

Gender and Culture

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BETWEEN MEN

*English Literature
and
Male Homosocial Desire*

With a new preface by the author
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pleted unit, for at choice moments the poet attains to such a state, sees its soul-state reflected in a physical embodiment of its own unity [the fair youth]; and from that unique experience flower our supreme pieces."⁹

Finally, as I suggested in the Introduction, while genital sexuality is a good place to look for a concentration of language about power relationships, the relation of that language—and, in fact, of sexuality itself—to other power relationships is one of meaning, and hence intensively structured, highly contingent and variable, and often cryptic. Even the strength and shape of the bond by which “the sexual” is connected to the genital changes as extragenital bonds and forms of power change, and in turn the nature of that bond affects their distribution.

CHAPTER THREE

The Country Wife:

Anatomies of Male Homosocial Desire

SHAKESPEARE'S Sonnets seem to offer a single, discursive, deeply felt narrative of the dangers and vicissitudes of one male homosocial adventure. It includes a woman, but perhaps optionally: among the many uncertainties surrounding these historically deracinated lyrics is our ignorance of the range of shapes taken in Shakespeare's time and circle by nonheterosexually-routed male erotic relationships.¹ A text from the next century, William Wycherley's Restoration comedy *The Country Wife*, supplements the Sonnets: not by filling in the gaps in our knowledge of exclusively male relationships (a task begun by Alan Bray and others, using other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts), but in the opposite way, by examining a comprehensive range of responses to a social situation in which the routing of homosocial desire through women is clearly presented as compulsory. The play seems to offer a circulating library of different, vivid prototypes for this relationship, and I will use the next few pages to give darker outline to these prototypes so that we can use them as objects of reference throughout our readings of later texts, as well.

The given of *The Country Wife* is that cuckoldry is the main social engine of the aristocratic society depicted. “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. In the title of his study, David Vieth acutely calls the play an “anatomy of masculinity”;² specifying further, I will discuss it as an analysis of several different paths by which men may attempt to arrive at

satisfying relationships with other men. What I mean to show, of course, is that the men's heterosexual relationships in the play have as their *raison d'être* an ultimate bonding between men; and that this bonding, if successfully achieved, is not detrimental to "masculinity" but definitive of it.

The bond of cuckoldry differs from at least some social conformations of homosexuality in being *necessarily* hierarchical in structure, with an "active" participant who is clearly in the ascendancy over the "passive" one. Most characteristically, the difference of power occurs in the form of a difference of knowledge: the cuckold is not even supposed to know that he is in such a relationship. Thus, cuckoldry inscribes and institutionalizes what is only contingently a feature of male homosexual bonds—an impoverishment of horizontal or mutual ties in favor of an asymmetrical relation of cognitive transcendence. The most common image for a cuckolding relationship in *The Country Wife* is of one man cheating another at cards.

Obviously, "to cuckold" differs additionally from more directly sexual male homosocial bonds in that it requires a woman. And as Shakespeare's Sonnets showed, the male path through heterosexuality to homosocial satisfaction is a slippery and threatened one—although for most men, in at least most cultures, compulsory. To women, in addition, the heterosexual detour of male homosocial desire is potentially damaging almost regardless of whether it succeeds, although perhaps damaging in various ways depending on its "success."

The programmatic emphasis on cuckoldry in *The Country Wife* means that the triangular transaction between men of the possession of a woman—a transaction whose structuring presence in other texts it sometimes requires some inferential work to detect—is simply the most patent subject. 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 status within the particular ambiguity of being at the same time objects of symbolic exchange and also, at least potentially, users of symbols and subjects in themselves. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, "woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since insofar as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs."³ The play teaches that women are in important senses property, but—as in the Sonnets—property of a labile and dangerous sort. As in the Sonnets, too, there is something contagious about the ambiguities of femininity. To misunderstand the kind of property women are

or the kind of transaction in which alone their value is realizable means, for a man, to endanger his own position as a subject in the relationship of exchange: to be permanently feminized or objectified in relation to other men. On the other hand, success in making this transaction requires a willingness and ability to temporarily risk, or assume, a feminized status. Only the man who can proceed through that stage, *while* remaining in cognitive control of the symbolic system that presides over sexual exchange, will be successful in achieving a relation of mastery to other men.

Sparkish and Pinchwife are the characters in the play who embody most clearly the cautionary comedy of those who misunderstand the rules of this symbolic circulation. They are complementary characters: each has the page from the rule-book that the other one is missing, and each thinks that his page is the whole rule-book.

Sparkish's distinctive humor is his puppyish eagerness to be a wit, a spark, one of the boys; the transparency of his desire makes it unachievable, but the play does not consistently undercut the value of what he desires. Sparkish understands correctly that, in the total scheme of things, men's bonds with women are meant to be in a subordinate, complementary, and instrumental relation to bonds with other men. Dorilant, who speaks for the play's worldly system, explains, "A mistress should be like a little country retreat near the town, not to dwell in constantly, but only for a night and away, to taste the town better when a man returns."⁴ Sparkish likes the same gustatory metaphor: "It may be I love to have rivals in a wife," since "loving alone is as dull as eating alone" (III.ii).

But, Harry, what, have I a rival in my wife already? But with all my heart, for he may be of use to me hereafter; for though my hunger is now my sauce, and I can fall on heartily without, but the time will come when a rival will be as good sauce for a married man to a wife as an orange to veal. (IV.iii)

Sparkish's behavior when he introduces his friend Harcourt to his fiancée Alithea makes clear that his strongest motive is really not even to use Harcourt as a sweetener for the marriage, but to use his wife, and Harcourt's approval of her, as an intensifier of his homosocial bond with Harcourt and the wits. He instructs Alithea, "Him you must bid welcome ever to what you and I have," while the anxious questions are reserved for Harcourt's verdict: "Do you approve my choice?" "Tell me, I say, Harcourt, how dost thou like her?" "Prithee, Frank, dost think my wife that shall be there a fine person?" Finally—"Go, go with her into a

corner, and try if she has wit; talk to her anything; she's bashful before me." Thrusting friend and wife together is part of Sparkish's wishful sense of "what we wits do for one another." Pinchwife puts it more sourly and accurately: "Be a pander to your own wife, bring men to her, let 'em make love before your face, thrust 'em into a corner together, then leave 'em in private!" (II.i)

Sparkish says to Harcourt, "I'll be divorced from her sooner than from thee" (III.ii), and this is an accurate summary of his priorities. He imagines that a proper deployment (which he interprets as a lavish one) of his beautiful fiancée will help him secure not only a bond with but a certain mastery over the men he most admires. He does not fail to perceive Harcourt's desire for Alithea, but he is too quick and explicit in supposing that Harcourt's desire turns the man who is, after all, his own beau idéal, into "an humble, menial friend," whom he can fascinate and master with his valuable property. "It may be I have a pleasure in't, as I have to show fine clothes at a playhouse the first day, and count money before poor rogues" (III.ii), he says, would-be-condescendingly. He takes no pleasure in Alithea for her own sake. Walking with his men friends and glimpsing her, he tries to hide, worried that she will interrupt their manly communion and his later attendance on the King at Whitehall. And losing her, at the end of the play, he makes explicit,

I never had any passion for you till now, for now I hate you. 'Tis true I might have married your portion, as other men of parts of the town do sometimes, and so your servant; and to show my unconcernedness, I'll come to your wedding, and resign you with as much joy as I would a stale wench to a new cully; nay, with as much joy as I would after the first night, if I had been married to you. (V.iii)

Even in this final situation which is—according to the programmatic arrangement of the plot—supposed to show Sparkish as finally "jealous," it is still only for his reputation among men as a particular kind of man that he is jealous: "Could you find out no easy country fool to abuse? none but me, a gentleman of wit and pleasure about the town? But it was your pride to be too hard for a man of parts, unworthy false woman!" (V.iii). So the best recuperation he can manage—and it may seem to him quite adequate—is the assertion that he has simply acted like "other men of parts of the town," and the fantasy that he is still passing Alithea on from (male) hand to hand, like the used currency she is.

In treating Alithea as currency that has no inherent value, but takes on

value only in circulation among men, Sparkish seems to have access to half of the truth. After all, Pinchwife, his foil, becomes far more ridiculous, and in addition frighteningly violent, through his *failure* to see that a stable relation to a woman is impossible in the context of male transactive circulation. Sparkish is disastrously candid about the purely instrumental, symbolic value that Alithea has for him; Pinchwife, on the other hand, is forced to psychotic extremes of concealment in his unsuccessful attempt to withdraw his wife from circulation, to fix her value in herself and keep it for his own private use.

By Pinchwife as much as by Sparkish, the system of male traffic in women is treated as a given; the two men are only making different choices of relation to it. The primacy of the male-homosocial category "cuckold" determines every shred of Pinchwife's behavior as a husband—so much that his unworldly wife learns both to want to cuckold him and how to go about doing so, purely from his phantasmic and obsessional harping on the subject. His fetishization of women's value makes him as unable to perceive intrinsic value in a woman as does Sparkish's too-ready speculation in their transactive liquidity. "What is wit in a wife good for, but to make a man a cuckold?" (I.i). Pinchwife also joins Sparkish in describing women as potentially nauseating food that is to be made palatable only by triangular mystifications: "a woman masked, like a covered dish, gives a man curiosity and appetite, when, it may be, uncovered, 'twould turn his stomach" (III.i). The difference is that the seeming omnipotence of this triangular structure terrifies Pinchwife, while Sparkish over-relishes it.

Pinchwife speaks on the subject of cuckoldry and debauchery with the authority of experience, as well, having been "a whoremaster," "one that knew the town so much, and women so well." But, Horner asks him,

was not the way you were in better? Is not keeping better than marriage?

PINCHWIFE: A pox on't! The jades would jilt me; I could never keep a whore to myself.

HORNER: So, then you only married to keep a whore to yourself. (I.i)

As this exchange makes clear, Pinchwife has felt undermined by the very flow of women as exchangeable property among men. Only an arrested and individualized version of this relation of collective ownership promises to assuage his jumpy, projective terror of male encroachment.

Like the dealers in gold and silver who claim that the value of cash is merely assigned by "economists," while the value of precious metals is inalienable, Pinchwife imagines that he can pick one element out of the larger stream of exchange and stamp it forever with the value that is really, however, lent to it only by its position in that stream. "Our sisters and daughters," he says, "like usurers' money, are safest when put out; but our wives, like their writings, never safe but in our closets under lock and key" (V.ii). As this remark also suggests, the ambiguously referential status of women, currency, and the written word are all alike intolerable to Pinchwife. Forcing his wife to write a letter dismissing Horner, he threatens her, in a shocking and crucial image: "Write as I bid you, or I will write 'whore' with this penknife in your face" (IV.ii). Wishing to physically mark this particular piece of currency as inalienably his own—which is to say, as with the example of gold and silver, wishing to locate its value in its inherent physical nature and possession, rather than in its position within a larger, symbolic economy—his only recourse, the one he threatens here, inevitably betrays him in two ways. First, it would physically spoil the very object whose physical possession he claims is valuable. And second, the imprint he threatens to make is the very one that names her public and circulable character, his own worst fear.

Again, when Pinchwife has finished dictating his wife's letter to Horner, having repressed her every expressive impulse ("Her style, I find, would be very soft")—"Come," he orders her, "wrap it up now, whilst I go fetch wax and a candle; and write on the backside, 'For Mr. Horner.'" Soft and impressible as wax, endorsed "whore" on the obverse and "For Mr. Horner" on the backside, Pinchwife's little parcel of desire goes promptly off to its destination, but containing exactly the opposite message from the one intended, since his wife, "now he has taught me to write letters," has substituted an affectionate one of her own. ("There's my letter going to Mr. Horner, since he'll needs have me send letters to folks.") The systems of symbolic exchange in this world have the property that every attempt to stabilize them in terms of either private or collective ownership, either the materiality or the transparency of the objects exchanged, either the heterosexual or the homosocial aim of desire, brings the countervailing, denied term instantly, uncontrollably, and as it were vengefully into play, orienting the entire symbolic system suddenly around the denied term itself, and transferring its value to the now feminized (cuckolded) person of the would-be manipulator of signs.

While Sparkish and Pinchwife make complementary mistakes in ma-

nipulating the symbolic economy as it relates to women, Horner has the whole rule book at his disposal. He holds on at the right moments and lets go at the right moments; he values women just enough but not too much; he moves back and forth acrobatically and effortlessly between a privatizing and a circulative relation to the female commodity. Given that the object of man's existence is to cuckold men, Horner is a master. As in Shakespeare's Sonnets, the fiction of male androgyny—of a symmetrical relation between men and women in which one person (a man) could place himself "halfway between" the two genders in order to view, and enjoy, them equally—is an important thematic possibility for this play, and for Horner within it. Also as in the Sonnets, though, male "androgyny" actually functions, instead, as a mask for a more efficient manipulation of women's asymmetrically marginal, subsumed, and objectified status.

At first glance, or in Horner's own rhetoric, his strategy of pretending to be sexually impotent, "as bad as a eunuch" (I.i), in order to make his sexual escapades easier and safer for himself and the women involved, seems to offer a critique of and an escape from the circuit of male homosocial desire. Horner claims that he, unlike the men around him, is actually interested in women, rather than in the opinions of other men:

Vain fops but court, and dress, and keep a pother,
To pass for women's men with one another;
But he who aims by women to be priz'd,
First by the men, you see, must be despis'd. (V.iv)

Certainly, Horner is withering on the subject of male friendship, even as it is represented by the attractive Harcourt and Dorilant, never mind the unappetizing Sparkish. He tries scornfully to egg Harcourt and Dorilant on into increasingly extravagant and misogynistic declarations about male bonding:

HORNER: Women serve but to keep a man from better company; though I can't enjoy them, I shall you the more. Good fellowship and friendship are lasting, rational, and manly pleasures.

HARCOURT: [M]istresses are like books. If you pore upon them too much, they doze you and make you unfit for company; but if used discreetly, you are the fitter for conversation by 'em.

HORNER: I tell you, 'tis as hard to be a good fellow, a good friend, and a lover of women, as 'tis to be a good fellow, a good friend, and a lover of money. You cannot follow both, then choose your side. Wine gives you liberty, love takes it away.

DORILANT: Gad, he's in the right on't.

HORNER: Come, for my part I will have only those glorious, manly pleasures of being very drunk and very slovenly. (I.i)

Horner represents himself, and is perceived by some women, not only as excepting himself from the male homosocial circuit, but as making a sacrifice of his (homosocially defined) masculinity, in favor of the pleasure of women. Lady Fidget, for instance, wonders at him:

But, poor gentleman, could you be so generous, so truly a man of honor, as for the sakes of us women of honor, to cause yourself to be reported no man? No man! And to suffer yourself the greatest shame that could fall upon a man, that none might fall upon us women by your conversation? (II.i)

Nevertheless, the play makes clear in many ways that, far from renouncing or subordinating the male-homosocial destination of desire, Horner has actually elevated it to a newly transcendent status. If he gives up the friendship and admiration of other men, it is only in order to come into a more intimate and secret relation to them—a relation over which his cognitive mastery is so complete that they will not even know that such a bond exists. Horner's very name, to begin with, makes explicit that the act of cuckolding a man, rather than of enjoying a woman, is his first concern. His 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. Most pointedly, the ending of the play makes clear that a stable, nontriangular relationship with the hotly pursued woman is the last thing in the world Horner wants. Margery Pinchwife's naive assumption that because he wants to cuckold her husband, he must therefore want *her*, threatens the very basis of his carefully constructed strategy; and to protect that, to keep himself in circulation on the terms he has chosen, Horner unhesitatingly packs her off back to her violent and repressive husband. When she seems to threaten to be candid about her fondness for Horner, he grumbles, "Well, a silly mistress is like a weak place, soon got, soon lost, a man has scarce time for plunder" (V.iv); but it is his desire, not hers, that makes their affair a transient one. "Next to

the pleasure of making a new mistress," he says, "is that of being rid of an old one" (I.i).

Sparkish and Pinchwife are finally feminized or immobilized by their denial or repression of the schism in women's status within the male-homosocial erotic economy. Horner's more successful strategy, on the other hand, is not to deny, repress, or project but to voluntarily embody and hence control that schism. Because he is willing, not to undergo, but himself to represent "castration," and because he takes on himself the role of passive and circulable commodity—because in one register he withdraws from the role of rival to that of object—he is able in another register to achieve an unrivaled power as an active subject. Only because he is a man, however, does his renunciation actually increase his mobility and power. These women are sometimes "free" to act out the contradictions of their status, as well, but, as we shall see, they never achieve the cognitive leverage, the mastery of their whole range of choices, that Horner's pseudofeminized masculinity allows him to achieve.

I have already suggested how Horner's supposedly castrated status lets him act out one aspect of the schism in women's status, between being ostensibly the objects of men's heterosexual desire and being more functionally the conduits of their homosocial desire toward other men. Horner is able to pretend, mockingly and opportunistically, to his men friends that he now can value only homosocial bonds; in relation to Sir Jasper Fidget, for instance, he consents to be treated as domestic property, essentially as a woman. He does this, however, actually in order to be brought near the women: at the same time as men mistakenly see him as entirely homosocial, he can convince the women that he alone among men is entirely heterosexual, more interested in them than in their husbands' opinion of him. In fact, however, his motivation *is*, as we have seen, homosocial, only at a higher than usual level of cognitive manipulateness. Horner embodies the counterposed homosocial/heterosexual forces in women's erotic fates, but because he is a man and therefore an active subject of male homosocial desire—and because he alone realizes that men's homosocial and heterosexual desires need not be opposites but may be entirely complicit—he is able to use the apparent contradictions to his advantage against both men and women.

Similarly, Horner both acts out and exploits the schism between the private and public aspects of women's status as objects of possession and exchange. One manifestation of this, as we suggested in relation to Margery Pinchwife, is the apparently contradictory illusions of materiality and

immateriality of the (symbolic) object of exchange. Horner carries out a brilliant parody of that tension in the famous "china" scene, where "china" arbitrarily becomes a signifier for the suddenly reified sex act: instead of sharing gestures, touches, and cutaneous sensations, the characters find themselves competing absurdly for quantities of a finite, material commodity.

MRS. SQUEAMISH: 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.

HORNER: Upon my honor, I have none left now.

MRS. SQUEAMISH: Nay, nay, I have known you deny your china before now, but you shan't put me off so. Come.

HORNER: This lady had the last there.

LADY FIDGET: Yes, indeed, madam, to my certain knowledge he has no more left.

MRS. SQUEAMISH: Oh, but it may be he may have some you could not find.

LADY FIDGET: What, d'ye think if he had had any left, I would not have had it too? For we women of quality never think we have china enough.

HORNER: Do not take it ill, I cannot make china for you all, but I will have a roll-wagon for you too, another time. (IV.iii)

This scene shows Horner hapless, his sexual potency—great as it may be—publicly objectified, quantified, and judged, as women's bodies are. On the other hand, by submitting to and even furthering the objectifying, feminizing momentum of this scene, Horner as usual establishes ever more firmly his own secret control over the terms of the discourse.

LADY FIDGET (to Horner, aside): What do you mean by that promise?

HORNER (apart to Lady Fidget): Alas, she has an innocent, literal understanding. (IV.iii)

Horner's command of the broader schism in women's exchange status, between public circulation and privatization, is similarly participatory and deft. As he explains to Lady Fidget, the "secret" fact of his potency will function the better—the more secretly—the more widely he makes it known in action, since

rather than [other women] shall prejudice your honor, I'll prejudice theirs; and to serve you, I'll lie with 'em all, make the secret their own, and then they'll keep it. . . . [T]he devil take me if censorious women are to be silenced in any other way. (IV.iii)

For Horner to circulate this "knowledge" means to circulate his own body, womanlike, as common property creating the illusion of private property. What is not womanlike is the control he is thus enabled to maintain over the terms of his sexual itinerary.

Horner's play is successful because, as I suggested, it allows him to split his erotic/political relations between two "registers." These registers are differentiated in more than one possible way. The most conventional way to describe the gap is between appearance and reality, or sign and signified.⁵ In fact, the thematics and vocabulary of the play do make this gap a clamant subject. Again, however, we need to find a way of differentiating Horner's activist, volatilizing, and highly manipulative use of this gap from the more static uses of it available to the women. The play ranges its women carefully but simply along a continuum from truthful to mendacious. Alithea is exactly defined by her exact truthfulness, and the Fidget/Squeamish women by their exact (and often self-defeating) adherence to a system of hypocrisy about which they are very candid:

LADY FIDGET: Our virtue is like the statesman's religion, the Quaker's word, the gamester's oath, and the great man's honor: but to cheat those that trust us.

MRS. SQUEAMISH: And that demureness, coyness, and modesty that you see in our faces in the boxes at plays, is as much a sign of a kind woman as a vizard-mask in the pit. (V.iv.)

Margery Pinchwife moves in the course of the play from a truthful extreme of simplicity and literal-mindedness to an equally simple mendacity. Each of these women, while keeping her words and her actions in a different relation to each other, nevertheless accepts that their relation will be a *given* and univocal one. The "signs" of marriage and "honor," too, fall within this schema: the Fidget/Squeamish women are as compulsive and consistent in belying their social bonds as Alithea is in honoring hers; they are finally equally helpless to do anything but ratify (albeit by denial) the structures that define their social existence. (It is worth noting, too, that Alithea's truthfulness, which has at least a potential for subvert-

ing the system by which homosocial masquerades as heterosexual desire, is in fact permissible because her love relationship, with Harcourt, is the least triangular in the play: this in turn because she is, exceptionally, an orphan with (apparently) money of her own, and therefore comparatively free of patriarchal ownership. Her relatively nontriangular love is one of those cul-de-sacs in Wycherley's drama, a self-enclosed bubble that seems to have floated in from another genre, that features even more problematically in *The Plain Dealer*.)

Horner, on the other hand, unlike the women, from the start places himself in a commandingly, because knowingly, off-centered relation to the truth of representation. It is off-centered because it is different to men and women, but also because it involves the endurance and manipulation of a potentially painful temporal lag: "If I can but abuse the husbands," he says in a wittily and importantly off-balance formulation, "I'll soon disabuse the wives" (I.i). Because of his ability to submit to, gain momentum from, and thus expropriate the irrepressible and divisive power of gender representation, Horner constructs for himself an intelligible two-phase narrative of feminization followed by (rather than contradicted by) masculine recuperation.

Let me end with a few words about the exchange value in *The Country Wife* of wit, the commodity that comes closest to thematizing the generic status of the play itself. To begin with a biographical snippet, John Den- nis reported in a letter

that the Correspondence between Mr. *Wycherley* and the foresaid Lady [Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, who had also been the mistress of Charles II for a number of years previously] was the Occasion of bringing Mr. *Wycherley* into favour with *George* Duke of *Buckingham*, who was passionately in Love with that Lady, who was ill treated by her, and who believed Mr. *Wycherley* his happy *Rival*. After the duke had long solicited her without obtaining any thing, whether the relation between them shock'd her, for she was his Cousin-Germain, or whether she apprehended that an Intrigue with a Person of his Rank and Character, a Person upon whom the eyes of all Men were fix'd, must of Necessity in a little time come to the King's Ears, whatever was the cause, she refus'd to admit of his Visits so long, that at last Indignation, Rage and Disdain took Place of his Love, and he resolv'd to ruin her. When he had takn this Resolution, he had her so narrowly watch'd by his Spies, that he soon came to the Knowledge of those whom he had reason to believe his Rivals. And after he knew them, he never fail'd to name them aloud, in order to expose the Lady, to all those who frequented him, and among others he us'd to name Mr. *Wycherley*. As soon as it came to the

Knowledge of the latter, who had all his Expectations from the Court, he apprehended the Consequence of such a Report, if it should reach the King. He applied himself therefore to *Wilmot* Lord *Rochester* and to Sir *Charles Sedley*, and entreated them to remonstrate to the Duke of *Buckingham* the Mischief which he was about to do to one who had not the Honour to be known to him, and who had never offended him. Upon their opening the Matter to the Duke, he cry'd out immediately, *that he did not blame Wycherley, he only accus'd his Cousin. Ay, but, they reply'd, by rendring him suspected of such an Intrigue, you are about to ruine him, that is, your Grace is about to ruine a Man with whose Conversation you would be pleas'd above all things.* Upon this Occasion they said so much of the shining Qualities of Mr. *Wycherley*, and of the Charms of the Conversation, that the Duke, who was as much in love with Wit, as he was with his Kinswoman, was impatient till he was brought to sup with him, which was in two or three Nights. After Supper Mr. *Wycherley*, who was then in the Height of his Vigor both of Body and Mind, thought himself oblig'd to exert himself, and the Duke was charm'd to that degree, that he cry'd out in a Transport, *By G——my Cousin is in the right of it; and from that very Moment made a Friend of a Man whom he believ'd his happy Rival.*

"It was but shortly after," Wycherley's biographer tells, "that Buckingham arranged for Wycherley to become Captain Lieutenant of the Company of Foot of which he was himself Captain."⁶

This anecdote confirms Freud's contention in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* that wit is an important mechanism for moving from an ostensible heterosexual object of desire to a true homosocial one.⁷ What is also interesting in Wycherley's case—both in this biographical example and, more importantly, in the play—is the special position of wit as a token of class membership or mobility, especially as these are associated with sexual status. In *The Country Wife*, to be a wit, a gamester (at the expense of "rooks" or "bubbles"), a spendthrift, and a cuckold, are all associated with aristocratic gentlemen of the town. Lack of wit, conversely, goes with being a cuckold and with the urban bourgeoisie or the insufficiently urban gentry. Sir Jasper Fidget, for instance, the baronet who has gone into business in the City, is no wit, but "this grave man of business" (I.i), and hence a ready-made cuckold: his wife remarks,

Who for his business from his wife will run,
Takes the best care to have his business done. (II.i)

It is Sir Jasper's insistent, ostentatious, bourgeoislike acquisitiveness that impels him to attach Horner to his household in the first place: he loves

to call Horner "my eunuch" (III.ii), and explains to his wife, "a lady should have a supernumerary gentleman-usher, as a supernumerary coach-horse, lest sometimes you should be forced to stay at home" (II.i).

Sparkish though wealthy is witless and untitled: hence he loves a Lord and "a wit to me is the greatest title in the world" (I.i). We have already seen how this affectation makes him vulnerable to cuckoldry; Horner says, "he is to be bubbled of his mistress, as of his money, the common mistress, by keeping him company" (III.ii). Pinchwife calls him "the flower of the true town fops, such as spend their estates before they come to 'em, and are cuckolds before they're married."

The dour Pinchwife, as usual, contrasts Sparkish's economic and sexual liquidity with his own conservatism, here seen as land-based: "But let me," he continues, "go look to my own freehold," meaning Margery (II.i). An aristocrat like Sir Jasper, Pinchwife becomes déclassé in the opposite way, in the play's urban-centered view—by retreating to his rural base and to a countrified fear of cash expenditure. He congratulates himself on having a country wife, who, though not wealthy, is "as rich as if she brought me twenty thousand pound out of this town; for she'll be as sure not to spend her moderate portion as a London baggage would be to spend hers, let it be what it would" (I.i). Both he and Sparkish consider wit and sexual possession exchangeable, though at different rates: "You may laugh at me, but you shall never lie with my wife," Pinchwife rumbles, while Sparkish feels just the opposite.

SPARKISH: Why, d'ye think I'll seem to be jealous, like a country bumpkin?

PINCHWIFE: No, rather be a cuckold, like a credulous cit. (II.i)

To be a wit and a cuckold, then, is to be neither bumpkin nor cit, but a young, aristocratic man-about-town whose only visible relation to money is the playful (though predatory) one of gambling. Dorilant opines that "we they call spendthrifts" are indeed the only people who can be called wealthy, "who lay out [our] money upon daily new purchases of pleasure" (I.i).

The hidden, or uprooted, relation between these urbane yet noncommercial young men and their landed economic and political base is already rather precarious and slippery in capitalist Restoration England. (This may be why gambling is the economic image that captures their fancy.) One consequence of their sublimation of that relation—the sublimation

that is signified in this play by "wit"—is that a share of the prestige that belongs to their economic and political position can also be achieved by men who cultivate the signifier "wit" even in the absence of its economic and political grounding.

The man who wishes to achieve his social position in this way, however, must follow a discipline of transcendent renunciation as well as of ambition. As the examples of Pinchwife and Sir Jasper show, to appear to be concerned about material accumulation or conservation is fatal to the "wit" even of wealthy aristocrats. The man who, like Wycherley, without great wealth or unambiguous status sets out to live *by* his wits, and off the "wits," needs a strategy and skills that are rather like Horner's. Deferring and sublimating his material need, disguising his ambition through various forms of apparent feminization, being able to envision only a manipulative rather than a mutual relationship with the real "wits," such a figure, by giving a voice and body to real or apparent contradictions in the status of those he envies, may succeed in cleaving a path for himself to the ascendancy or even the material goods he desires. That such a career is dangerous and fails more often than it succeeds is clear from Wycherley's own life.

Some sexual bearings of this strategy are suggested in Wycherley's "*billet doux* dedicatory" to *The Plain Dealer*. Dedicating the play to Mother Bennet, a London procuress, in a shower of equivoques, Wycherley describes her profession as analogous to that of the playwright-satirist:

you have been a constant scourge to the old lecher, and often a terror to the young. You have made concupiscence its own punishment, and extinguished lust with lust, like blowing up of houses to stop the fire.⁸

Similarly, the prologue to *The Country Wife*, which Wycherley puts into the mouth of the man who plays Horner, compares the vulnerability of playwrights with the sexual availability of actresses, since both are betrayed by the actors, handed over to the base appetites of the audience:

But we, the actors, humbly will submit,
Now, and at any time, to a full pit;
Nay, often we anticipate your rage,
And murder poets for you on our stage.
We set no guards upon our tiring-room,
But when with flying colors there you come,

We patiently, you see, give up to you
Our poets, virgins, nay, our matrons too. (p. 6)

The mixture here of the playwright's thematized dependency on actors with his invisible control over "their" language—really, it is he who hands them over to the audience—is cast in even more clearly sexual terms in the "Epilogue, Spoken by Mrs. Knep [Lady Fidget]." Speaking as an actress and hence, inferentially, as a woman who is for sale on the sexual market, she taunts the men in the audience for talking big for the sake of homosocial prestige, but being unable to deliver in bed.

In fine, you essenc'd boys, both old and young,
Who would be thought so eager, brisk, and strong,
Yet do the ladies, not their husbands, wrong;

The world, which to no man his due will give,
You by experience know you can deceive,
And men may still believe you vigorous,
But then we women—there's no coz'ning us. (p. 142)

The play itself, like *Horner*, seems with this ending to identify itself with the cause of women's pleasure, at the expense of appearances directed at other men. The playwright himself seems to have undergone a metamorphosis. Prologue and Epilogue are the places where the artifice of the drama—multiple bodies uttering as their own the words, and expressing or misexpressing the intentions, of the playwright—is both underlined and mediated; and the playwright here has gone from being embodied as a man, a trans-actor in women, to being embodied as a woman, the corrosive object transacted.

Once again, however, the context of the play's ending—in which *Horner*, to protect his own terms of negotiability, sends Margery Pinchwife back to her abusive husband—combines with the larger context of Restoration theater-going, to make the apparent female identification of the "Epilogue" seem merely a move in a larger male-homosocial strategy. The very presence of female bodies on the stage at this period, speaking "women"'s lines, was novel and remarkable enough to make an especially salient echo with the play's thematization of women's materiality or transparency as objects of exchange. That is, the presumption goes unchallenged in the play that women go on the stage to market their bodies

to men, as much as to embody the conceptions of male playwrights; even more, women in the audience, with the one exception of Alithea, are shown as being there for display and rental *rather* than as spectators.

Even insofar as it represents a woman's voice, "Mrs. Knep"'s Epilogue is a protest within this system rather than against it: "Mrs. Knep" merely makes a direct claim for the artifactual pleasures that are supposed to be a byproduct for women of the male-acted, male-prestige-enhancing theatrical traffic in whores and mistresses. Like "Molly Bloom" and many other female embodiments of men's voices, "Mrs. Knep" still speaks a sexual language that can embody only one message: variations on "yes." To receive the pleasure that she is claiming, would sweeten her position in the transactive sexual economy, but not change it: she is not trying to extend her vocabulary to "no." Even viewed as a strategy for prying apart the image and power of the patriarchal phallus from the frailties of the fallible individual penis (see chapter 1), the Epilogue offers no new social affordances to the female speaker: *her* relegation within the transactive economy is tied unambiguously to the phallus, however labile may be the career of the individual man within the space defined by penis and phallus.

In fact, the authorial male figure that consents to be embodied in this female voice and presence has much more to gain from "Mrs. Knep"'s tirade than "she" does. The hidden understanding of how men's heterosexual activity is both motivated and, potentially, sapped by its true homosocial object gives leverage to the ambitious, active man as it does not to the only peripherally existent woman. Once having undergone the apparent eclipse of taking on a female persona (as when Wycherley pleaded indirectly with the Duke of Buckingham not to "ruine" him), and hence gained command of the actual path of male desire ("that the Duke . . . was as much in love with Wit, as he was with his Kinswoman"), the satirist from his secret vantage can then more durably feminize his male object in relation to himself ("and the Duke was charm'd to that degree, that he cry'd out in a Transport, *By G—my cousin is in the right of it*").

In the next chapter, we will see this class and gender strategy more densely psychologized, and described in relation to a more densely populated social world, in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*. In chapters 5 and 6, discussing the paranoiac Gothic novel, we will deal more explicitly with the ways in which the range of male homosocial bonds may have been fractured by homophobia or structured in relation to an emergent male

homosexual role. For the purposes of this section, however, it is enough in that connection to re-stress three things in *The Country Wife*: the compulsory and double-edged involvement of women in all the male homosocial bonds, the absence of direct genital contact between men, and the cognitively hierarchical, authoritarian, "transcendent" nature of the homosocial bond signalized by cuckoldry. The homosociality of this world seems embodied fully in its heterosexuality; and its shape is not that of brotherhood, but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Sentimental Journey: Sexualism and the Citizen of the World

THE reading in this chapter, like those in the next two, records the emergence in something close to modern terms of the social articulations of male homosocial desire. What is most foreign to the twentieth-century American reader, in *A Sentimental Journey*, is the relatively crisp and differentiated treatment of class. What is most familiar to us, and also newest in the period under discussion, is the automatic availability and salience, for the description of many different power transactions, of the image of the family—the family as psychoanalysis conceives it, comprising one parent of each gender and, as subject, a single, male child. The fantasy polarities of omnipotence and utter powerlessness, of castration and phallic investiture, of maternal nurturance and deprivation, form in *A Sentimental Journey* and in the Gothic, as in more recent thought, the ground onto which other power transactions are mapped. Within this warm space of pathos and the personal, however—a space whose new distinctness and freightedness are described by Eli Zaretsky and others as a kind of complementary artifact of developing capitalism¹—we can trace modern versions of Horner's cold-blooded, manipulative erotic strategy as it moves into more psychologized and gemütlich-sounding incarnations. Although novels like *A Sentimental Journey* and the Gothic spread a glamor of familial pathos over a complicated male strategy for homosocial empowerment, they are also intricately, even appealingly candid about the worldly ties and meanings of their narrators' project. Like psychoanalysis itself: imperialism with a baby face.

A conventional charge against psychoanalytic-like views of the family

9. On this, see Miller, *New Psychology*, ch. 1.
10. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, p. 91.
11. Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 83, quoted in Rich, *On Lies*, p. 206.
12. On the Bohemian Grove, an all-male summer camp for American ruling-class men, see Domhoff, *Bohemian Grove*; and a more vivid, although homophobic, account, van der Zec, *Men's Party*.
13. The NOW resolution, for instance, explicitly defines sadomasochism, pornography, and "pederasty" (meaning pedophilia) as issues of "exploitation and violence," as opposed to "affectional/sexual preference/orientation." Quoted in *Heresies* 12, vol. 3, no. 4 (1981), p. 92.
14. For explorations of these viewpoints, see *Heresies*, *ibid.*; Snitow et al., *Powers*; and Samois, *Coming*.
15. MacKinnon, "Feminism," pp. 530-31.
16. Mitchell, *Gone*, p. 780. Further citations will be incorporated within the text and designated by chapter number.
17. For a discussion of these limitations, see Vicinus, "Sexuality." The variety of useful work that is possible within these boundaries is exemplified by the essays in Newton et al., *Sex and Class*.
18. On this, see McKeon, "Marxism."
19. Juliet Mitchell discusses this aspect of *The German Ideology* in *Woman's Estate*, pp. 152-58.
20. Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, p. 154.
21. The best and clearest discussion of this aspect of Freud is Laplanche, *Life and Death*, especially pp. 25-47.
22. On this, see ch. 8.
23. For an especially useful discussion of the absence of women from the work of Girard, see Moi, "Missing Mother."
24. On this see (in addition to Snitow et al., *Powers*) Breines and Gordon, "Family Violence."
25. The following books are, to a greater or lesser extent, among the exceptions: Fernbach, *Spiral Path*; Mieli, *Homosexuality*; Rowbotham and Weeks, *Socialism*; Dworkin, *Pornography*.
26. The most influential recent statement of this position is Heilbrun, *Androgyny*.
27. See Irigaray, "Goods"; and Frye, *Politics*, pp. 128-51. Jane Marcus's work on Virginia Woolf makes use of Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi's homophobic formulation, "the Nazi community is made by homosexual brothers who exclude the woman and valorize the mother." Marcus says, "The Cambridge Apostles' notions of fraternity surely appeared to Woolf analogous to certain fascist notions of fraternity." Macciocchi's formulation is quoted in Jane Caplan, "Introduction to Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology," *Feminist Review* 1 (1979), p. 62. Marcus's essay is "Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny," in Heilbrun and Higonet, *Representation*, pp. 60-97; quotation is from p. 67.
28. On this see Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, pp. 42-67.

Chapter 1. Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles

1. On this, see Bell et al., *Sexual Preferences*.
2. Review of *Homosexualities*, p. 1077.
3. On this see Gallop, *Daughter's Seduction*, pp. 15-32.
4. Kahn, *Man's Estate*, pp. 9-10.
5. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), p. 115; quoted in Rubin, "Traffic," p. 174.
6. Rubin, *ibid.*
7. Irigaray, "Goods," pp. 107-10.

Chapter 2. Swan in Love: The Example of Shakespeare's Sonnets

1. Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, p. 14.
2. On this see, for instance, Weeks, *Coming Out*, pp. 52, 57, 68; and see the Coda of this book.
3. Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 106.
4. Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, p. 39, Sonnet 42. Further citations will be incorporated in the text, where possible by Sonnet number.
5. Krieger, *Window*, p. 80.
6. Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, p. 14.
7. Wilde, *Portrait*, p. 68.
8. Fiedler, *Stranger*, pp. 25-26.
9. On shamanization, see Lewis, *Lion*, pp. 149-58 and passim; quotations are from Knight, *Mutual Flame*, pp. 36-37.

Chapter 3. *The Country Wife*: Anatomies of Male Homosocial Desire

1. For instance, Alan Bray's *Homosexuality* offers a salutary, sceptical survey of the received wisdoms concerning male homosexuality in this period; see, e.g., pp. 7-9.
2. Vieth, "Country Wife."
3. Lévi-Strauss concludes, "This explains why the relations between the sexes have preserved that affective richness, ardour, and mystery which doubtless originally permeated the entire universe of human communications" (*Elementary Structures*, p. 496). This is quoted by Rubin in "Traffic," p. 201. Rubin remarks, "This is an extraordinary statement. Why is he not, at this point, denouncing what kinship systems do to women, instead of presenting one of the greatest rip-offs of all time as the root of romance?"
4. Wycherley, *Country Wife*, I.1. Further citations will be incorporated in the text, and designated where possible by act and scene.
5. On this see Vieth, "Country Wife."
6. Quoted in McCarthy, *William Wycherley*, pp. 91-92.
7. Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 98-100.
8. Wycherley, *Plain Dealer*, p. 6.