus protecting her reputation if she engaged in activities that some might consider unladylike" (152). In this way, the central function of the mask as a form of disguise was to protect one's privacy by allowing them to pursue (presumably illicit) activities that otherwise would have ruined their good name.

The Restoration stage displayed a mirror image to contemporary society where wearing masks was a generally accepted and popular phenomenon; as Heyl points out, "what happened on the stage was essentially very similar to what went on among the audience. In a situation where part of the audience was masked, the distinction between players and audience almost broke down, turning the theatre into a gathering of professional and amateur performers" (125). As a result, Restoration audience and stage merged on two important levels: first, since wearing masks was not uncommon among the members of the audience, it might have been easier for them to identify with characters disguising themselves on the stage; and second, the use of disguise on stage in turn reflected (and commented upon) the contemporary customs of concealment.

Nevertheless, whereas in Restoration society the primary function of disguise was to secure privacy, in Restoration plays the use of concealment became a (paradoxical) way of self-assertion; as Borden observes, "disguise or hidden identity allowed a character to move beyond the ordinary restrictions of class, profession or gender. [...] Appearing as a different

gender, or changing professions or positions within society [...], the disguise allowed a character to behave in ways that were not normally available to him or her” (148). In this way, by engaging in behaviour beyond the social norms under disguise, characters could manipulate their status in society and thus assert their self-identity.

In conclusion, as I have shown in Chapter 1, in Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* the relation between cuckoldry and marriage turns out to be a relation of disguise against disguise. This recurring motif of disguise in Wycherley’s play can be traced back to a newly emerging custom in the Restoration era: people began to wear masks in order to protect their identity and reputation while engaging in illicit activities that otherwise would stigmatize them. The practice of concealment in contemporary society was mirrored on the Restoration stage, too, where the use of disguise enabled characters to manipulate the social system and to achieve their individual desires. This is what happens in Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, too, where the various forms of disguise become major means in controlling, operating and undermining the central social engine, that is, cuckoldry; and, in the subsequent chapters, I am going to examine two different cases of how women take control over the manipulation of cuckoldry with the help of disguise.

Chapter 3: Lady Fidget

Introduction

“Our reputation! Lord, why should you not think that we women make use of our reputation, as you men of yours, only to deceive the world with less suspicion? Our virtue is like the statesman’s religion, [...] but to cheat those that trust us” (V.iv.113-9), claims Lady Fidget in the name of the female aristocracy of London. Her observation, in fact, epitomizes the primary motivations of the gentle ladies: in public they affect virtuousness while in private they pursue illicit sexual relationships under the nose of their husbands – in other words, they actively take part in the game of cuckoldry. Lady Fidget, being the most skilful and experienced player at this game, becomes the quasi mouthpiece of the London ladies (who call themselves the “virtuous gang” (V.ii.106)), as her opinions, behaviour and use of disguise represent the group’s general attitude towards the practice of adultery. In the following chapter, I am going to examine how Lady Fidget and her “virtuous gang” use the disguise of honour in order to undermine and thus control the fundamentally male-dominated system of cuckoldry in Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*. Before that, however, we first need to examine the central device that governs the entire plot of the play, that is, Horner’s disguise.

3.1 Horner’s disguise

Horner, in order to gain sexual access to the married ladies of London, concocts a plan of disguise: he pretends to be impotent, so that he can cuckold husbands while hoping to remain unsuspected. Horner explains the logic behind his plan as follows:

Ask but all the young fellows of the town [...], your women of honour, as you call ‘em, are only chary of their reputations, not their persons, and ‘tis scandal they would avoid, not men. Now may I have, by the reputation of an eunuch, the privileges of one and be seen in a lady’s chamber in a morning as early as her husband, kiss virgins before their parents or lovers and may be, in short, the *passe partout* of the town. (I.i.182-98)

By making this comment, Horner is assuming that he and his like-minded friends have in-depth knowledge as regards the behaviour of the London ladies: they think these females

feign virtuousness in order to avoid scandal and preserve their good name, while they are actually ready to engage in illicit sexual affairs and thereby participate in the practice of cuckoldry. Therefore, firmly believing that the set-up of his disguise can only lead to his success as a seducer – scandal is surely avoided since no-one would suspect a eunuch –, Horner considers his plan completely infallible.

Indeed, Horner's use of disguise proves to be successful for two reasons; first, he has previously acquired such a high position in the homosocial order by establishing himself as an able seducer that nobody would suspect that he fakes impotence; everybody assumes that his homosocial status is so important to him that he would never willingly risk losing it by pretending to be a eunuch. Second, he rightly assumes that the London ladies will be willing partners in the game of cuckoldry and he succeeds because, whereas husbands treat their wives as mere objects to be possessed, Horner counts on the women's ability and willingness to use disguise (in this case, affected virtuousness) and thus take part in the game of cuckoldry.

The validity of this latter assumption is confirmed through Horner's affair with Lady Fidget: not only does she prove a willing partner at the game of cuckoldry but she also turns out to be a remarkably skilful manipulator of disguise. Horner's liaison with Lady Fidget, however, also reveals the mistake in the man's scheming, as he fails to understand Lady Fidget's motivations for her actions. While he believes that she will take part in the games of cuckoldry and deception because she is unable to resist his charms, it turns out by the end of the play that her motivation has really been to take control of the game of cuckoldry and thereby to establish her female homosocial status in the community of the London ladies, the "virtuous gang."

3.2 The London ladies: under the disguise of coded language

Lady Fidget, as I have already argued above, proves to be an especially apt manipulator of disguise in Wycherley's play. In particular, she and the London ladies develop their own coded language, which becomes their fundamental tool of concealment with which they participate in the triangular transaction of cuckoldry. The use of language as disguise turns out to be in fact an underlying, if not dominant, motif in the entire play; as David B. Morris puts it:

The Country Wife presents a world of corrupted language in which fraud, perjury, and breach of trust have become the normative condition of mankind. [...] ambiguous language is a fundamental tool of the dishonorable and the false. In *The Country Wife* words mean virtually whatever the speaker pleases; language itself has become the ultimate form of appearance. (6)

Therefore, in terms of language, the play demonstrates a continuous discrepancy between word and meaning: the characters say one thing while they mean another; thus language becomes an essential tool of disguise in the game of cuckoldry, allowing illicit sexual practices to be pursued under the surface of proper social behaviour.

Lady Fidget and her “virtuous gang” become the masters of using coded language as a means of deception; and, according to Deborah C. Payne, the most spectacular example of such verbal duplicity in Wycherley’s play can be found in conversations between the London ladies and Horner. As Payne observes,

In deciding the word or expression to affect, Horner and the ladies employ only those signs encoded for select knowledge. Because these signs [...] have meaning only for a select few, it follows that they can be used for purposes of exclusion, inclusion, and deception. (411)

In other words, having developed their own coded language that only they have access to, the London ladies (and Horner) can easily exclude those uninitiated from the real meaning of their conversations while seemingly including them; thus the use of coded language becomes the primary means of disguise that allows the ladies to discuss adulterous affairs publicly, which otherwise would be considered disgraceful.

The most frequently used and therefore probably most significant element in the gentle ladies’ coded language is the word “honour,” which is well illustrated by the fact that, as Peggy A. Knapp observes, “there are over fifty instances of the word honor in *The Country Wife*” (462). Lady Fidget and her circle, by constantly using the word “honour” in reference to themselves, strive to preserve their good reputation and thereby conceal their extramarital relations. Morris further clarifies the functioning of the ladies’ constant abuse of “honour” when he asserts: Lady Fidget and her friends “associate honor with outward reputation alone. Lacking the substance of virtue, their honor resides only in words and appearances” (4). The word “honour” therefore becomes an empty term that only serves to disguise the lack of virtue (that is, a life of illicit sexual affairs), while on the surface sustaining the good reputation of the “virtuous gang.” As a result, the concept of honour and virtuous action are completely dissociated by Lady Fidget and the ladies; as Morris continues,

Lady Fidget and her circle, “women of honor and reputation,” embody most vividly the town’s perverted notions. In public they repeat the word “honor” with calculated regularity, implying their absolute probity. In private, all covet the pleasures of illicit sex. [...] So entirely have they equated honor with mere reputation that even adultery [...] can seem perfectly consistent with an exalted affectation of virtue. (4)

To put it simply, the London ladies’ coded use of the word “honour” is a form of disguise that enables them to participate in the game of cuckoldry: they can control their husbands and manage their secret affairs while the disguise of honour assures the illusion of their absolute probity.

What is more, not only do the London ladies affect honour as a disguise to maintain their social status, but they even give the word a specific meaning in their coded communication: in an ironic way, it comes to mean “ready to have sex.” This use is perhaps best represented by the dialogues between Lady Fidget and Horner who develop their own coded language already at their first encounter, with the word “honour” becoming the central metaphor in their discourse. It is Lady Fidget who initiates the use of deceptive language when, hinting at the sexual abilities of Horner, she inquires: “But, poor gentleman, could you be so generous, so truly a man of honour, as for the sakes of us women of honour, to cause yourself to be reported no man?” (II.i.623-6). Horner immediately takes the hint and assures Lady Fidget of his sexual capability (II.i.632-4); consequently, Lady Fidget expresses her desire to establish an affair by continuing the metaphor: “I have so strong a faith in your honour, dear, dear, noble sir, that I’d forfeit mine for yours at any time, dear sir” (II.i.641-3). As Morris explains, “Since there are others present, the code language permits secrecy, while [...] the real fact of adultery is veiled in the decorous illusion of virtue and gallantry” (7). In other words, while the other characters present may believe that Lady Fidget and Horner are discussing the topic of honour in a courteous manner, the two of them are actually laying the foundations of their liaison by assuring each other of their sexual availability and of their willingness to engage in an adulterous relationship with one another.

Lady Fidget in fact displays outstanding expertise in the field of deceptive language, which is probably nowhere better typified than in the famous “china scene” (IV.iii), where on the pretext of taking a look at Horner’s china vessels, Lady Fidget and the man have sexual intercourse in Horner’s quarters. According to Morris, this scene “epitomizes a world in which ambiguous language expresses a radical breakdown of civilized values” (6); in other words, the china scene may be rightfully considered the most spectacular instance of how the

disguise of coded language enables Wycherley's characters to publicly discuss adulterous matters that otherwise would be simply unthinkable.

In the china scene, Lady Fidget and Horner proceed with their excessive use and abuse of the word "honour," thus making the real meaning of their coded language even more evident to the audience. Upon arriving at Horner's lodgings, Lady Fidget claims: "Well, Horner, am not I a woman of honour? You see I'm as good as my word" (IV.iii.39-40). In making this comment, as Morris argues, "Lady Fidget is not simply claiming the virtue of keeping her appointments; she is employing [...] a private language which implies that she and Horner have already reached an understanding" (7) concerning their mutual desire to make love. As Morris continues, Horner "appropriately replies in the same oblique idiom" (7) and thus confirms that he perfectly understands Lady Fidget's intentions to lie with him, when he invites her to his bedroom as follows: "And you shall see, madam, I'll not be behindhand with you in honour and I'll be as good as my word too, if you please but to withdraw into the next room" (IV.iii.41-4).

It is also in the china scene that Lady Fidget demonstrates her unique inventiveness in the field of coded language by creating a new use of the word "china." When the arrival of her husband, Sir Jaspar Fidget interrupts her intercourse with Horner, Lady Fidget "pretends to have been pursuing her passion for ceramics" (Morris 7), saying: "[Horner] knows china very well and has himself very good, but will not let me see it lest I should beg some. But I will find it out and have what I came for yet" (IV.iii.119-22). Subsequently, under the guise of searching for Horner's finest china, Lady Fidget withdraws into Horner's bedroom, where she finally obtains what she has really come for: she and Horner make love – right under the nose of Sir Jaspar. In this way, the word "china" becomes Lady Fidget's disguise for her sexual intercourse with Horner, and, as a result, the word also acquires the meaning of "sexual encounter."

The use of "china" as a disguise for the sexual act becomes even more emphatic when Lady Fidget, having slept with Horner, reappears with a china vessel in her hand and the other ladies "begin clamoring for china of their own" (Morris 7), employing the metaphor invented by Lady Fidget. The ladies' repeated demands such as "O Lord, I'll have some china, too. Good Mr Horner, don't think to give other people china and me none; come in with me too" (IV.iii.211-3), or even, "I have known you deny your china before now, but you shan't put me off so. Come" (IV.iii.215-7) make the word "china" more and more sexually loaded; so much so that, as Morris argues, Sir Jaspar "must at this point be the only person in the theatre who

does not perceive that ‘china’ is being used as a thinly veiled metaphor” for having sex with Horner (7).

Lady Fidget’s use of “china” as a disguise has been interpreted in various ways by scholars. For instance, Payne argues that the metaphorical use of “china” emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the use of linguistic signs when she claims: the word in itself has no sexual suggestion whatsoever; instead, it derives the sexual connotation from its context and usage. As Payne explains,

Wycherley’s point here is that there is nothing inherently “sexual” about the word “china.” The humor of that scene derives from Horner’s and Lady Fidget’s ability to trade mutual confidences in a coded language which becomes increasingly sexual from the context, not the words. And that coded language by nature is arbitrary, suggesting that context alone creates meaning rather than the particular signification given to words. (413)

To put it simply, since in Wycherley’s play words may mean anything the speaker pleases, their meaning is not fixed but is gained through a given context and particular usage; accordingly, the word “china” gains its sexual implication through its role as an ad hoc disguise for Lady Fidget and Horner’s sexual intercourse, as arbitrarily invented by Lady Fidget. Payne argues for the linguistic skilfulness of Lady Fidget when she continues: “the use of ‘china’ arises situationally; nevertheless, these characters have the unscrupulous art to make anything mean anything else. In their hands, this ability is more than a matter of innuendo – it is linguistic revolution” (413-4). Therefore, although Lady Fidget invents the deceptive use of “china” on the spot, it is precisely the incidental nature of this use that makes it so masterful, implying that Lady Fidget could make practically any word as sexually suggestive as “china.”

As opposed to Payne, Morris traces the origins of the “china” metaphor in contemporary moral discourse, discovering an irony in Lady Fidget’s use of it. He argues that the china vessel itself already carries some sort of sexual implication when he claims, “China traditionally signified the outward beauty and fragile virginity of woman. Thus, the vessel displayed by Lady Fidget is a kind of ironic icon, its traditional significance betrayed by the grossly flawed virtue of its possessor” (7). In other words, the china vessel held by Lady Fidget emphasizes her deceptiveness: symbolizing the delicate appearance and purity of females, the china stands in an obvious contrast with the promiscuous inside of Lady Fidget. Morris goes even further in stressing the discrepancy between the china vessel and its holder when he remarks, “Fresh from her wrestle with Horner, Lady Fidget brazenly maintains an

outward appearance of honor. Despite her efforts, however, the piece of ceramic which she holds, like the metaphor she employs, vividly reveals the alarming disparity between fair appearances and foul realities” (7-8). Therefore, the duplicity of the china vessel as well as the “china” metaphor manifests the duplicity of their owner: whereas Lady Fidget exhibits a virtuous appearance on the surface, she secretly engages in the illicit pleasures of adultery under the disguise of honour.

Payne and Morris’s interpretations, therefore, lay the emphasis on different aspects of the china metaphor; what is common in these analyses, however, is that they both represent Lady Fidget as a masterful manipulator of language as a disguise. In Payne’s analysis, since Lady Fidget contrives the new use of “china” as a disguise spontaneously, she actually displays a unique inventiveness and expertise in the field of coded language. According to Morris’s reading, in calling attention to the utter contrast between Lady Fidget’s honourable appearance and her promiscuous way of life, the china vessel in fact also emphasizes how masterful Lady Fidget’s use of disguise is: she successfully deceives others into thinking that she is really as virtuous as she shows, while on the inside she covets illicit pleasures.

3.3 The real motivations of Lady Fidget and the “virtuous gang”

In the china scene Lady Fidget proves that, in accordance with Horner’s assumptions, she is willing to use disguise and thereby to participate in the game of cuckoldry. However, it also turns out in the course of this scene that her motivation is more than what Horner assumes; she is not only a skilful player at the game of cuckoldry but – as Matalene points out – she successfully appropriates the game to her own purposes, thus refusing to be a mere subject of male exploitation.

Lady Fidget’s real motivations are revealed for example in the way she thinks about her own adulterous affair. According to Matalene, she is actually more interested in seizing control over her husband than in enjoying the virility of Horner; as Matalene asserts:

Horner may think that Lady Fidget cannot resist “a Machiavel in love,” but if we look again at what happens in the famous china scene, we shall see [...] that she is unable to resist the temptation, not of Horner’s presence, manner, or person, but of cuckolding Sir Jaspar while he actually waits outside the room where she is having intercourse. (404)

Indeed we can see that in the china scene Lady Fidget's behaviour suggests that she regards her affair with Horner merely as an opportunity to gain control over the triangular transaction of cuckoldry and thus contradict her role as an object to be possessed by her husband.

If we look more closely at what happens in the china scene, Matalene claims, there is a sudden, seemingly inexplicable change in Lady Fidget's behaviour when she arrives at Horner's lodgings, which, in an odd way, may further clarify her motivations. Although she has previously expressed her desire to consummate the affair, she now seems to hesitate for a while, insisting that Horner "must promise to have a care" of her "dear honour" (IV.iii.45-6); but when Sir Jaspar arrives, she is suddenly ready to make love with Horner (Matalene 406). Matalene explains her whimsical conduct as follows: "Only Sir Jaspar's inopportune entrance and her rising above it separate Lady Fidget's impasse with Horner from her hasty copulation with him [...]. Surely, therefore, it is not the prospect of physiological satiety but the prospect of carrying off a particularly daring assignation that Lady Fidget really finds irresistible" (406). Consequently, on the basis of Matalene's argumentation, we could say that it is in fact Sir Jaspar's arrival that makes Lady Fidget realize: her sexual encounter with Horner – especially if it is carried out right under the nose of Sir Jaspar – is a particularly fine opportunity to take control over her husband.

Besides her desire to control her husband, Lady Fidget – just like Horner – has her own homosocial aims, too: by taking part in the triangular system of cuckoldry through her affair with Horner, she intends to confirm her reputation and establish a dominant homosocial status among the gentle ladies of London. As Matalene puts it, "[Lady Fidget's] motivation, like [Horner's], is homosocial. She uses Horner so that she may see herself, and be seen, not as a chaste wife, but as a woman of the world – able to work private promiscuities into a life of aristocratic public probity, without being seduced, and without being exposed *in flagrante delicto*" (406). In this sense, therefore, Lady Fidget takes control not only of her husband, but also of Horner himself. From her own perspective, she becomes the dominant partner in the triangular transaction of cuckoldry, because she skilfully manipulates both her husband and her lover in order to be acknowledged for her ability to successfully establish an extramarital affair while remaining unsuspected by her husband thanks to her mastery at the use of disguise.

Lady Fidget finally reveals her true motivations to Horner in the so-called drinking scene (V.iv), where she and the "virtuous gang" elucidate how they subvert and control the triangular system of cuckoldry under the disguise of honour. In this scene, wine-drinking provides the pretext for the honest nature of the discussion between Horner and the ladies; as

Payne points out: Lady Fidget and her friends seem to share the idea of *in vino veritas*, which Lady Fidget manifests in her toast: “By this brimmer, for truth is nowhere else to be found” (V.iv.24-5). Therefore, having drunk a significant amount of wine, the ladies are willing to unveil the truth and engage in an “honest exchange” (Payne 404) that otherwise would be impossible.

This honest exchange unveils the truth most directly in the “stuffs” metaphor. As Matalene points out, in the drinking scene one of the London ladies, “Mrs. Dainty Fidget coins *The Country-Wife*’s most apt metaphor for homosocial eroticism” (Matalene 406) when she comments on the promiscuous affairs of young gallants as follows: “The filthy toads choose mistresses now as they do stuffs, for having been fancied and worn by others” (V.iv.71-3). Therefore, in the ladies’ understanding, young gentlemen tend to treat their sexual partners as though they were fine garments (“stuffs”) that they can boast about. According to Matalene’s interpretation, “one wears such a partner, like ‘Stuffs,’ more for the pleasure of homosocial display than for bodily comfort [...]. The physical comfort of orgasm is, according to the ladies’ metaphor, incidental to the social pleasure of being seen as if adorned by the dependence of a frail lover” (407). In this way, in Matalene’s reading, the ladies in fact manifest their general understanding of the homosocial game of cuckoldry (which applies to the women’s practices, too): they argue that establishing promiscuous affairs is primarily for the sake of arriving at a high homosocial status in society, thus the sexual pleasure itself becomes an almost irrelevant side-effect of illicit affairs. Indeed we have seen that this is what happens in the case of Lady Fidget and Horner’s affair, too, where Lady Fidget exploits the man only to be admired by other females for her expertise at cuckoldry and thereby to attain a satisfying homosocial status among the “virtuous gang.”

This is clearly revealed both to Horner and to the spectators when at the climactic point of the drinking scene Lady Fidget finally decides to expose the naked truth about her illicit affair with Horner by announcing to the ladies that they have had each other, claiming: “this is my false villain” (V.iv.185-6). Matalene comments on her announcement as follows: “Thus does Lady Fidget deck herself out, before her peers, in the ‘Stuff’ of her affair with Horner [...]. The ‘dear secret’ of Horner’s virility comes out in the service of Lady Fidget’s homosociality” (407). To put it simply, Lady Fidget’s statement finally erases any doubt: she has indeed exploited Horner in order to boast about her expertise in the field of cuckoldry (by deceiving Horner as well as her husband), thus obtaining the admiration of her friends.

We could argue that in Wycherley’s play women in fact use men as objects in the same way as men treat women as their personal property. Nevertheless, in order to do so,

women have to be more creative: as Payne argues, “Men may openly keep ‘common and cheap’ mistresses, but women of quality must use their wiles in order to satisfy their desires” (413). In other words, when engaging in illicit pleasures, women need to rely more on their wits, while men may manage without it. Thus the crucial difference between men and women is that women have to be more subtle in their manipulative techniques: they need to break out of their object-like status unnoticed, disguise the disguise, cheat the cheaters and subvert what the cuckold-makers subvert. In this way, female wit plays a decisive role in enabling women to subvert the male-dominated patterns by manipulating cuckoldry: males must be allowed to believe that they are using women as objects so that the women can use them as objects.

To conclude, indeed we can say that Lady Fidget turns out to be the most skilful player at the homosocial game of cuckoldry in Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*. Whereas Horner thinks he has outwitted everyone by his feigned impotence, Lady Fidget outwits even Horner by using her disguise in a double function: while she deceives her husband by secretly taking control of cuckoldry through her affair with Horner, she also manipulates Horner by concealing her real motivations, and thereby confirms her unique expertise in the field of cuckoldry as well as disguise.

Chapter 4: Margery Pinchwife

Introduction

“‘Tis my maxim, he’s a fool that marries, but he’s a greater [fool] that does not marry a fool. What is wit in a wife good for, but to make a man a cuckold?” (I.i.473-5), claims Pinchwife, suggesting that a good wife should be ignorant so that the husband can take absolute control over her. Indeed his wife Margery, the title-character of the play, proves to be a naive, subservient country-wife at the beginning of the play; nevertheless, through her illicit affair with Horner, Margery gradually learns how to gain power over her possessive husband by appropriating the rules of cuckoldry to her own aims. She acquires mastery of cuckoldry by learning how to use disguise through four different instances, each of which displays a greater amount of control: first she is coerced to cross-dress and remains rather passive under her disguise; in the second case she is forced to write a letter, but this time she actively uses writing for her own purposes; in the third case she writes a letter completely on her own, disguising it as a letter of another person; and finally, on the fourth occasion she takes complete control by visiting Horner under disguise. In this way, by the end of the play Margery in fact becomes as great a manipulator of cuckoldry and disguise as Lady Fidget herself. In this chapter, I am going to analyse Margery’s four uses of disguise showing how she gradually becomes an apt manipulator of the triangular transaction of cuckoldry and gains self-assertion by undermining this male-dominated system.

4.1 “Under lock and key”

“Our sisters and daughters, like usurer’s money, are safest when put out; but our wives [...] never safe but in our closets under lock and key” (V.ii.88-90), Pinchwife states, implying that the value of a wife as a possession can only be preserved by keeping her locked up and guarded. Indeed Pinchwife applies this theory to his own wife: he keeps Margery hidden and isolated from the young gentlemen of London so that she can remain under his control and be his private property; in other words, he wants to avoid being cuckolded. Margery’s comments such as “Pray, sister, tell me why my husband looks so grum here in town and keeps me up so

close and will not let me go a-walking” (II.i.6-8) or “we sat amongst ugly people [in the theatre]; he would not let me come near the gentry [...], so that I could not see ‘em” (II.i.17-9) confirm that Pinchwife is excessively cautious not to let his wife meet other men, lest he should lose her as his personal property.

Pinchwife’s observations such as “good wives should be ignorant” (I.i.442-3) or the one I quoted in the introduction suggest that he has married Margery primarily because of her inexperience and lack of knowledge; in short, for her supposed inability to cuckold Pinchwife. As Rogers puts it, “[Pinchwife] has chosen Margery, a country girl so simple that she cannot be unfaithful to him” (Rogers 65). Accordingly, he calls her “silly” on several occasions throughout the play; for example, when he remarks: “She’s too awkward, ill-favoured, and silly to bring to town” (I.i.438-9), or, “since silly and innocent, [Margery] will not know the difference betwixt a man of one-and-twenty and one of forty” (I.i.465-6). Knapp comments on the possible connotations of Pinchwife’s use of the adjective “silly” in the following way: “Pinchwife values both inexperience and witlessness in his wife, equating [...] *silly* with sexual innocence [...], social foolishness [...], and a will subservient to command” (460). Still, despite her innocent naivety and her assumed inability to commit adultery, Pinchwife keeps Margery locked up, which in fact indicates Pinchwife’s excessive anxiety about losing his possession.

However, instead of preventing him from being cuckolded, Pinchwife’s plan to keep Margery to himself backfires and sets the machinery of the game of cuckoldry in motion. For it is precisely Pinchwife’s jealousy that makes Horner desire Margery. According to Sedgwick, it is not so much Margery’s personality as Pinchwife’s obsession with avoiding being cuckolded by any means necessary that attracts Horner’s attention. As she puts it: “[Horner’s] pursuit of Margery Pinchwife begins, not when he first admires her beauty, but when he first learns that she is Pinchwife’s jealously guarded bride” (*Between Men* 56). In making this comment, Sedgwick is arguing that Pinchwife’s abnormal jealousy (his continuous attempts to make her unseen and unavailable to other males) makes Margery all the more valuable as an object to be possessed.¹

Moreover, by guarding Margery so closely and forcefully isolating her from other males, Pinchwife kindles Margery’s desire, too: since she is coerced to be a mere object in her marriage, it is no wonder that she becomes interested in breaking free and taking part in the game of cuckoldry. As Knapp points out, “her [...] seduction by Horner may be seen as a

¹ As Matalene points out, furthermore, Horner’s interest in Margery is clearly homosocial in nature (408).

release from this captivity, however brief” (457). Also, by making disparaging comments on town life and young men Pinchwife further heightens Margery’s interest; as Vernon states, “every effort [Pinchwife] makes to keep his wife in ignorance only helps to teach her what he wishes to conceal” (qtd. in Rogers 69). For instance, when Pinchwife tells his wife, “Ay, my dear, you must love me only and not be like the naughty town-women, who [...] love plays, visits, fine coaches, fine clothes, fiddles, balls, treats, and so lead a wicked town-life” (II.i.90-4), Margery immediately expresses her aroused interest towards London life in responding as follows: “I did not care for going; but when you forbid me, you make me, as ‘twere, desire it” (II.i.111-3).

Margery’s interest in Horner starts when Pinchwife informs her about Horner having fallen in love with her in the theatre the preceding day. Upon trying to make theatre-going unattractive to Margery, Pinchwife says: “one of the lewdest fellows in town, who saw you [in the theatre], told me he was in love with you” (II.i.129-31). When Margery ecstatically replies: “Indeed! Who, who, pray, who was’t?” (II.i.132), Pinchwife realizes that his remark has in fact backfired and established Margery’s interest in Horner. At this point, Margery’s motivation is not to break free from her marriage or to control cuckoldry: she is excited because she knows she is desired as an object by another man. She is not yet familiar with the concept of cuckoldry; her comments such as “Jealous? What’s that?” (II.i.11), or, “if [Horner] loves me, why should he ruin me? [...] Methinks he should not” (II.i.141-3) all demonstrate how innocent and naive she is at the beginning of the play.

Therefore, because she knows he desires her, initially Margery (unlike Lady Fidget) is genuinely interested in Horner’s personality. Upon meeting Horner for the first time, she immediately expresses her attraction towards the man’s charms when she says, “O jeminy! Is this he that was in love with me? I am glad on’t, I vow, for he’s a curious fine gentleman, and I love him already too” (III.ii.471-3). It is in the course of the action that Margery’s object of desire changes: while gradually learning how the system of cuckoldry functions, Margery becomes more and more interested in taking control over her husband and mastering the game through her various uses of disguise.

4.2 Disguised as a man

Margery's initiation into the use of disguise comes once again from Pinchwife's failed attempt to conceal her. Having learned about the colourful life of London ladies, Margery becomes unsatisfied with her confined way of life and longs for visiting the town. At her unwavering insistence, Pinchwife eventually agrees to take her into the town; however, due to Margery's infatuation with Horner and in order to prevent cuckoldry, he decides on the spot to dress her in male attires as though she was her own brother, "little Sir James" (III.ii.120). Once Pinchwife and the cross-dressed Margery arrive downtown, they accidentally meet Horner and his friends, which immediately makes Pinchwife think of cuckoldry ("What a swarm of cuckolds and cuckold-makers are here!" (III.ii.212-3)). Horner, recognizing Margery under her disguise, makes his moves under Pinchwife's nose and, when the husband's back is turned, leads her away for a sexual encounter.

Pinchwife's failed plan demonstrates that the use of disguise is in fact a risky enterprise. By disguising her he regards Margery as his own private object that he tries to keep out of the triangular transaction of cuckoldry; nevertheless, since Horner sees through Margery's disguise (the concealment turns out to expose her as a desirable object for Horner), the plan backfires and Pinchwife finds himself trapped by the rules of cuckoldry.

This situation can indeed perfectly demonstrate the dangers of using disguise. When dressing his wife as a man Pinchwife has certain aims; however, by introducing disguise, he unwittingly opens the possibility of different outcomes, too: outcomes that may be directly contrary to his initial aims. When he disguises his wife, he wants her to look like a man, as if she was not an object to be possessed – that is, not desirable to other men; at the same time, however, he wants her to continue behaving as a woman is supposed to – in other words, to be a passive and obedient object under the husband's control. However, both of Pinchwife's expectations backfire: whereas in her looks Margery remains sufficiently like a woman for Horner to recognize her, in her actions she becomes a little like a man, as being dressed like a man gives her a certain degree of autonomy (which Margery comes to relish for the first time in the play).

What is more, the use of disguise here traps Pinchwife in an awkward situation, because he cannot reveal Margery's identity without the loss of his homosocial status. By dressing Margery as a man, Pinchwife in fact facilitates Horner's seduction as he cannot intervene without admitting to the disguise and thus completely humiliating himself. As Rogers puts it, "The result is that Horner can kiss [Margery] freely, while Pinchwife stands

helplessly by, unable to reveal that she is in fact a woman on whom he alone has a proprietary claim” (66). In other words, Pinchwife practically falls into his own trap: even when Horner makes his moves towards the disguised Margery, Pinchwife must still pretend that she is not his property, because, if he admits to disguising her, he also admits to his lack of power over her in the homosocial hierarchy and therefore loses his homosocial status within the male society. Even Pinchwife himself admits that he “must have a city patience” (III.ii.631), that is, the patience of a husband to endure being cuckolded by another male (Holland 287). Horner of course takes this opportunity to demonstrate his power over Pinchwife: having realized that the husband is bound by the rules of cuckoldry and cannot intervene without losing his homosocial status, Horner decides to provoke Pinchwife’s jealousy, saying, “let us torment this jealous rogue a little” (III.ii.511-2). Seeing that Pinchwife wants to leave for home as soon as possible (sensing the danger of cuckoldry, he continuously tells his wife to go home), Horner purposely prolongs the scene and, on the pretext of sending kisses to Margery at home, he boldly kisses the disguised Margery right in front of the enraged Pinchwife; and, when Pinchwife’s back is turned, he hauls her away for a sexual intercourse.

In her first use of disguise, therefore, Margery remains rather passive: first, she is coerced to dress into male clothing for Pinchwife’s own purposes; and second, although the male attires provide her with some degree of control, it is Horner who actively makes use of her autonomy by manipulating Pinchwife and thus taking the control over the game of cuckoldry into his own hands.

4.3 Writing as a disguise: the two letter-writing scenes

The second instance of Margery’s use of disguise comprises two letter-writing scenes, which clearly indicate that Margery is gaining increasingly more control of the male-dominated game of cuckoldry. The day after visiting downtown London, Pinchwife decides to put an end to the affair of Margery and Horner by forcing Margery to write a fake letter in which she expresses her supposed hatred for Horner and renounces any further contact with the man. Pinchwife commands Margery to “Go fetch pen, ink and paper out of the next room” (IV.ii.66-7) and dictates a harsh letter to her, while intimidating her with comments such as “Write as I bid you, or I will write ‘whore’ with this penknife in your face” (IV.ii.110-1), or, “write as I’d have you, and question it not, or [...] I will stab out those eyes that cause my

mischievous" (IV.ii.127-30). In spite of these threats, however, when Pinchwife leaves the room to fetch some wax and candle, Margery writes another letter in which she assures Horner of her affection and successfully substitutes it for the letter dictated by her husband.

Previously, in the cross-dressing scene, being costumed as a male has made it possible for Margery to briefly experience what it feels like to have control (however limited); and the second step in the process of awakening to her power is when, in this first letter-writing scene, she learns how language can be used as a form of disguise. According to Payne, up until the letter dictation scene, Margery has never previously thought of language as having such potential; as Payne points out, "Until the letter-writing scene in IV.ii, Margery fails to connect words with acts deceitfully, the only proper way in which language, gesture, and meaning can be connected in the world of this Restoration play" (406). Her initial lack of understanding language as a form of disguise is perhaps best exemplified in the previously discussed cross-dressing scene, where upon seeing the tavern signs in downtown London Margery remarks: "Lord, what a power of brave signs are here! Stay – the Bull's-Head, the Ram's-Head and the Stag's-Head" (III.ii.218-20). Clearly, the names of the horned animals refer to the concept of cuckoldry – however, Margery, as Payne claims, "reads naively, seeing the tavern signs [...] only in terms of their most obvious signification [...]. The sexual innuendo is as lost to her innocent gaze as are other important cultural codes within that society" (406).

Nonetheless, despite her initial lack of insight, Margery begins to comprehend the deceptive use of language owing to two major factors. First, it is in fact Pinchwife that brings her to this awareness by making her use language as a disguise in the letter-writing scene: he dictates the letter to her so that it seems it is really Margery who rejects Horner. Second, it is her newly acquired knowledge of the life of London ladies that helps her realize the need for the deceptive use of language, when upon thinking of how to manipulate the letter dictated by her husband, she thinks to herself: "Can one have no shift? Ah, a London woman would have had a hundred presently" (IV.ii.171-2). As a result, according to Payne, "Margery comes to realize that she too needs a 'shift' in order to deceive her husband" (407); in other words, she understands that she needs some sort of manipulation in order to achieve her own aims, and therefore decides to write her own letter. As Payne points out, however, learning how to use deception is not a quick process: "Margery's physical contortion during this scene, designated by her halting line-by-line repetition of 'what she hath writ,' shows us just how hard the codes of [...] deceit are to master – but how inevitable, given the nature of that society and its demands on social intercourse" (407). To put it simply, since she is inexperienced in the field of deception, Margery is slow to adopt deceptive language; nevertheless, since (as we have

seen in Chapter 3) the central tool in Wycherley's society is deceptive language, it is inevitable that Margery (despite her initial innocence and naivety) comes to acquire it, too.

In a sense, the letter-writing scene resembles the cross-dressing scene: Pinchwife wants Margery to remain under his control, but as soon as he resorts to the use of disguise, he exposes himself to risk and gives her an opportunity to manipulate the disguise in her own way. There is a crucial difference, however, in Margery's attitude to these two uses of disguise. Whereas in the cross-dressing scene she has remained rather passive, in the letter-writing scene Margery actively makes use of the opportunity provided by Pinchwife's disguise and subverts his plan by substituting her own writing for the dictated letter. Margery, in fact, deceives her husband by disguising her own letter as if it was the letter dictated by Pinchwife, thus actively appropriating the means of Pinchwife's manipulation for her own purposes.

The letter-writing scene, which is the second step of Margery acquiring control over her life, raises the question of identity, too. Margery's use of disguise becomes necessary because of the male-dominated system: Pinchwife wants to define her identity, to retain her as his own object of possession and to keep her under his seal; and this is why he makes Margery write a letter in which she renounces her affair with Horner. In other words, Pinchwife "would like to determine his wife's identity completely" and therefore uses her as a mere "writing instrument" (Bacon 433). Nevertheless, by resorting to disguise, Pinchwife involuntarily provides Margery with an opportunity which makes her an author. Bacon interprets the letter-writing scene as a contest over who should have the right to define Margery's self-identity; he claims,

the literal act of writing manifests [Margery's] self-assertion. Denied a separate legal identity, Margery enters into a private contest to decide whether she or her husband will be the author of her personality. Pinchwife would define her character by using her as a writing surface. [...] Forced to take an identity from her husband, the wife rebels by subverting the meaning of that identity. (433)

By subverting Pinchwife's original meaning, Margery in fact gains self-assertion: being the possession of her husband, she cannot have her own identity, but the letter gives her the opportunity to obtain self-identity by becoming the real (disguised) author of the letter. To put it simply, the letter-writing scene gives Margery the opportunity to become not just an object but an active agent in the system of cuckoldry – and Margery does not hesitate to make use of that opportunity.

Margery's use of the letter as a disguise further confirms her self-assertion on two more occasions. First, when Pinchwife makes Margery apply his seal to her own letter, Pinchwife's seal – "the stamp of his identity," as Bacon puts it (434) – in fact validates Margery's true feelings and therefore affirms her own self-identity without Pinchwife even realizing it. But Pinchwife unwittingly confirms Margery's meaning and status as an independent author on a second occasion, too, when upon delivering the letter to Horner he sarcastically remarks: it is a "love-letter" (IV.iii.312) from his wife, and continues, "I'll assure you 'twas voluntarily writ; I had no hand in't, you may believe me" (IV.iii.382-3). This is in fact another instance of how Pinchwife's plan backfires: he wants to assert his own control, but instead, he ends up confirming his wife's.

The first letter-writing scene leads to a second one, which marks a new step in Margery's gradual acquisition of the rules of the art of adultery. Having promised to write again to Horner in her first letter, Margery sits down to compose another letter while Pinchwife is busy with delivering the previous one to Horner. This time Margery expresses her utter hatred towards her husband, claiming that she loathes, nauseates and detests him (IV.iv.25-6), and asks Horner to help her break free from her woeful marriage, saying, "I hope you will speedily find some way to free me from this unfortunate match" (IV.iv.27-9). Nonetheless, before Margery could end her letter, Pinchwife enters the room, snatches the paper from her, reads the letter and forces her to finish it. Margery cunningly finishes the letter by signing it in the name of Pinchwife's sister, Alithea, as though it was she who desired to escape her unfortunate marriage with the help of Horner. When Pinchwife asks why Alithea would have Margery write a letter in her name, Margery cleverly replies: "Because, lest Mr Horner should be cruel and refuse her [...] and show the letter, she might disown it, the hand not being hers" (V.i.39-41).

The second letter-writing scene becomes the third step in Margery acquiring control over her possessive husband and mastering the game of cuckoldry through her use of disguise. It is in this scene that Margery's object of desire changes: whereas previously she has only been interested in Horner's charms, now her aim is also to break free from her husband by taking the control over cuckoldry into her own hands. Also, since this time she decides to write the letter completely on her own, she displays a higher degree of independence and control than in the previous letter-writing scene; and, by concealing her letter as Alithea's, she displays her growing expertise in the field of using disguise for her own purposes.

Similarly to the first letter-writing scene, this scene also raises the question of who should define Margery's identity. According to Bacon, Pinchwife, by forcing Margery to finish the letter, in fact "compels her to deny her identity" (434): threatened with physical harm again ("make an end of your letter and then I'll make an end of you [with my sword]" (IV.iv.44-5)), Margery clearly cannot sign her own name; therefore she chooses to sign Alithea's, thus seemingly denying her own identity as an independent author. Nevertheless, Margery's supposed loss of identity is compensated by the consequences of her letter: Pinchwife, wrongly believing that the letter will help him dispose of Horner by marrying him off to Alithea (he claims, "I'd rather give [Horner] my sister than lend him my wife [...]. I'll make him of kin to [Margery] and then he won't care for her" (V.i.73-7)), in fact helps Margery achieve her own aims. Although Margery's second letter is not delivered to Horner, it provides her with a pretext for visiting Horner: since Pinchwife favours the idea of marrying Alithea to Horner, he is ready to take Margery disguised as Alithea to Horner's lodgings, thus unwittingly facilitating their subsequent coupling.

4.4 Disguised as Alithea

The two letter-writing scenes thus lead to Margery's last use of disguise, which demonstrates the complete mastery she has gained in the art of deception. When Margery signs her second letter in the name of Alithea, Pinchwife wants to ask his sister about the letter; however, Margery, in order to avoid being exposed, insists on first talking to Alithea herself. Since Alithea is actually away from home, Margery only pretends to talk to her; and with the help of Lucy, Alithea's maid, she concocts a plan: she makes Pinchwife believe that Alithea insists on discussing the matter with Horner first and thus wishes to be taken to the man's lodgings by Pinchwife; nevertheless, she is so ashamed that she has to wear a mask before Pinchwife. Under this mask, then, Margery disguises herself as Alithea, has Pinchwife take her to Horner's quarters, and, while Pinchwife leaves for his business, the disguised Margery and Horner have sexual intercourse in the man's bedroom.

Her plan to dress up as Alithea and thus visit Horner is the fourth and final step in Margery gaining control over the triangular transaction of cuckoldry as this scene shows her complete mastery over the art of adultery. Although she asks Lucy for some ideas on what lie she should tell next (V.i.71-2), she initiates the use of disguise entirely on her own and

executes it single-handedly. Also, whereas her previous uses of disguise have been reactive (she has reacted to the situation in order to save face), here she acts in a proactive way: she uses her inventiveness not only to escape from a difficult situation, but also to initiate her liaison with Horner. This use of disguise is in fact the ultimate form of Margery's self-assertion: it is only by disguising herself as Alithea – whose name means "truth" in Greek – that Margery can finally achieve her own aims; therefore we could say that, in a paradoxical way, she can only be herself when she pretends to be the exact opposite of what she really is. As a result, by successfully implementing her own plan of disguise in order to cuckold Pinchwife and thus to gain self-assertion, Margery in fact obtains as great expertise in manipulation as Lady Fidget.

Therefore, when she disguises herself as Alithea and thereby lies with Horner, Margery accomplishes the final step in becoming a subtle manipulator of the triangular system of cuckoldry and takes complete control of her husband, thus finally breaking out of her object-like status in her marriage. Indeed she comes to leave behind her initial lack of experience in the field of deception and by the end of the play becomes a master of manipulation just like Lady Fidget herself.

Conclusion

Thus we have seen that Wycherley's *The Country Wife* indeed presents adultery as a subtle art that organizes the entire world of the play, the game of cuckoldry being in the centre of the action throughout. This game is generated by and is regulated to promote male interests: as I showed in Chapter 1, it is based on the objectification of women and primarily serves to establish and maintain what scholars call the male homosocial bond.

Because of its fundamentally illicit nature, the game of cuckoldry resorts to the use of disguise: as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, it becomes the characters' major means of operating, controlling and interfering with the homosocial game of cuckoldry. Besides providing the means for managing adulterous affairs, however, the use of disguise inevitably opens the possibility for the women involved to break out of their objectified status and to appropriate the rules of the game for their own purposes.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I introduced two examples of how two principal female characters of the play take advantage of this possibility and become masterful practitioners in the art of adultery. Lady Fidget, who represents the gentle ladies of London, uses language as a disguise: while sustaining the illusion of virtuousness by abusing the word "honour," she establishes an illicit affair with Horner, whom, as it turns out in the end, she merely uses to take control of her husband and thereby to attain a dominant position in the circle of London ladies. In the meantime, Margery, the "country wife," goes through a process in the course of which she gradually learns how to master the art of adultery through four instances of disguise and thus finally gains complete control over her husband. By the acquisition of mastery at the game of cuckoldry, both these women succeed in turning the art of adultery to serve their own interests and, as I have argued, they even outwit their male counterparts.

Wycherley's presentation of the art of adultery, therefore, provides an elaborate analysis of the functioning of Restoration society, which calls attention to the real power that women can exert in a seemingly male-dominated society.

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