

A Textual and Production History  
of William Wycherly's  
The Country Wife (1672-1786).

by  
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The 17th and 18th century English playwrights and actors such as John Lee, David Garrick, and Colley Cibber revised earlier plays to suit the popular taste. Shakespeare's Richard III suffered horribly in the hands of Colley Cibber. William Wycherly's classic comedy The Country Wife suffered horribly in the hands of John Lee and David Garrick. How was the Wycherly text revised and why? To answer this question it is necessary to present the textual and production histories congruently. The text was altered to suit the production, not vice-versa as is the trend in the contemporary theatre.

William Wycherly wrote The Country Wife in 1672.<sup>1</sup> The play was first performed on January 12, 1675 by the King's Company at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane.<sup>2</sup> There are five early editions of the play.<sup>3</sup> The original 1674/75 text is the most authoritative and is used as the basic text followed in every modern reprint.<sup>4</sup> There is a 1683 text, one for 1688, and two 1695 editions.<sup>5</sup> There are variations in sentence structure and capitalizations of certain words in the two 1695 texts, but none of these differences is of consequence.

There have been other versions of The Country Wife since 1695. Three have not survived while two have. The play was "Carefully Revis'd" for the May 23, 1715 performance.<sup>6</sup> Critical comment, however, does not exist for the performance; The London Stage merely mentions the fact of the revision. This same source tells us that the September 29, 1716 production was "Carefully Revis'd" also, but again a description of the revision is lacking.<sup>7</sup> Did these "Revis'd" editions differ greatly from the original? Were the scripts similar or different? These questions must remain unanswered because of lack of evidence.

There are indications of still another text which was used for the May 11, 1733 performance. The London Stage says that this version was produced "With a new Prologue and Epilogue proper to the play."<sup>8</sup> Once more, it is not known what this

edition contained, who wrote it, or how much the play was affected by it.

John Lee, a well-known actor in Rich's and Garrick's Company, altered The Country Wife to two acts for the April 16, 1765 performance.<sup>9</sup> Montague Summers has criticized Lee's alteration as being "muddled, miserably flat, and banal."<sup>10</sup> He is correct in his criticism, for the play lacks the bawdy humor and the intricacies of plot and character contained in the original. Lee's version omits many of Wycherly's characters, but Sparkish, Pinchwife, Harcourt, Dorilant, a servant, Alithea, and Margery Pinchwife remain. The most noticeable omission is Horner. It is likely that Lee was influenced by the moralist thinking of Jeremy Collier and David Garrick, both of whom believed that the stage was no place to exhibit "Immorality and Obscenity."<sup>11</sup> If such was the case, Horner had to go because by the standards of 1765 he would have been immoral.

In Lee's alteration, Harcourt is the man who is disillusioned with love and wants to sever all ties with women.

Well, a plague of all love and wenching say I.

Women serve but to keep a man from better company.

Wine, wine and good fellowship are lasting, rational, and manly pleasures. 12

Harcourt is disillusioned, but Lee makes no mention of him being a eunuch as Horner is in the Wycherly original. Lee has altered the character of Dorilant so that he is much the same person as Harcourt in the first version. Dorilant's lines in the Lee version are taken word for word from Wycherly's Harcourt.

Pinchwife is the same as in Wycherly, however, and he enters and lets it be known that he has taken a country wife. Dorilant has seen her at a play and is in love with her. Pinchwife senses this and grows jealous and afraid of being cuckolded. Margery and Alithea remain essentially the same characters as in the original. Margery, the country wife, wants to see the city, but Pinchwife forbids her to leave the house. He finally consents and dresses her in his godson's clothes in order to make her look like a boy. Pinchwife, Margery, and Alithea depart and meet Harcourt and Dorilant in the park. Dorilant and Margery steal away while Alithea rejects Harcourt in favor of her brother's choice, Sparkish. Pinchwife learns of Dorilant's advances and forces Margery, against her will, to write him a letter of rejection. She manages to fool her husband and writes Dorilant of her love. Thinking it the first letter, Pinchwife delivers the envelope to Dorilant. In the last scene Sparkish reads the letter to the amazement of Pinchwife, and Dorilant wins Margery. Then the tables turn on Sparkish

when Alitheia rejects him for Harcourt. Pinchwife and Sparkish become resigned to their losses, and the play ends with Alitheia gently reprimanding Pinchwife for his jealousy.

The elimination of Horner, the omission of the bawdy and obscene language, and the effort to make the play conform to the ethical standards of the period make the Lee alteration indeed "miserably flat and banal."<sup>13</sup> The play did, however, appeal to 18th century audiences, and was played as late as 1786 at Covent Garden.<sup>14</sup>

David Garrick's The Country Girl is another altered version of Wycherly's The Country Wife, and was first performed at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane on October 25, 1766. Unlike Lee, Garrick explicitly states his reason for altering the play.

.... The Alterer claims no merit but his Endeavour to Clear one of our most celebrated Comedies from Immorality and Obscenity .... There seems indeed an absolute Necessity for reforming many Plays of our most eminent Writers, For no kind of Wit ought to be received as an excuse for Immorality, nay it becomes still more dangerous in proportion as it is more witty--Without such a Reformation, our English Comedies must be reduced to a very small number, and would pall by a too frequent Repetition, or what is worse continue shameless in spite of publick Disapprobation.<sup>15</sup>

Garrick omits many of Wycherly's characters and adds some of his own. Harcourt, Sparkish, Alitheia, and Lucy remain the same as in Wycherly. However, Garrick has inserted a man named Jack Moody in place of Pinchwife as the jealous country squire, and a girl named Peggy Thrift as Moody's country girl. The play is called The Country Girl instead of The Country Wife because sweet, innocent Peggy is not yet married to Moody. Peggy's father has given her to Moody without her consent, and Moody is holding her against her will. Peggy is a melodramatic heroine, and Jack Moody is a melodramatic villain.

As in the Lee alteration, there is no Horner in Garrick's version. Harcourt is in love with Alitheia, and Belville, his nephew, is captivated by Peggy. Garrick is careful to make both Harcourt and Belville virtuous characters. Harcourt first ascertains that Peggy is not married before he approves of Belville's love.

Belville: But you must encourage and advise me too, or I shall never make anything of it.

Harcourt: Provided the girl is not married; for I never, never encourage young men to covet their neighbor's wives. <sup>16</sup>

The sanctimonious tone of the language is similar to this throughout the play. Garrick's version is much longer than Lee's, but the plot is basically the same.

Harcourt wins Alitheia, and Belville successfully woos the unwed Peggy. Even with the attempt to make Peggy a heroine and Moody a villain, Garrick has written the epilogue of the play to be an apology by Peggy for having forsaken the man her father wants as a son-in-law. She ends the play begging the audience for forgiveness.

Though the banality of The Country Girl is worse than the Lee alteration, Garrick's play was successful in its time, and was still being revived at the beginning of the present century.<sup>17</sup> However, it appealed to the melodramatic tastes of the period, and it cannot be considered good literature. It has not survived in print. The Wycherly original has.<sup>18</sup>

#### The Production History

No evidence states explicitly that January 12, 16, 5 was the date of the first performance of The Country Wife. It is known that the play was performed on January 15, 16, 5, but it was entered in the Stationer's Register on January 13. Therefore, it is only suggested that January 12 was the first performance.<sup>19</sup>

The Country Wife was one of the most popular comedies of the period. Between 1675 and 1753 it was performed 146 times, and after 1753 shortened versions were played as afterpieces.<sup>20</sup> The play remained at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane until October 4, 1725 when it was performed at Lincoln's Inn Fieldhouse.<sup>21</sup> On January 26, 1733 it was played at Covent Garden.<sup>22</sup> The Country Wife continued to be revived at all three of these theatres until 1765. The 1683, 1688, and the two 1695 scripts were used for performances during these same years. However, the casts, exact dates, and the theatres for many of these productions is unknown.<sup>23</sup>

Wycherly's comedy was the mainpiece of the evening's entertainment for ninety years, and most of the time it was presented in its full length with music and dancing between acts. The mainpiece was followed by an afterpiece which was usually shorter than its predecessor.<sup>24</sup> Between 1700 and 1729 there were five afterpieces which accompanied The Country Wife: The What D'Ye Call It, Apollo and Daphne, The Necromancer, Harlequin Dr. Faustus, and Harlequin, A Sorcerer.<sup>25</sup> In at least one instance the afterpiece was as popular, if not more so, than The Country Wife. The description of the January 26, 1726 performance states "The new entertainment of Apollo and Daphne . . . is follow'd by such Crowds every Night that the House is not able to hold all that Company."<sup>26</sup> Apollo and Daphne must have been extremely popular because it appears on the bill with most of the plays done at the Lincoln's Inn

Fieldhouse from January 14, 1726 to the 1747 season.<sup>27</sup>

The music and dancing was light-hearted and entertaining. Dances and songs included "The Irish Lilt," "Vaulting on the Manag'd Horse according to the Italian Manner," "The Mad-Man's Dance, a new dance perform'd by 16 Persons in Grotesque Habits in which a Black will perform a Variety of Postures to Admiration," (December 30, 1702) "The Chimney Sweeper's Dialogue," "A Trumpet Song," "The Turkey Cock Music," and many others.<sup>28</sup> The repertoire of music and dance changed each night in order to provide for a greater variety of amusement.

Once the Lincoln's Inn Fieldhouse imported a foreign company to produce the afterpiece to The Country Wife. For the April 4, 1716 performance a touring company played "an Italian Farce called The Whimsical Death of Harlequin." The nationality of the company is not stated, but it is known that they made a "short stay" in England before returning to Paris.<sup>29</sup>

The Country Wife was extremely popular with the royalty, and many times the play was performed at the "desire" of the King, a Duke, or of various Princes and people of "Quality."<sup>30</sup> The Country Wife was last performed as the mainpiece on November 7, 1753 at the Covent Garden Theatre although it was revived sporadically after that date. It was replaced as the prime attraction by Romeo and Juliet.<sup>31</sup>

Lee's two-act version played seventeen times between April 26, 1765, and November 1, 1769 at three theatres: The New or Little Theatre in Haymarket Square, Covent Garden, and the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane.<sup>32</sup> After 1769 its popularity dwindled and it was produced for the last time on February 7, 1786 at Covent Garden.<sup>33</sup> There were sixteen productions of Garrick's The Country Girl between 1766 and 1775 at the Theatre Royal, according to The London Stage.<sup>34</sup> However, Dougald MacMillan in his book Drury Lane Calendar lists twenty-eight performances at the same theatre during the same period of time.<sup>35</sup>

#### Footnotes

1. Leigh Hunt, The Dramatic Works of Wycherly, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar (London, 1940), p.x.
2. William Van Lennep, ed., The London Stage 1660-1800 (Carbondale, 1965), v. 1, part 1, p. 227.
3. Robert Megaw, "Notes On Restoration Plays," in Studies in Bibliography, Fre-

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- dson Bowers, ed. (Charlottesville, 1950), v. III. p. 252.
4. Every script I have examined is a reprint of the 1674/75 text.
  5. Megaw, p. 252.
  6. *The London Stage*, v. 1, part 2, p. 357.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 357.
  8. *Ibid.*, v. 1, part 3, p. 299.
  9. *Ibid.*, v. 2, part 4, p. 1111.
  10. Montague Summers, ed., The Complete Works of William Wycherly (New York, 1964), p. 7.
  11. David Garrick, "The Country Girl," in Three Centuries of Drama, English 1751-1800, Henry W. Welled ed., (New York, 1962), v. 16, Readex Microprint.  
Jeremy Collier died in 1726 which was long before the Lee alteration was written. Lee's play, however, was revised in accordance with Collier's moralistic philosophy as stated in his book A Short View of The Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage.
  12. John Lee, The Country Wife (Altered from the Wycherly version), in v. 17, Readex Microprint.
  13. Summers, p. 7.
  14. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
  15. Garrick. This quote is taken from the explanatory note at the beginning of the play.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 1. All the pages of the play are on one Readex Microprint card.
  17. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
  18. The Country Girl is not available except in Microprint.
  19. The London Stage, v. 1, part 1, p. 227.
  20. The number 146 was obtained through scrutiny of all the volumes of The London Stage.
  21. The London Stage, v. 2, part 2, p. 834.
  22. *Ibid.*, v. 1, part 3, p. 267.
  23. *Ibid.*, v. 1, part 1, pp. 227, 322, 368, 440.
  24. This is a reasonable assumption. None of the afterpieces are ever listed as full-length plays. If they were full-length, they would have assumed a position of importance equal to the mainpiece which was supposed to be the main attraction. However, some of the afterpieces were popular.
  25. The London Stage, v. 2.
  26. *Ibid.*, p. 851.
  27. The London Stage. I am able to make this statement because I examined the volumes to 1747.

28. Ibid., selection of titles taken from all volumes.
29. Ibid., v. 1, part 2, p. 395.
30. Ibid., p. 395.
31. Ibid., v. 1, part 4, p. 390.
32. Ibid., a count taken from several pages.
33. Summers, p. 7.
34. The London Stage. The count is taken from several pages between the years 1766 and 1775.
35. Dougal MacMillan, Drury Lane Calendar (Oxford, 1938), pp. 227-28.

#### Bibliography

Bowers, Fredson, ed. Studies in Bibliography. Charlottesville, 1950, v. III.

Robert Megaw's article is on page 252 of this book. Megaw shows how the two 1695 versions of The Country Wife differ in punctuation and capitalizations of certain words, but does not attempt to examine the more important differences there may be between them. He also does not tell us why it was felt necessary to write versions other than the original. These are important subjects, but none of the books I read make any attempt to answer them.

Downes, John. Roscius Anglicanus. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968.

This book is "A Historical Review of The Stage from 1660-1706." I had hopes of finding a great deal of information in it about The Country Wife, but such was not the case. Montague Summers in his introduction to the book says "It would appear that in his narrative he was trusting largely to memory, and that he had few, if any, actual manuscript notes by which to check his chronicle." W.J. Lawrence has criticized the book as being "A rambling stage record published in 1708, when the quondam prompter who penned it was in the decline of his years and his intellect." These criticisms are valid, and Summers' explanatory notes at the end of the short fifty-two page work by Downes are of more scholarly and critical value than the book itself.

Hunt, Leigh. The Dramatic Works of Wycherly, Congreve, Vanrugh, and Farquhar. London, 1840.

This is an anthology of the collected plays of each of these authors. It also contains valuable biographical and critical information about the works and the men who wrote them.

Leneped, William Van, ed. The London Stage 1660-1880. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965.

These volumes are checklists by day, month, and year of each play produced on the various London stages from 1660-1800. Lengthy and detailed introductions are provided for each season which tell about the nature of the year, casts, theatrical companies, financial situation, and, rarely, about the productions themselves. The fault of The London Stage is that it is primarily a checklist and not enough of a critical work. Little information is given which tells how the actors did their roles,

what the set was like, or about the critical reviews for the performances. Earlier in the paper I mentined that The London Stage claimed that two of the productions of The Country Wife were "Carefully Revis'd." The volume offers no information about the revisions such as who wrote them, how long they were, whether or not they were successful, or whether scripts were still in existence. It is possible such information is lacking. If this is true, The London Stage does not mention that the information is no longer available, The volumes could be made more scholarly if they included more critical data about the plays.

MacMillan, Dougald. Drury Lane Calendar. Oxford, 1938.

This book is a checklist arranged by day, month, and year of all plays done at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane from 1747 to 1776. These were the years that David Garrick managed the theatre. MacMillan's book is valuable as a checklist, but the same criticisms that were leveled at The London Stage apply also to Drury Lane Calendar. It would be more helpful if detailed information about the plays were given, or if the author would include information about where to obtain greater data about any single play.

McCollum, John I. Jr. The Restoration Stage. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961.

McCollum's book is an anthology of essays about Restoration theatre by authors such as Colley Cibber, Jeremy Collier, John Dryden, Thomas Shadwell, and others. The essays offer criticism of the day about theatre, and give a valuable insight as to the nature of popular opinion concerning theatre. Included in the book is a list of suggested topics for papers. Students can benefit from this list if they use it as an aid for doing extended research in the Restoration period. Teachers can use it as a source of topics for student papers.

Summers, Montague, ed. The Complete Works of William Wycherly. New York: Russell, 1964, v. 2.

Included in this volume are The Country Wife, The Plain Dealer, and Wycherly's letters and poems. Summers also gives the sources and theatrical histories for both plays. In pp. 5-8 he writes a theatrical history for The Country Wife and claims that "The Country Wife was given at Drury Lane, 28 November, 1748 .... This was the last production of The Country Wife until the present century." Summers has not done his research correctly because The London Stage traces the productions to 1765.

Waith, Eugene, ed. Restoration Drama. New York, 1968.

This book is a collection of representative plays of the Restoration period. It is a useful addition to the library of any literary historian.

Welled, Henry W., ed. Three Centuries of Drama, English 1751-1800. New York: Readex Microprint, 1962.

These are microprint cards with photographs of every play ever written by English authors. They are an invaluable source to those of us who study minor playwrights whose works are not in print.

Woodward, Gertrude, and McManaway, James. A Checklist of English Plays 1641-1700. Chicago, 1945.

This is another listing of plays by authors' last names. The same criticisms that



were levled at The London Stage and Drury Lane Calendar are applicable to this book. It contains no explanatory introductions and gives no notes. Of all the books of its type that I studied this is the worst.because it contains no additional information whatsoever. However, it is valuable as a checklist.