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How To Become A Town Wife: From Naive and Innocent The Country Wife To The Mannerism of a Female Libertine

Nasıl Şehirli Eş Olunur: Saf ve Masum Taşra Kızının Özgürlükçü ve Yapmacık Bir Kadına Dönüşümü

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Abstract

William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) is often regarded as a prototypical example of Restoration comedy of manners, a genre characterized by its sharp wit, social satire of the upper-class society, and its stereotypical characters. Through the play's complex and intriguing plot structure of deceit, disguise, and humor, Wycherley draws the panorama of moral and social conventions of his time, with to marriage, sexual desire, and class dynamics. The play centers on the male libertine Horner, who seeks to seduce a variety of women, including the naïve country girl, Margery. Her transformation from a passive, rural bride to a self-confident woman can be handled as a criticism of patriarchal systems and an exploration in the nature of gender and sexuality during the Restoration period. Wycherley's exaggerated and farcical stereotypes provide a satirical mirror to the Restoration court's social hierarchies, revealing how personal identity and relationships were ruled over and shaped by doctrines of public. Moreover, the play deals with the comic conventions of disguise, mistaken identities, and elaborate scheming, masking and unmasking scenes where moral ambiguity and comic farce create a chaotic but realistic portrayal of 17th-century English society. Eventually, *The Country Wife* serves not only as a comedy of manners but also as a satiric commentary on the delicate boundaries between virtue and vice, appearance and reality, and innocence and hypocrisy, countryside and city life, all within the panorama of Restoration theatrical tradition. *The Country Wife* presents hypocritical facades and sexual duplicities to heal the society from its shortcomings.

Keywords: Restoration Comedy of Manners, William Wycherley, The Country Wife

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INTRODUCTION

Standing out as one of the most provoking and enduring examples of Restoration comedy of manners, William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) present the key features of the genre known for its sharp wit, satirical treatment of hypocritical social mores, and exploration of sexual politics. The *Country Wife* wittily criticizes and illustrates the hypocrisy, pretends, and moral shortcomings of the English upper class via using humour and irony to reflect the complex social dynamics of the period. The play's central themes such as infidelity, deception, and the clashes between appearance and reality are presented through the stereotypically drawn characters, clever dialogues- double- entendres-, complicated main and sub-plots and some cliché scenes of Comedy of manners.

In *The Country Wife*, Wycherley examines the corruption in the British upper- class society through the farcical nature of courtship, marriage, and gender relations, particularly focusing on the tensions between sexual desire and social propriety. Employing the stereotypical characters such as the protagonist, Horner- an urbane libertine- violating the sexual mores of the time to arrange a series of misunderstandings and manipulations, Wycherley exposes the superficiality of the societal norms. Through this portrayal, Wycherley not only entertains the audience but also brings a bitte commentary on the restrictions placed on women, the corruption of the marriage institution, and the moral flexibility of men in the pursuit of sex and pleasure. As a comedy of manners, the play offers a lens through which audience may have the opportunity to question the codes, rules and gender roles that governed Restoration society. This article will explore how *The Country Wife* functions as a comedy of manners, analysing its characterization, themes, and structure to illuminate the ways in which Wycherley uses comedy to satirize the social practices of his time to enlighten his audience with the purpose of healing the ills of the society.

William wycherley and his comedy of manners

Wycherley was born about 1640 at Clive, where several generations his family had been settled on an estate. His father was steward to the marquesses of Winchester. Thus, through his being exposed to the upper class society from the very birth, Wycherley was totally aware of the social facades of his hypocritical class. Along with his intellectual power, Wycherley was a fine gentleman. "He is outspoken with man of fashion, suited to shine in a brilliant court." (Thompson, 1979, pp. 73-81). Wycherley became a fellow- commoner of Queens College Oxford, in 1660. He, then proceeded to the Inner Temple, rather to acquire a "fashionable polish"- quality and politeness- than to make a serious study of law. His first play *Love in Wood*, which he told Alexander Pope that he wrote it the year before he went to Oxford, was produced in 1671 at Drury Lane. It was a great success which gained him the patronage of the Duchess of Cleveland, mistress of Charles II. His next play, *The Gentleman-Dancing-Master* (1672) was followed by his two masterpieces, *The Country Wife* (1675) and *The Plain-Dealer* (1676) "an expose laden with satirical irony on the deception inherent in love and friendship" (<http://classiclit.about.com>).

His brilliant wit and clever satire give him a prominent place in the history of English Restoration Drama. Wycherley's private life may have damaged his career. He lost court favour by his "clandestine" marriage (1680) to the Countess of Drogheda, who was young, pretty and rich. The Countess died a year later after leaving her fortune to her husband. Not being able to afford the costs of legal procedures, Wycherley ended up in the Fleet prison. There, he remained for seven years. With accession of James II, he was released from prison and given a pension. The publication of his *Miscellany Poems* (1704) led to a friendship with young Alexander Pope. The year before his death, 1716, he married a young girl. In this sense, Wycherley clearly knows about the double-entendres and social facades of the 17th century upper class society as he can be also depicted as a male libertine of that period with his extramarital relationships, ups and downs in his marital and social life.

Comedy of manners aiming at satirizing manners and hypocrisy of the society handles the shortcomings of the upper- society's lifestyle via the use of double-entendres, elaborate languages, cross dressings, extramarital affairs, stereotypical characters, forgeries and some cliché scenes. At first, there comes out a perfect picture of the upper class with its refined and charming lifestyles, yet during the realm of the play, the masks of this beautiful society is removed and this perfect society turns out to be the chaotic and immoral (Hirst, 1979, p. 6). In William Wycherley's comedy of manners, there is an emphasis on woman and themes related to the women as the name play suggests since in the 17th century "the presence of women for the first time on the English stage served to highlight the emphasis on marriage and sexual intrigues, with their corollaries, adultery and divorce: fresh themes for the English comedy" (Hirst, 1979, p. 6). Highly affected by the fashion of the time, Wycherley created a transformation of a countryside girl into a female libertine with the mask of artificial upper-class values.

The country wife as comedy of manners

The Country Wife is a harsh comment on the morals of the age which offers a refinement in the artificial relationships in the society, especially in the marriage. Although Wycherley includes different Restoration comic forms, he presents these forms not in a conventional way. His satire is not like a didactic preaching of a moralist but it is the voice confessing his own societies and his own corrupted values in a satirical way, which makes it severe as he once was a member of this corrupted society as a real male libertine. Wycherley questions the nature of honour in marriage and social life as he seeks to confront with himself and his affairs. William Wycherley employs the characters of the Restoration Comedy of Manners. The play includes;

the whole gallery of Restoration figures - the jealous man who is proved wrong to be jealous; the trusting man who is a fool to be trusting; the light ladies concerned for their 'honour'; the gay sparks devoted only their pleasure; the ignorant woman seduced; the woman of common sense baffled... (Dobreé, 1981, p. 94).

Wycherley takes these characters from the Restoration period and depicts them in an exaggerated manner in order to satirize the hypocrisy, the corruption in the manners of the society. There are the stereotypes of comedy of manners in a caricatured version, which makes the play more effective and satiric. It questions the social morality and the matter of honour through clear representative types in familiar social situations. They are the characters like "the little- playhouse creatures" as Mrs. Squeamish utters.

Horner as his name suggests the male libertine and a horn-maker of the cuckolded husbands, who is ready for any kind of sexual relationship. He employs castration as a cover for his affairs, which is like a mask put on his cuckolding instinct and his uncontrollable sexual appetite. "Horner's role is his sexuality" (Marshall, 1993, p. 75). Firstly, he can be seen as a womanizer but in fact he is a "husbandizer" because his cuckolding is not presented as the corruption of women but as a deserved punishment of the foolish husbands and the hope of the unhappy wives. Wycherley through Horner looks at the arranged marriages and the honour concept from a satirical point of view. "Horner is Wycherley's tool for unmasking the Restoration social world as hypocritical" (Young, 1997, p. 119). Although Wycherley does not approve the deeds of Horner, he does not criticize and judge him harshly. As at the end of the play, he keeps him secure and untouched and moreover, he punishes the cuckolded husbands with "the Dance of Cuckolds". Horner keeps "the combination of mental sharpness and verbal quickness that his age called "wit" (Bevis, 2014, p. 84). Horner do not believe the concept of marriage and he sees it as a facade of the upper class. The only thing he values as male libertine is being free from the must and to dos of the marriage life. Moreover, he uses the marriage bond so as to free himself on the way to seduce the other women. His comparison between wine and love is very witty and shows his extreme passion for liberty, freedom and disbelief in love and marriage as he says;

HORNER: Wine gives you liberty, love takes it away. Wine makes us witty; love only sots. Wine makes us princes; love makes us beggars (89).

Through his double-entendres, Wycherley gives voice to his satiric views about the Restoration hypocrisy and corruption by talking about the while making joke.

HORNER: A Quack is fit a for a Pimp, as a Midwife for a Bawd; they are still but in their way, both helpers of Nature (85).

The word "nature" has got double meaning, which in fact, means sexual intercourse. Horner describes three women- Lady Fidget, Dainty Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish- ironically as women of honour, or Virtuous Gang. Although he depicts woman as holy and honourable creatures, in fact he sees woman as sexual objects to be conquered and collected as a war trophy. His attitude towards woman is totally benefit seeking and he clearly builds up connections with women as a sexual sport away from any kind of emotional intimacy.

There is a decorum in his language. Horner speaks like a eunuch while playing the role of an impotent man. He uses his so-called impotency as a cover or a safe guard for finding new hunts to tempt and seduce or in other words, to fulfil his life goal of seduction. As he is speaking as the *horner*, he uses double-entendres. Horner has a mastery in using the appropriate manners parallel to the masks he is wearing at that moment. Horner knows the ways and manners of seducing woman as being expertised in the art of cuckoldry. The china metaphor is a very effective double-entendre. China as "a vessel for food" symbolizes the appetite for sex. On the other hand, china is used for decoration which is a diversion from its original purpose, which makes china, sex, a thing feeding the appetite not for necessity but for mere earthly pleasure (Loftis, 1966, s. 86). He criticizes and makes fun of himself and his society. Horner is "the exposé of the sham of marriage" (Young, 1997, p. 133).

Margery Pinchwife, the country wife of the title, is the wife of “Pinchwife” who is available to be pinched. At the very beginning, she seems to be a would-be female libertine but later on, by her lack of wit and practicing the sexual freedom, she becomes a discarded mistress. She is the character through whom Wycherley shows the stages of corruption in naivety. As firstly, she is the naive, innocent Margery of the country life. After her taking the surname “Pinchwife” of the town man, she loses her virtue, honour, naivety and educates herself in the ways of London life and “the London disease” which is love and becoming a mistress and sexual object of Horner. In fact, she is the naive, inexperienced country wife who in the process of the play, learns how to be a town wife. Margery desires to be normal woman and to be a London wife not a country wife to adjust the society she is newly introduced. Yet, she is in a way castrated parallel to Horner since she is costumed in male attire by her husband, which is an example of cross-dressing cliché in comedy of manners. Her being naive is set “against the dominant hypocrisy of the women of honour” (Lawrence, 1988, p. 3). Although Margery tries hard to be a town wife with its extramarital love affairs, masks and deceits, she cannot be more than a country wife as she is not able to understand the necessity of hiding her hypocritical face with the masks of the upper class since in nature, she still remains as an honest character and the country girl without any masks. Unlike the other woman characters who know the manners of city life, Margery do not have an interest in preserving her reputation as the wife of Mr. Pinchwife since adultery, deceit and extramarital love affairs are very common among the member of upper-class society and it is depicted as an everyday issue. Margery does not realise it means ruining the virtue of herself and her husband. In the end, she learns how to cheat her husband, yet she does not understand the necessity of hiding it, which lacks her being a perfect town wife and ends in her staying as a country wife forever.

Mr. Pinchwife is as the combination of the jealous husband, the cuckolded husband, the country bumpkin and the old lecherous man married to a young woman. Pinchwife’s jealousy and fear of being cuckolded lead to his own his cuckoldry. He is so obsessed with the single idea of cuckoldry as Margery suggests the actions of her husband as “sick”. His fear of wearing horns sends him to the countryside to take an innocent and naïve wife as he says, “one who does not know the ways of London life.” He refers the cuckold as an “insupportable name” (92). Mr. Pinchwife sees every woman as “a sexual threat and casting the entire world around him into the role of cuckold and cuckold maker” (Marshall, 1993, p. 67). Ironically, Pinchwife gives his wife and her letters with his own hand to Horner, which presents the theme of what one fears comes trues. Moreover, he becomes a tool of his own cuckoldry, which falls him at the level of being a country bumpkin punished at the end of the play. He has got misogynistic treatments towards his wife as he threatens her to write “whore” on her face or to kill her with a sword, which stands for his lack of potency as he does not realize that he has been betrayed by his country wife. Although he has taken all the necessary precautions such as crossdressing, abuse, threatening not to be a cuckolded husband which he eternally hates, he ended up as the cuckolded husband of a “pinched” or stolen wife. He is the man dwelling in ironies. Though he accepts himself as the manipulator of town life and his country wife, at the end of the play, he is manipulated by his country wife who knows now the rules of town life better than he does.

As his name suggests, Mr. Sparkish is a potential inflaming something new within the text. At the first look, he would be seen as a would-be-wit with his obsessive idea of “wit” but he is

a potential fool. His name can be interpreted in a second way. Sparkish can be seen as the potential tool which inflame a love between his fiancée and Harcourt because of his foolish attitudes. Ironically, he sees jealousy as the sign of a “country bumpkin” which is a title he cannot escape from. He is the foil of Mr. Pinchwife as Pinchwife goes to the extremes of jealousy while Sparkish goes to the extremes of being not jealous. Like Pinchwife, he is mocked and satirized through the witty dialogues of Horner. Through these two characters, Wycherley clearly presents the idea that being a cuckolded husband in every kind of marriages is the inevitable for the husbands even if they have taken the necessary precautions or not since the marriage institution is corrupted and apt to fail sooner or later. Sparkish is a perfect example of foolish fop who is mocked and humiliated while trying to show off via displaying his so-called wit.

All the ideals of honour and his reputation are merely appearances, and are given at the background. Alithea and Harcourt as the sensible couple opposing the male and female libertine’s fake and desire-oriented relationship and the symbol of honour are given at the background. Alithea is the sensible woman as Harcourt accepts her as a celestial figure related to Heaven by calling her “The Divine, Heavenly Creature, The Seraphick Lady, The Most Glorious of Her Whole Sex.” She is an intelligent and educated London girl who is so sensible that she is faithful to her fool and materialistic fiancé after her estate. She is the ideal, totally white figure of faithful woman though she is a town woman, which shows Wycherley’s ideas about honour as a natural instinct not as a regional behaviour. Harcourt is the sensible man but he still uses the double-entendres and tricks, being disguised as a parson, like a libertine. the Sensible couple like their opposing couple-libertines- are clever enough to use double-entendres dialogues to show their sexual desires. Yet, what differentiates the sensible couple from the libertines is their sexual desires stay just in verbal level unlike the extramarital affairs of libertines. In fact, as his name suggests, he is courting with the fiancée of another man but it is different from the Horner’s sex-oriented mentality. He is playing the role of the libertine in order to marry Alithea. Both of them seek for the ideal marriage institution.

Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty and Mrs. Squeamish are the discarded mistresses who are the representatives of the ill manners and hypocrisy of the upper-class lady. They have got the outer appearance of the woman of honour but they are still lecherous and immoral in nature. In a witty expression, Horner describes them as “The Virtuous Gang” but as their names suggest the honour is “easily shocked by unpleasant things”-Squeamish- but it is also like a “fidget” who “moves its body around in a restless, impatient way.” Lady Fidget is the most outstanding of the three as she is more experienced in the art of double-entendre, mannerism and nature which means sexuality within the realm of the play. She says that their virtue is like “the State-Man’s Religion, The Quack’s Word, The Gamester’s Oath and the Great Man’s Honour.” Like Horner, she satirizes herself as well as her society. Her husband, Sir Jasper Fidget is also the fool, the country bumpkin. He is cuckolded through his insistence on the relationship between his wife and Horner. He is one of the victims of Horner.

Besides his employing characterization of comedy of manners in a satiric and unconventional manner, William Wycherley sets the technical elements of the comedy of manners such as plot structure, setting, technical devices and the set scenes in a very different and unconventional style by employing them as a contribution to the themes such as corruption

in marriage, pursuit of sex and money, nature of honour and hypocrisy in the 17th century upper class society.

The plot structure is like an experiment on the corruption stages of marriage hypocrisy in honour. The sensible is like the control group. It has got a complex plot structure as seen in the other Restoration Comedy of Manners. There is one higher plot and one lower plot with two dimensions or in other words, two lower plots concentrating on the issue of marriage to show that the corruption in the marriage is an overall issue not limited to just one example. In the higher plot, we have the sensible couple and a would-be arranged marriage between Alithea and Sparkish. The love between Alithea and Harcourt forms the highness of the plot. In two lower plots, we have the two intrigues of Horner on two arranged marriages, the Pinchwives and the Fidgets. These three plots come together when Pinchwife brings the disguised Margery to Horner and the play resolves after the climactic unmasking scene. These three plots form a unity functioning thematically.

Setting is also an important issue about the play. It is the London setting as usually given in the Restoration Comedy of Manners but it differs from the others as it mentions the idea of country –country wife- at the very beginning not at the end as the place of refinement. “It moves steadily and systematically in the opposite direction” (Kaul, 1970, p. 123). The libertine is not sent to the country setting for the refinement as Wycherley believes that refinement is not related to the country or the town but it is related to the human nature and he presents it by comparing the country wife- Margery- with the London girl -Alithea – and so the country setting with urban setting. At the very beginning, Alithea is supposed to become a female libertine, yet she turns out to be a sensible woman, a perfect model for a chaste woman though she is a London girl unlike Margery, the country libertine.

Wycherley used the devices –letters, dance, deus ex machina, and especially disguise- which contribute to the resolution of the plot. Letters are thematically the education process of Margery ironically taught by her husband, which is necessary for learning the art of being a London woman. They also work technically as the tool which develops the relationship between Margery and Horner as Margery is imprisoned by her husband. Dance – *the Dance of the Cuckolds*- is the punishment of the cuckolded husbands. Disguise is an important device working both thematically and technically on the whole of the play. Every character wears a disguise: Horner as an eunuch, Sparkish as a wit, Pinchwife as a man who knows the town, Lady Fidget as a woman of honour. Harcourt wears a disguise as a parson, in fact it is not a pretense like the others’ but a real disguise. Margery is disguised by her husband in male attire, later on, after she learns the ways of London life and becomes a part of the town life, she disguises herself as Alithea by wearing her clothes. Only Alithea has not got a mask, which shows her purity and not being a hypocrite since as a lady of honour, she does not wear a mask. The disguise device shows thematically the hypocrisy of the characters and through the unmasking scene, when Margery confesses her adultery, the real faces of the characters are revealed. Margery learns how to disguise herself as a new town woman but she cannot learn the art of the pretense –confessing her adultery- as she is still a country wife in nature. Quack works as the deus ex machina which covers the confession of Margery by declaring that Horner is a eunuch, which saves the libertines from the punishment and technically leads the play to resolution as the characters put their mask again.

William Wycherley does not show the set scenes in a traditional manner. There is the *lady and maid* scene referring to the sensible woman, Alithea and her maid, Lucy unlike the other comedy of manners. She talks about her love towards Harcourt but without unmasking or drinking as she is the sensible woman with no mask but there are still the upper-class ladies – not only one lady- drinking and releasing their social masks. The three ladies are revealing their relationship with Horner while drinking in Horner's lodgings. There is the unmasking of all the characters except Alithea when Margery confesses that she had a sexual relationship with Horner but this *unmasking scene* is a temporary situation, as it is followed by a re-masking scene in which the characters put their masks again. Lastly, there is no *provisio* scene where the lady lists her provisos to the refine the male libertine as the male libertine, Horner; is not punished by marrying the female libertine and being sent to the country for refinement.

To sum up, William Wycherley reflects the stereotypical portraits of the Restoration upper class with their artificial, hypocritical manners, and questions the validity of the marriage institution, the refining atmosphere of country, the nature of honour by using comedy of manners but not a traditional one, which makes his play more creative, his style interesting, his satire harsher and his whole portrait more vividly.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley sets an ideal example of a comedy of manners with its reflections and critiques of the social mores and conventions of a particular class. Specifically, Wycherley's play, first performed in 1675, satirizes the moral decay and hypocrisy of Restoration England, especially the upper classes. Through sharp wit, hidden sexual dialogues, and a cast of characters involved in deceit and manipulation, Wycherley exposes the conflict between appearance and reality. At its core, *The Country Wife* is a biting social commentary on the roles of marriage, gender, and social status, all themes that are explored through the framework of the comedy of manners and handled light-heartedly.

One of the key features of Restoration comedy, and *The Country Wife* in particular, is the depiction of a society preoccupied with facades and social propriety. Wycherley takes aim at the hypocrisy of a culture that, on the one hand, insists on strict obedience to social and moral codes, while on the other, openly disregards and celebrates vice, particularly sexual promiscuity. Characters like Horner, who deceives others by pretending to be impotent to gain sexual access to women, are emblematic of this duplicity. His manipulation of social norms to his advantage highlights the performative nature of societal expectations during the Restoration period. As noted by Jamil (2020, pp. 40-50), Horner's actions demonstrate how the comedy of manners genre displays the absurdity of a social order that values public reputation and decorum, while privately embracing subversive behaviors. In this way, Wycherley's play is not merely an entertainment; it is an insightful criticism of the values of Restoration society, particularly the sexual politics that reinforced much of its social life.

The character of Horner also underscores the notion of sexual power and control within a hierarchical social structure. His manipulation of the women he encounters—especially the married women—reveals how sexual relationships are often entangled with issues of class, status, and power. As Jamil (2020, pp. 40-50) discusses in his analysis of gender dynamics in

literature, *The Country Wife* reflects the patriarchal systems that dominate social and personal relationships during this period, where women are often reduced to objects of desire and nothing more and men use their power to control or exploit them. Yet, Wycherley complicates this portrait by giving Margery, the country wife, a certain autonomy and agency that challenges the conventional roles assigned to women in Restoration comedy. While Margery initially appears to be a naive and innocent country woman, she soon reveals her ability to navigate the complex sexual and social codes of the city, ultimately gaining control of her own destiny. Her transformation throughout the play reflects the broader tension between the rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern, and the ways in which women could subvert the dominant power structures even in a society that largely sought to suppress their agency.

Moreover, Wycherley's portrayal of marriage in *The Country Wife* is deeply critical of the institution's role in social control. Marriage is depicted not as a sacred bond or a romantic union but as a social contract meant to preserve family status and ensure the continuation of social norms. This is particularly evident in the character of Mr. Pinchwife, Margery's husband, who embodies the anxieties of a man desperate to control his wife's behavior in a society that prizes outward propriety. His attempt to keep Margery isolated from the world of city life and his obsession with her supposed innocence reflect the prevailing belief that women should remain submissive and naïve, while men assert control over them. As Gelber (1992, p. 269) notes, the play uses humor and irony to expose the contradictions within these marital arrangements, where the so-called "virtuous" wife is often the one who experiences the greatest limitations on her freedom, while her husband's vices are not only tolerated but also overlooked in favor of maintaining social appearances.

In addition to its criticism of gender roles and marriage, *The Country Wife* also engages with the broader theme of social class. The contrast between the rural, unrefined world of the country and the sophisticated, but morally corrupt, world of the city is central to the play. Wycherley uses Margery's transition from the rural world of her marriage to morally dubious city to highlight the conflicts between innocence and experience, as well as the tension between social classes. As Morris (1972, p. 5) observes, the play's structure revolves around Margery's movement through these different social spheres, and her ability to successfully navigate both the naïve country life and the corrupting influences of city society is both a source of comedy and a subtle critique of social mobility. In this regard, *The Country Wife* becomes not only a commentary on gender and marriage but also an exploration of the ways in which individuals can manipulate their social environments for personal gain, even in a rigidly stratified society.

Ultimately, Wycherley's *The Country Wife* remains a masterful example of the comedy of manners, using wit, satire, and irony to separate the social conventions and moral contradictions of Restoration England. Through the play's characters, dialogue, and plot, Wycherley pictures the flaws in a society obsessed with appearances, propriety, and sexual politics, all while providing sharp critiques of the institution of marriage, gender roles, and class. Although the play reflects the unique historical and cultural context of the late 17th century, its themes of deception, power, and social mobility continue to resonate with modern audiences, showcasing the enduring relevance of comedy of manners in exploring the complexities of human behavior and social structures.

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