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The Country Wife.
Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

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Abstract

This article revisits the performance history of *The Country Wife* by looking at changing configurations of its celebrated china scene across a centuries-long journey that begins with Wycherley's own reprise of the same trope in his next comedy, *The Plain Dealer*, and reaches up to the present day. Unlike the vast majority of Restoration plays, which virtually disappeared from the stage from the mid-eighteenth until well into the twentieth century, *The Country Wife* has remained a fixture within the English repertoire; the afterlife of its iconic scene, however, is a different story, a bumpy map with its highs and lows, emergences and suppressions and, sometimes, metamorphoses. By focusing on some paradigmatic stages in the history of the play's reception and reproduction, this paper evidences at once the frailty and the resilience of Wycherley's archetypal comic scene and of the object it contributed to install as a prominent theatrical and cultural signifier.

Keywords: Restoration comedy; *The Country Wife*; William Wycherley; china scene; reception; translatability; cultural relocation

To London theatregoers who, in 1675, gathered at Drury Lane to watch William Wycherley's new comedy, there was no question that Lady Fidget's hard-won trophy from her trafficking in the libertine's bedroom had travelled a long way before landing in her greedy hands. As they enjoyed Wycherley's archetypal comic scene in *The Country Wife*, Restoration audiences immediately identified the stage prop that substantiates the fiction of "buying china" as a cover for illicit sex as a luxury commodity imported from the remote Eastern country whence porcelain derived its popular name. This awareness conceivably added to their amusement, as they worried about the fate of the costly artefact once it has been dislodged from the safety of Horner's cabinet to become an object of contention between his sexually voracious female visitors: will the fragile roll wagon survive unscathed this final, brief but tumultuous trait of its journey from faraway China to fashionable London? Or is the

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phallic-shaped vase doomed to suffer irreparable damage through its final exposure to uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) female desire? In the play, the precious commodity brandished by Lady Fidget as evidence of her success exits the stage still miraculously intact; but a quick glance at the afterlife of *The Country Wife* and the broader cultural reverberations of its central scene reveals that it does not take long before Wycherley's porcelain begins to suffer serious injury. This already happens in the dramatist's own reprise of the infamous scene in *The Plain Dealer,* and the breakage – both literal and metaphorical – continues as Wycherley's china proceeds to migrate to ever-new texts and contexts, reaching up to the present day. In its subsequent incarnations across a centuries-long history of reception and reproduction, china's liability to incur damage appears closely associated with its wanton sexualisation in Wycherley's play but also, as I illustrate below, to an inborn propensity to travel, both literally and figuratively. By focusing on some paradigmatic stages in the literary and theatrical afterlife of *The Country Wife,* this paper evidences at once the frailty and the resilience of Wycherley's iconic scene and of the prop it contributed to install as a prominent theatrical and cultural signifier. As befits a prized commodity, china changes hands and becomes remoulded with each new appropriation; it is displaced or outright excised, revisited, transposed or transmuted, yet retains its recognisability and singular vitality all along the way.

1. Enter China

From the very beginning of its stage life as a prop,[1] upon its entrance in Act 4, Scene 3 of *The Country Wife*, Chinese porcelain shows a remarkable semantic mobility. The ribald humour of Wycherley's celebrated scene rests on the fact that each of the characters has a slightly different understanding of what is happening, depending on what they take to be the meaning of china: sexual intercourse, a male body part, Horner's sexual stamina as well as a 'normal' porcelain vase for the cuckolded husband. Wycherley places at the centre of his play a comically unstable signifier that is transformed by the various minds that encounter it, thereby revealing the characters' respective mastery of the complex code demarcating witty cosmopolites from unpolished outsiders in Restoration society. On one level, the impudent colonisation of an apparently innocent word by improper sexual content is traceable to the "libertine offensive" (Novak 1977) whereby

[1] Verbal references to chinaware, and especially to china-houses as places of sexual promiscuity, were of course already current in pre-Restoration drama: see Williams 1994, 1, 236-8.

1670s Restoration comedies sought to blot out the memory of civil war and Puritanism. At the same time, however, the scene's emphasis on words as social artefacts alerts us to china's special suitability to generate multiple and multiplying meanings for its characters and audiences alike. Chinese porcelain entered the Restoration stage loaded with a cultural and ideological baggage that Wycherley was quick to leverage for satirical purposes. By increasing and extending the metaphorical range of the china motif, these connotations have significantly contributed to its lasting vitality and viability along its protracted stage life.

As both literary critics and cultural historians have not failed to point out, the sexualisation of china in *The Country Wife* resonates with contemporary concerns about the dawning consumer culture and the opportunities it created for "a new and disturbingly public role for women" (Porter 2002, 407; see also Degenhardt 2013; Kowaleski-Wallace 1995; Porter 1999; Rosenthal 2020; Zuroski Jenkins 2013). The Restoration period, an age of rapidly expanding overseas trade and budding imperial expansion, saw the emergence of a whole new breed of "voracious urban collectors of luxury commodities, usually gendered female" (Tait 2020). Chinese porcelain, an exotic import made popular by Charles II's Portuguese queen, Catherine of Braganza, took pride of place among the new luxury goods associated with the female consumer and her growing agency in the economic and social sphere. In his comedy, Wycherley paradigmatically captures the transition from woman as an object of desire to woman as a desiring subject which was effected by the consumer revolution, and spotlights the cultural anxieties surrounding this conspicuous breach of gender prerogatives. In the hands of his fashionable Town ladies, china sheds its traditional metaphorical attributes as a trope for feminine fragility, an emblem of the valuable but easily breakable asset of maidenhood, to become instead a figure of robust and seemingly unquenchable female appetite.

Wycherley's china scene insists on the fundamental kinship between female consumption and sexual transgression. To all appearances, London's "women of reputation" (CW, 4.3.36) routinely pass off their sexual escapades as shopping expeditions; when Mrs Squeamish arrives at Horner's lodgings, determined to obtain her own share of china, Lady Fidget corroborates the libertine's claim that he has no more in stock by reminding her impatient associate of women's consumerist voracity: "What, d'ye think if he had any left, I would not have had it too? For we women of quality never think we have china enough" (4.3.200-2). This reversal of gender attributions is of crucial import for the play's sexual politics. The dramatist pointedly relies on china's status as a fashionable commodity to turn the tables on the rake hero of libertine comedy. Initially a figure of Horner's "irrepressible phallicism" (Kowaleski-Wallace 1997, 56), the much-coveted porcelain vase that Lady

Fidget exhibits as a reward for her unseen dealings with its male owner forcefully proclaims the libertine's figurative unmanning as a result of the overwhelming, incontrollable appetites unleashed in women by chinaware. Lady Fidget's "boldly emasculating gesture" (Porter 1999, 50) in the china scene marks Horner's definitive subjection to an economy of consumption that turns him into a vulnerable object of female desire: by the end of the play, we see him permanently trapped in his eunuch mask in order to meet the ladies' soaring demand for his "china". In the act of possessing women, Horner has become their valued, secret possession; Wycherley's arch-libertine is remoulded as a porcelain sex toy and barred from reaching a rake's chief and statutory goal, namely, public acknowledgement of his superior manhood.

Wycherley returns to the china scene and the menacing implications of the consumer revolution in his next play, *The Plain Dealer* (1676). Presented at a short distance from *The Country Wife*, on the same London stage and with a largely overlapping cast, the play revisits the dramatist's own sexualised construction of china through a metatheatrical lens, enlarging the frame to also include women as consumers of entertainment. A bitter satire loosely based on Molière's *Misanthrope*, Wycherley's last play stages an extended debate between two female spectators who hold opposed views about *The Country Wife* and its supposed obscenities. As they rehash the china trope, the playwright emphasises collecting and theatregoing as twin and potentially harmful activities, signalising the continuities between china house and playhouse as sites of unprecedented, formidable female agency. Symptomatically, the precious porcelain that in *The Country Wife* still manages to emerge singularly unscathed from the "toiling and moiling" (CW, 4.3.187) in Horner's bedroom meets a dismal fate when it ends up in the hands of the untutored, unscrupulous female spectator of *The Plain Dealer*.

In a prolonged scene that exposes her manifold forms of hypocrisy, Olivia, the cheating mistress of the titular plain dealer, confronts her cousin Eliza over the latter's unpardonable failure to publicly proclaim her "detestation" of "the hideous Country Wife" (PD, 2.1.395-7). To Eliza's suggestion that there are no obscenities in the text itself but only in the minds of the audience, for which the playwright can hardly be held accountable, Olivia opposes her unforgiving verdict on *The Country Wife* as a "filthy play" (416-17) and on china as the "lewdest, filthiest thing" (443) in it:

> I will never forgive the beastly author his china. He has quite taken away the reputation of poor china itself, and sullied the most innocent and pretty furniture of a lady's chamber, insomuch that I was fain to break all my defiled vessels. You see I have none left . . . (444-8)

In Olivia's absurdly fetishistic reading, the figured meanings of china in Wycherley's scene take on a life of their own as their perceived obscenity travels from the world of signs to that of material objects, prompting the actual destruction of her irreparably tainted collection. To her eyes, every piece of china has become a double entendre and, as such, is deserving of capital punishment. Yet rising to the defence of his work, the dramatist makes sure that the plaintiff is betrayed by the very words she (ab)uses: Olivia's closing statement unwittingly repeats, to self-incriminating effect, Horner's confession to Mrs Squeamish that Lady Fidget has drained him of his china and he has "none left now" (CW, 4.3.193). In a crudely retaliatory form of poetic justice, moreover, Olivia's feigned prudishness brings about an equally literalising form of physical punishment. Wycherley's female critic, who has equated her exposure to the sexualised language of *The Country Wife* to a kind of "mental rape" (Airey 2007, 8-9), becomes in turn a rape victim; in a cruel actualisation of her specious sexual fantasies, the ravisher of china is herself ravished.[2]

While undoubtedly fuelled by Wycherley's resentment at the damaging charges of obscenity levelled against *The Country Wife* by its influential female patrons,[3] the harshness of Olivia's retribution throws light on a widespread anxiety, in Restoration England, about the operations of the female gaze and its newly-achieved prominence in the cultural and aesthetic sphere. Even Eliza, the author's mouthpiece and ostensibly a discerning female theatregoer, is not wholly immune from suspicions of fraudulent judgement. To many members of the Drury Lane audience, her defence of china and other 'innocent' signifiers ("I can think of a goat, a bull, or satyr, without any hurt", 426-7) must have smacked of an in-house joke, considering that the actress who delivered it, Elizabeth Knepp, had appeared in the role of Lady Fidget on that very same stage only the year before. In this respect, *The Plain Dealer* can be considered an early and seminal instantiation of the discourse of taste that drives the refiguring of Wycherley's china scene across the eighteenth century and beyond. As the taint of corruption – aesthetic as well as moral – began to transfer onto china itself, rather than its sexual allusiveness, the female china lover took centre stage and the art and literature of the period are awash with broken porcelains that testify to the perils of an unbridled, extravagant female gaze.

[2] Airey (2007) provides an insightful discussion of rape language in *The Plain Dealer* and coeval antitheatrical writings.

[3] In his prefatory epistle, Wycherley dedicates the play to Mother Bennet, a notorious procuress, explaining that "this play claims naturally your protection, since it has lost its reputation with the ladies of stricter lives in the playhouse" (14-16).

2. China Broken

After the turn of the century, as exotic commodities were quickly losing their elitist associations amidst an escalating consumer revolution, the discourse of taste rose to a "reactionary new regime of social demarcation" (Porter 2002, 400) which, in the case of Chinese porcelain, continued to specifically target violations of gender boundaries. A clear indication of china's centrality to the budding discourse of taste can already be found in Susanna Centlivre's highly popular comedy, *The Busie Body* (1709). Embedded in Centlivre's play is a reworking of Wycherley's scene in which the topos of broken china appears in conjunction with a satire of the aesthetic and moral vagaries of the female collector. Miranda, an orphaned heiress, is about to elope with her handsome suitor, Sir George Airy, in order to escape the clutches of the highly undesirable Sir Francis Gripe, her controlling guardian and husband-to-be. Upon the latter's unexpected arrival, Miranda hides her lover behind the chimney board; to prevent discovery, she pretends that the door conceals a pet monkey and insists that

> if you open it before the Man comes that is to tame it, 'tis so wild 'twill break all my China, or get away, and that wou'd break my Heart; for I am fond on't to distraction . . . (Centlivre 1709, 54)

Miranda's ruse is successful, but her precious porcelain ends up in pieces nonetheless. Once he is left alone in the room, Marplot, the titular busy body, opens the door and discovers Sir George who inadvertently throws down the costly trinkets as he dashes off, thereby ironically enacting Miranda's 'wild monkey' scenario.

On one level, Centlivre stages a far more innocent brand of china than the one paraded in *The Country Wife*. There is almost no trace in her scene of Wycherley's licentiousness: Miranda's transgression is of a romantic, rather than sexual, nature, and the role of stand-in for it is filled by the inexistent monkey behind the screen, with chinaware seemingly demoted to a mere decorative appendage. The very use of the monkey as a proxy for the male human partner is indicative of Centlivre's mitigating strategy: in *The Country Wife*, the wild animal was instead associated with Lady Fidget, the oversexed woman.[4]

[4] When Lady Fidget locks herself in Horner's chamber, purportedly to plunder his hidden china, the libertine reacts with "Oh women, more impertinent, more cunning and more mischievous than their monkeys, and to me almost as ugly! Now she is throwing my things about, and rifling all I have, but I'll get into her the back way, and so rifle her for it" (CW, 4.3.124-8).

It is only in the second part of the scene that Miranda's apparently inconsequential reference to her concomitant monkey keeping and china collecting reveals its full implications. Summoned by the commotion, Sir Francis and the other characters re-enter the room. The following exchange ensues:

> Miranda Oh you Toad! what have you done?
> Marplot No great harm, I beg of you to forgive me: Longing to see the Monkey, I did but just ràise up the Board, and it flew over my Shoulders, scratch'd all my Face, broke yon' China, and whisk'd out of the Window.
> Sir Francis Was ever such an unlucky Rogue! Sirrah, I forbid you my House. Call the Servants to get the Monkey again; I wou'd stay my self to look it, but that you know my earnest Business.
> Scentwell Oh my Lady will be the best to lure it back; all them Creatures love my Lady extremely.
> (Centlivre 1709, 55-6)

Together with lapdogs and parrots, pet monkeys are a typical accoutrement of the woman of quality in satirical writings of the period.[5] Here, at end of a scene that pivots on the comical surrogation of Miranda's paramount by her imaginary monkey, the young lady is pronounced by her maid to be "extremely" loved by "all them Creatures", with the ambiguously inclusive plural collapsing the distinction between Sir George and her nonhuman admirer(s). By her own admission earlier in the dialogue, Miranda is "fond . . . to distraction" of her fashionable commodities; in light of the worrying lack of discrimination highlighted by Scentwell's closing remark, one is led to infer that her collection includes her human gallant alongside her pet monkey and china.

As we move into the following decade, the unsettling promiscuity generated by the levelling gaze of the female consumer typically takes the shape of a list, by now a common device for satirising women's impaired aesthetic and ethical judgement. The best-known example is undoubtedly Pope's anti-female satire in *The Rape of the Lock*, where enumeration is elevated to a prime satirical method. In his heroicomic masterpiece, Pope famously resurrects the trope of broken china in connection with the double entendre surrounding the "rape" of Belinda's curl. The description of the protagonist's hyperbolic reaction to the outrageous violation constructs the young woman as, at once, a fragile porcelain object and a collector of bizarrely assorted fashionable commodities:

[5] For a comprehensive discussion of the monkey trope in Restoration and eighteenth-century drama, and its frequent intersections with the china motif, see Brown 2010.

> Then flash'd the living lightning from her eyes,
> And screams of horror rend th' affrighted skies.
> Not louder shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast,
> When husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last,
> Or when rich China vessels, fall'n from high,
> In glitt'ring dust and painted fragments lie!
> (Canto 3, 153-60)

Commenting on the irreverent deflation of a husband's standing through his listing among other "objects of vanity and sources of fleeting and superficial pleasures" – the usual catalogue of animate and inanimate collectables – Porter (1999, 48) indicates Belinda as Lady Fidget's direct descendant. Beyond the evident continuities between the two women's subversive conversion of phallic authority into a fashionable bagatelle, however, some crucial differences stand out. As a result of its association with female vacuity, rather than sexual depravity, in Pope's satire china acquires a new kind of frailty that is typical of eighteenth-century refigurations. The very physical qualities that are foregrounded about porcelain as an object are token to this shift. In *The Country Wife*, the china vase shows a striking resistance to Lady Fidget's rough handling and to the unruly appetites of her "virtuous gang" (5.2.96). It is principally china's hardness that Wycherley foregrounds in order to signify, at once, Horner's mighty phallus, its objectification as a female sex toy, and the remarkable durability of London's women of quality who, we must assume, have been visiting china houses for ages with no apparent damage to their reputations. In Pope, by contrast, the accent falls on china's material as well as aesthetic thinness, a liability that makes it an eminently breakable commodity. Porcelain is recast as an object of shallow, ephemeral visual pleasure, a glossy, insubstantial surface with no depth or content that easily dissolves into "glitt'ring dust and painted fragments" (160).

A clear attempt at containing the challenge that Belinda and her likes posed to established authority, cultural and otherwise, the trope of aesthetic and moral vacuity and 'broken' female taste continues to pervade literary and artistic figurations of china through to the mid-eighteenth century, a point in time when the booming taste for Chinese porcelain, by then disdainfully branded a "craze", reached its peak. It was at this stage that the "classicist backlash" (Porter 1999, 32) against the mania for china found a theatrical counterpart in the damage inflicted on *The Country Wife* by its first adaptors, John Lee and David Garrick.

Lee's *The Country Wife* (1765) came first, but it was Garrick's *The Country Girl* (1766) that became the new 'authorised version' of Wycherley's comedy, ousting the Restoration original from the English

stage until well into the twentieth century. While differing in tone and form – Lee remodelled the play as a reform comedy and squeezed it into a two-act afterpiece, whereas Garrick gave it a romantic makeover – both adaptations remorselessly excised Horner's eunuch plot and its climactic scene. The pungent wit and unashamed bawdy of Restoration comedy were clearly deemed unfit for the more refined palates of eighteenth-century audiences, reared at the social school of taste provided by periodicals, coffee houses and other spaces of informed debate. Indeed, if *The Country Wife* was able, unlike the vast majority of Restoration plays,[6] to hold the stage uninterruptedly, this was in no small measure owing to Garrick's judicious removal of its lewd china for the sake of decorum. Wycherley himself, as we have seen, had anticipated this potential vulnerability in his comedy's reception through the image of the broken porcelains in *The Plain Dealer*. Akin to Wycherley's female critic, Garrick was quick to pinpoint the filth in *The Country Wife* and, in an uncanny actualisation of Olivia's bowdlerising zeal, proceeded at once to destroy the play's hapless china scene. While Wycherley's porcelain vase had to wait until 1924 to be again displayed on a theatre stage,[7] however, the iconic scene that contained it went on to enjoy a clandestine, but glorious, afterlife thanks to the prompt intervention of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Garrick's putative heir as the new manager of Drury Lane. Through a process of displacement and strategic camouflage, Sheridan managed to smuggle Wycherley's china into *The School for Scandal* (1777), the greatest theatrical hit of the age and an uncontested pillar of the English comic tradition until this very day.

3. China Displaced

Sheridan's entire career as a writer and theatrical impresario was driven by a sustained dialogue with the witty, 'laughing' tradition of the Restoration period, a cultural capital that, by the time he took over the management of Drury Lane in 1776, had fallen into almost complete disrepute. The venturous newcomer made his intentions clear from his very first season at the helm of the distinguished institution, by programming a sequence of Congreve plays and other Restoration comedies, which were soon to be followed by his own homage to the Restoration dramatic tradition with *The School for Scandal*. These revivals were a bold and risky move:

[6] *The Country Wife* is one of the very few exceptions to the general disappearance of Restoration drama from the theatrical repertoire after the mid-eighteenth century.

[7] This was in Montague Summer's production at the Phoenix Society, the first revival of the play in its original form since the 1760s.

by general consensus, Restoration comedies were deemed unfit for the stage, and Sheridan's eminent predecessor at Drury Lane, David Garrick, had brought a storm around his ears with his production of Congreve's *Love for Love* in 1771. Consequently, in *The School for Scandal* the dramatist is very careful to take the sting out of his extensive borrowings from Congreve, Vanbrugh and, especially, Wycherley, diluting their barbed social satire with an adequate dose of sentiment, and steering clear of any form of licentiousness in word or deed. Lady Teazle, the 'country wife' struggling with an older, grumpy husband, is a far more genteel version of her Restoration antecedent. For the female protagonist of *The School for Scandal*, Margery's "London disease" (CW, 4.4.1) manifests itself as an extravagant appetite for luxury commodities, rather than sex; even her decision to betray her husband, Sir Peter Teazle, is presented as a homage to the customs of fashionable society rather than a pursuit of carnal pleasure. In this late-Georgian beau monde, the irrepressible sexual urge that drove the female characters in *The Country Wife* has given way to the tamer, though equally addictive, vices of conspicuous consumption, the card table and, as the title indicates, gossip.

While clearly informed by a similar mitigating strategy, Sheridan's revamping of *The Country Wife* reverses Garrick's excision of the china scene, choosing to mend what his mentor had just broken. Wycherley's censored china hovers as a phantasmal presence over the pivotal reveal scene of *The School for Scandal*, when Lady Teazle is compromisingly caught hiding behind a screen in the private lodgings of her suitor, the double-dealing Joseph Surface, with whom she was about to commit adultery. Their tryst is interrupted by the sudden arrival of Sir Peter, her husband, followed a little later by Charles, Joseph's rakish younger brother. On the play's opening night, when the latter knocked down the screen on a mischievous impulse to see the "little French milliner" (4.3.355) allegedly hidden there by his faultless sibling, only to discover Lady Teazle instead, the Drury Lane audience almost brought down the house with roaring laughter and applause.

In its impeccable comic construction, Sheridan's screen scene shows patent analogies with Wycherley's china scene, beginning with its purposeful location in Act Four, Scene Three. The china stratagem is echoed in Surface's conventional use of his book collection as cover for his rendezvous with Sir Peter's wife ("Lady Teazle, when are you to give me your judgement on my library as you promised?", 2.2.225), a better matched alternative to his feigned depth of soul. The screen is an amplified version of the same prop in *The Country Wife*, where it provided a secret

space of observation for Quack, Horner's accomplice in the eunuch ruse;[8] at the same time, it demarcates for Lady Teazle an off-scene space akin to Horner's private chamber. In its newly achieved centrality the screen stands out as a physical equivalent to the rhetorical operations of the double entendre, where words serve as "fronts for invisible eruptions of meaning" (Zuroski Jenkins 2013, 83). But it is especially in their revelatory power that the two scenes show deep affinities. In *The Country Wife*, as we have seen, the china scene lays bare not so much the women's hypocrisy as Horner's paradoxical condition as a rake hero who is unmanned by his own sexual potency. Similarly, in Sheridan's screen scene the more momentous revelation in terms of plot development concerns the true nature of the "Man of Sentiment" for whom Lady Teazle was prepared to risk her marriage. As a silent, unseen witness to the conversation between her lover and her husband, Lady Teazle becomes privy to the latter's generosity and genuine affection for her and, by contrast, to Joseph's grotesque worthlessness as a compulsive liar trapped, Horner-like, in his own feigned persona. Even before the screen falls down, Sheridan discloses the vulnerability of Joseph's sentimental mask, a fragile "surface" that cracks and crumbles under the pressure of keeping up pretences with each new visitor who enters the room.

When it becomes Lady Teazle's turn to be publicly exposed, the continuities between china and screen find further, visual support in the image of the (potential) adulteress who emerges from her shielded retreat clutching, instead of Lady Fidget's roll wagon vase, a no less suggestive fan. The prop is not mentioned in Sheridan's stage directions but it invariably appears in extant visual records of this incredibly popular scene. An anonymous engraving published in 1778[9] shows Lady Teazle after the discovery instinctively covering her face with her fan, a poor replacement for the protection offered by the folding screen that has tumbled at her feet, and an ironically self-incriminating one given the fan's stage history as an unmistakable "sexual semaphore" (Sofer 2003, 118). The double function, as shield and flirtation device, of this distinctly feminine,

[8] In the china scene, Horner enjoins the obliging doctor to hide behind the screen so he can witness the success of his plot: "Step behind the screen there, and but observe if I have not particular privileges with the women of reputation already" (CW, 4.3.35-7).

[9] Anon., "Scene from School for Scandal being performed in Drury Lane Theatre, London" (British Museum).

sexualised prop would hardly have gone lost on Sheridan's audience.[10] Just like Lady Fidget's porcelain vase, moreover, the fan was not only an essential complement for the woman of fashion, but also, crucially, an import from China; as such, it created a powerful visual bridge between Wycherley's outlawed porcelain vase and Sheridan's screen. The fact that the latter is "hung . . . with maps" (SFS, 4.3.112) leaves no doubt about the exotic, imperial connotations that Sheridan's prop shares with the suppressed china by which it is "ghosted"[11].

China's phantasmal presence in the screen scene is framed by its seemingly casual appearance in the opening and closing moments of *The School for Scandal*. Sheridan's initial stage direction is tactically silent about it, but Chinese porcelain inhabits the characters' upper-class setting from the very start, as the curtain rises on Lady Sneerwell and her right-hand man Snake intent on scandalmongering while they enjoy their morning chocolate, a fashionable drink associated with luxury tableware. Notably, Garrick's prologue has already alerted the audience to this "presumed prop"[12] through its description of a parallel tea-drinking and gossip-reading scene in which china cups are likewise implied by way of repeated references to the act of "sipping" (ll. 7-20). The china trope is then resurrected in the fifth act, in connection with the other reveal scene that hands Joseph his final defeat. Sir Oliver, the young Surfaces' uncle and long-time benefactor from faraway India, decides to put the elder brother's generosity to the test by pretending to be an indebted relative seeking financial assistance. Much to his surprise, Joseph cries poor and scornfully dismisses his uncle's generous outpour of imperial riches as a bagful of worthless exotic trifles:

[10] Frances Abington, the star performer who played the first Lady Teazle on the Drury Lane stage, was famous for her expert command of the fan and its eloquent gestural lexicon (Sofer 2003, 126). In another visual record of the same tableau, James Roberts's painting "Frances Abington, Thomas King, John Palmer, William Smith" (1779; London, Garrick Club), Abington holds an open fan with both hands over her crinoline dress at the site corresponding to the genital area, thereby drawing attention to the prop's sexual associations.

[11] I use the term with specific reference to the mechanism of surrogation described in Sofer's comprehensive study of the life and afterlife of stage props (2003). Sofer focuses on props' ability to carry the memory of previous meanings that can no longer be directly expressed in a new context. Here I extend the notion to also include the reverse process, whereby the same signified becomes attached to a new signifier that evokes the original, silenced one.

[12] In Sofer's definition, a prop that is "not explicitly mentioned in the stage directions but must nonetheless be present on stage" (2007, vi).

Sir Oliver . . . But I imagined his bounty had enabled you to become the agent of his charity.

Joseph Surface My dear sir, you were strangely misinformed. Sir Oliver is a worthy man. But avarice, Mr Stanley, is the vice of age. I will tell you, my good sir, in confidence, what he has done for me has been a mere nothing, though people, I know, have thought otherwise; and for my part I never chose to contradict the report.

Sir Oliver What, has he never transmitted you bullion, rupees, pagodas?

Joseph Surface O, dear Sir, nothing of the kind. No, no, a few presents now and then. China, shawls, congou tea, avadavats, and Indian crackers. Little more, believe me.

Sir Oliver (*aside*) Here's gratitude for twelve thousand pounds!

(5.1.64-77)

In order to continue to peddle his "sentimental French plate" instead of the genuine, but far more expensive, "silver ore of pure charity" (5.1.105), Joseph turns to the usual listing rhetoric, but his attempt at manipulating the discourse of value that had developed around china and similar luxury commodities backfires spectacularly. Ironically, moreover, Joseph's moral and economic debacle is rhetorically sealed by Sir Oliver's appropriation of the china motif in the closing scene when he publicly rehabilitates Charles, the prodigal nephew, over his scheming brother. Sir Oliver has obtained definitive proof of Charles's good-heartedness in the famous auction scene, when he confronts him under the assumed identity of a moneylender, and the heavily indebted rogue refuses to sell his uncle's picture along with the rest of the Surface family portraits. Having decided to make him his sole heir, Sir Oliver proceeds to demote his nephew's past "follies" to mere bagatelles, recalling how, in the auction scene, "the rogue bargained with me for all his ancestors, sold me judges and generals by the foot and maiden aunts as cheap as broken china!" (5.3.143-5).

Beside its more direct reference to the discounted Surface aunts, the comparison with "broken china" has evident applicability to Joseph, twice unmasked as a cheap, flawed imitation of the Man of Sentiment in his dealings with Lady Teazle, first, and with Sir Oliver/Stanley, later. In this respect, Sheridan's use of the china trope to expose Joseph as a deceitful "Surface" marks a significant departure from the common eighteenth-century association with female superficiality. In yet another significant form of displacement, the dramatist is careful to avoid any mention of Chinese porcelain where one would most expect to find it, namely, in the hands of the play's frivolous woman of taste. Lady Teazle's lavish spending on luxury commodities is a bone of contention in her frequent bickering with her husband, but strangely enough china never seems to be on the radar of Sheridan's inveterate fashionista. The only character in the

play who claims, albeit falsely, to own some is Joseph. By having him pose as a connoisseur of Chinese porcelain and other exotic commodities for the purpose of depreciating his uncle's generosity, *The School for Scandal* effectively reframes bad or 'broken' taste as a male, rather than female, attribute. Conversely Lady Teazle, who remains strikingly indifferent to china, is presented as capable of expert judgement in the screen scene when, as a silent witness to the conversation between her husband and her gallant, she quickly learns to distinguish real sentiment from its cheap replica[13].

4. China Restored?

After almost two hundred years of blackout, the early twentieth century saw the restoration of the china scene, as *The Country Wife* was again presented to the public in its original form, rather than Garrick's sanitised version. Like a number of other Restoration classics, Wycherley's comedy made its first, tentative reappearance in a semi-private staging at the Phoenix Society in 1924, and soon afterwards reached the commercial stage. This early season of revivals had the all-important effect of reinstating the core plays in the English repertoire; but it was eclipsed, in magnitude and scope, by the massive 'Restoration boom' in the later

[13] Due to limited space and the specifically theatrical focus of this essay, I am unable to include a discussion of George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879), though this "comedy in narrative", as the subtitle has it, would undoubtedly deserve a space in the genealogy I have traced. Effecting a similar reversal of gender identifications, Meredith presents a female protagonist whose refusal to be moulded according to her fiancé's wishes finds a symbolical correlation in her ill-concealed antipathy for china. In parallel, Clara's controlling, self-absorbed husband-to-be, Sir Willoughby Patterne, is mercilessly exposed as "a brittle model of upper-class petrified prejudice", a version of the British-made, mass-produced and therefore inherently fake 'Chinese' porcelain to which his name alludes (Lanone 2012, 3; for an insightful discussion of the central role of the willow pattern in Meredith's critique of gender stereotypes, as well as the novel's links with Restoration culture, see also Graziano 1999, 49-68). Interestingly for my line of argument here, in Meredith's iteration of the trope china gets broken while literally travelling to Patterne Hall, the patrician mansion that becomes Clara's place of confinement during her betrothal. The porcelain vase that Colonel De Craye, who is to serve as Willoughby's best man, has brought as a wedding present is shattered when his carriage is overturned on the way to his friend's estate. This is a foreboding of broken vows to come – Meredith's independent, spirited protagonist eventually succeeds in freeing herself from the stifling engagement – but also an indication of unconventional female behaviour, given that the incident occurs when the slightly drunk coachman swerves to avoid Clara who is out on the high-road on an unsupervised walk.

part of the century. The 1980s saw a steady rise of Restoration titles on theatrical playbills, hitting an impressive peak by the end of the decade; for the first time ever, moreover, this steady stream of restagings was paralleled by a considerable output of new work that engaged with the Restoration period and its theatre culture, very often with a view to establishing politically-relevant parallels with the present day (see Soncini 1999 for a full-ranging survey).

In approaching Restoration plays as a valid metaphor for Thatcherite Britain, these new productions strove to bring to the fore the socio-political subtext of what, in the earlier wave of revivals, had been largely understood as artificial and distinctly lightweight comedies of manners. When it came to *The Country Wife*, the theatremakers' sustained focus on class, gender and sexual politics led to the recovery, and indeed heightening, of Wycherley's scorching satire of social and sexual mores. This resulted, first and foremost, in the reconveyance of Horner's cuckolding intrigue. China returned, sometimes with a vengeance: in Andrew Manley's 1993 production of *The Country Wife* at the Harrowgate Festival, the romantic plot involving Harcourt and Alithea was cut altogether, in what effectively amounted to a complete reversal of Garrick's earlier move. In the parallel corpus of adaptations and spin-offs, Wycherley's comedy similarly tended to be reduced to its libertine scenario, with Lady Fidget and her "virtuous gang" often taking precedence over Margery and her marital vicissitudes. The full enfranchisement of the china scene, however, did not automatically entail a parallel comeback of the actual china within it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wycherley's symbolic object of desire is usually replaced by latter-day equivalents in modernising adaptations; but even 'regular' productions appear at pains to accommodate this culture-specific prop. A telling case in point is the 1993 Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Max Stafford-Clark, the unrivalled champion of the social-realist approach to Restoration drama[14]. This highly representative production aimed to rip apart the shiny surface of seventeenth-century manners in order to show the brutal, ugly face of Charles II's 'merry Restoration'. Horner's exquisite chinaware sat uneasily in a version of libertine comedy "with its vizard off and its breeches down", as Michael Billington (1993) famously put it in his authoritative review of the RSC performance. Accordingly, the phallic-shaped vase was updated to a more mundane, but culturally inert, coffee pot, a move that further contributed to deplete the scene of its mutinous farcical humour in favour of a chilling, bleak portrayal of predatory manhood.

[14] For more details on Stafford-Clark's work in this area, see Soncini 1999.

Even when retained in its original form, Wycherley's china continues to show a symptomatic vulnerability to cultural relocation. While Stafford-Clark's *Country Wife* played in Stratford, London audiences were being treated by the Haymarket theatre to *Lust*, a far more upbeat musical adaptation with text and music by the Heather Brothers featuring a much expanded china scene. The production's almost exclusive focus on the play's rampant promiscuity is announced from the very start, through a prologue in which Quack pre-dates Wycherley's comedy to 1661, the heyday of the libertine offensive, while the whole company join him in the theme song celebrating "The glorious restoration / of the noblest urge bestowed on us. / Wholesome and healthy, / Frolicsome and carefree, / Good old-fashioned, / Earthy and robust / Lust!" (Heather Brothers 1994, 1-2). Eschewing all subtlety, the china scene is relocated straight into Horner's bedroom, and opens on a post-coital conversation with a "breathless, dishevelled" (50) Dainty Fidget who has preceded her sister-in-law in the libertine's large four-poster bed that dominates the room. True to his status as a serial womaniser, this Horner keeps a stock of identical phallic-shaped vases conveniently stored in a chest at the foot of the bed; before she is briskly dismissed to make room for the next lucky lady, a still ecstatic Dainty is routinely given her china souvenir and instructed to produce it as evidence "if anyone asks" (50) about the purpose of her visit. In addition to Horner's sexual acrobatics, then, in this version of *The Country Wife* the audience is also admitted to his famed china cabinet, only however to find the rake's collection consisting of quite unimpressive mass-produced copies.

This disappointing depletion of value finds a match in china's supervened irrelevance by the time the china scene 'proper' begins. Lady Fidget is caught *flagrante delicto* in Horner's bed while she is about to fellate him. Clearly unable to resort to the worn-out china excuse, the lovers are rescued by Quack's prompt intervention. Before a stunned Sir Jaspar, the resourceful aide-de-camp coaches Lady Fidget into "keep[ing] a tight grip" of Horner's "tackle" (53-4), under pretense that she is assisting him in dressing the eunuch's wound. Even before the couple retire to the adjacent room to consummate, Wycherley's allusive vase has already given way to the actual piece of flesh it was originally meant to allude to. In its crudely literalising approach, the Heather Brothers' adaptation has no space left for double entendre: porcelain is drained of its sophisticated lustre, and the scene of its savage bite and subversive comic brilliance.

The arrant cheapening of Wycherley's prop is repeated, in amplified form, by the scene's choric ending, a collective celebration of the libertine sex craze. As all the characters sing the praise of "China" and rejoice in its ubiquity ("We have it everywhere. / On the banquet table, / Half-way up

the stairs / . . . Hanging on the Wall!"), a stage direction informs us that *"The Lights come up on various locations revealing Ladies fondling pieces of china identical to the piece Horner gave Dainty and Lady Fidget"* (57). The latter's superior expertise[15] turns out to be a joke, given that every other lady on stage is now clutching the same "truly unique" (56) vase that the inveterate rake has just palmed off on her.

Unlike what happens in *Lust*, in modern-day adaptations of *The Country Wife* it is far more common for the Restoration vase to travel under an assumed identity. The frequent iterations of the china scene without its china on the contemporary stage find a direct precedent in Sheridan's cautious recycling of Wycherley's comedy in *The School for Scandal*. For the latest generation of adaptors, however, china's vulnerability is no longer linked, as during the eighteenth century, to the pressures of censorship and decorum but, rather, to the acquired opacity of Wycherley's cultural signifier and its attendant inability to act as a vessel for new, contemporary meanings.

Hal Ashby's classic comedy film, *Shampoo* (1975) contains an early instance of china's replacement with a functional equivalent in our present. Co-written by Warren Beatty and Robert Towne, and reportedly inspired by the 1969 stage production of *The Country Wife* in Chichester, the film relocates Wycherley's libertine plot to Los Angeles and reframes it as a witty satire of late-1960s (sexual) politics. Beatty lends his gentle charm to George Roundy, a Beverly Hills hairdresser who is particularly popular with his upmarket female clientele due to his indefatigable devotion to his calling as a Don Juan. Hardly a match for Wycherley's "Machiavel in love" (CW, 4.3.68), this soft-hearted and largely clueless Horner meets his sad, final defeat when his paramours ditch him for financial and emotional security while, from a TV set in the background, Richard Nixon declares war on the "permissive society" during his successful 1968 presidential campaign. In modern-day America, Horner's feigned impotence is easily converted into George's statutory homosexuality as a star hairdresser – the stereotype is so powerful that he has no need for a Quack figure to spread the word – and the porcelain vase finds a 'natural' replacement in the phallic-shaped hairdryer that Beatty stacks into his denims before he hops on his motorcycle and heads towards Lester/Sir Jaspar's villa to service the lady of the house.

Horner's fragile, fine porcelain likewise vanishes from Tanika Gupta's 2004 adaptation of *The Country Wife*, the most sustained attempt thus far

[15] "Your wife is a true connoisseur, sir. And as such a most difficult woman to satisfy" (56), Horner informs Sir Jaspar during a brief pause in his sexual romp with Lady Fidget.

to relocate the comedy to a contemporary setting. A leading figure within the British-Asian theatre scene, Gupta revisits the play from a distinctly multicultural angle, transporting its characters from the courtly Town of Stuart times to Southall, an ethnically-mixed suburban district of West London, in a conscious attempt to open up this quintessentially English comedy to the representation of today's cultural diversity.[16]

Already from the indication given in the title that this is a "new version" of *The Country Wife*, the dramatist emphasises transposition as the play's governing principle, a move geared to convey an impression of transmutations resulting from the comedy's journey to a different historical and cultural milieu. With very few exceptions, every aspect of Wycherley's original finds an equivalent in this new environment. As inevitably happens, however, during the long crossing from Stuart times to the present day some items travel comfortably, whereas others arrive slightly bruised. In contemporary Southall, Pinchwife becomes reincarnated as Alok, a Punjabi husband who has got himself a naive, inexperienced wife from "the country" – meaning India, not the countryside – based on the mistaken assumption that she will be easier to control. While the typically 'Asian' theme of arranged marriages enlivens with new topicality the Restoration discourse of contractualism and the clash between individual aspirations and social conventions, Horner's eunuch ruse is inevitably harder to accommodate within post-millennial London and, specifically, the group of rowdy, streetwise twentysomethings who supplant Wycherley's aristocratic coterie in Gupta's version. For the same reason, the china scene proves one of the production's chief untranslatables. The Fidget ladies, here recast as Daisy and Dolly, the sexy babes of the local gangster Jazzy, visit the libertine under pretense of craving his X-box; when they emerge from Hardeep/Horner's flat after a merry threesome, a stage direction describes them "*clutching bits of a Playstation, joysticks, games etc.*" (Gupta 2004, 76).

While in some respects repeating the Heather Brothers' trivialisation of Wycherley's exotic, exclusive commodity, Gupta's twenty-first-century equivalent for china has some strong points. Although the conversation about the rake's reputedly infinite, yet regrettably depleted, collection can only revolve around the girls' insatiable craving for ever new games, to rather dull effect,[17] the joysticks nevertheless manage to retain the phallic suggestiveness of Lady Fidget's roll wagon, and to effectively convey

[16] For an extended discussion of Gupta's adaptation and its role in promoting a more inclusive approach to Restoration drama, see Soncini 2022.

[17] "Dolly What about Vice City—you got that one? / Hardeep There's nothing left. You took it all. / Daisy I reckon there's more hidden away . . ." (77).

the notion that Horner/Hardeep has become a sex toy for his ladies. At the same time, by turning to a typically *male* object of desire, Gupta insinuates the idea of gaming as a surrogate for sex for her modern-day libertines, a move which at once ties in with Wycherley's deflation of stereotypical virility and strengthens the dramatist's sustained critique of toxic masculinity and patriarchal oppression in this distinctly 'woke' refashioning of Restoration comedy.

Where Gupta's functional equivalent proves insetad irredeemably weak is in its lack of social allure: this cheapened, somewhat dumbed down version of Restoration china inevitably robs the scene of the riotously funny contrast between the obscene subtext and the polished surface of upper-class manners. An even more conspicuous damage incurred in the transposition from porcelain vase to X-box regards the silencing of china's wider cultural and ideological resonances. This historically accrued capital might arguably have brought added weight to Gupta's exploration of the complexities of our multicultural, global society through the lens of a Restoration play. As Rosenthal observes, *The Country Wife* is fully conversant with the new form of cosmopolitanism that emerged during the Restoration as a result of the Stuarts' empire-building ambitions. To its original Drury Lane audience, too, the titular "country" would have suggested the English nation, in addition or in parallel to the countryside: in the 1670s, the trope of the naive rustic girl graduating into metropolitan refinement found immediate applicability to "a backwater nation working its way into the sophistication of global networks" (Rosenthal 2020, 80). Similarly, with its twin associations with exoticism and eroticism, imperial expansion and cultural contamination, the china scene shone a light onto the ambivalence surrounding the Restoration discourse of cosmopolitanism. These connotations might have provided valuable conceptual firepower for an adaptation that celebrates multiculturalism while warning about its potential vulnerabilities; Gupta's modernising translation, however, precludes access to the rich but time-sensitive repertoire of cultural meanings baked into Restoration china.

I end my account of the final stretch of china's travels with what must count as the most mainstream attempt to date at refunctioning Wycherley's play for a present-day audience. This is John Guare's *A Free Man of Color*, an ambitious epic drama originally commissioned by New York's Public Theatre in 2004, and eventually presented on the Lincoln Center's stage in 2010 after substantial revisions. For his first Broadway production after more than twenty years, the distinguished American writer worked on the brief of producing a play that would tackle issues of "race and class in New Orleans around 1801, on the eve of the Louisiana purchase" (Healy 2010) using the frame of English Restoration comedy.

Tasked with exploring this seminal moment in America's long history of racial strife and social inequality, Guare mobilises Wycherley's comedy to defamiliarise the discourse of race and invite the audience to imagine alternatives to long-ingrained polarisations. Horner's avatar is Jacques Cornet, the son of a wealthy white father and an African American slave. The play opens on Mardi Gras in 1801, with Cornet and his associates hailing New Orleans as the "free-est" city in the world, a place of fertile self-invention where "race is a celebration" and "you can be whatever you declare yourself to be" (Guare 2011, 5). As he states his intention to create his own character and write his own play, Guare's "free man of colour" asserts his right to identify as neither a black man or a slave but a true aristocrat in taste and appearance.

The full social import of Cornet's new brand of libertinism is revealed in the china scene, where we watch him using his sexual prowess to procure vital intelligence at a time of seismic geopolitical shifts. In Guare's version, Wycherley's original signifier is first supplanted by its signified, and then restored to the scene, but in different shape. Upon realising that the city husbands are withholding political information from him, the libertine gives them to believe that he is 'only' doling out sex to their ladies, meanwhile using his confederacy of loyal wives to find out about the fate of Louisiana. An equivalent of the porcelain vase eventually materialises in the second part of the scene, in the form of a cylindrical cipher machine that Doña Smeralda's husband, Morales, unexpectedly returns home to look for while she is enjoying Cornet's company. On finding the bedroom door locked, he asks his wife, who tactically feigns a contagious fever, whether his "Imperial code breaker" might be there, describing the object as an unwittingly allusive "long black tube with a red ribbon on it" ("It looks familiar. I'll keep my eyes open", is the lady's amused reply, 31). The machine is eventually found by Cornet among the bedsheets and duly passed out to its owner who proceeds to decipher the fateful cartogram announcing that Spain has given Louisiana to France.

Guare's variation on the 'china scene without its china' has some evident advantages over Gupta's familiarising translation. In addition to the sexual suggestions, the cipher machine retains the foreignness – historical, if not geographical – of Wycherley's roll wagon vase as well as its handcrafted and somewhat bizarre uniqueness. Conceptually, it builds on the notion of china as code in *The Country Wife*, merging the scene's central concern with the sophisticated systems of interpretation used to penetrate social lexicon with Horner's self-description as a "passe-partout of the town" (CW, 1.1.149) when he first illustrates his stratagem for obtaining free access to London's upper-class ladies. For Guare's rake, the "skeleton key that once fit all the locks of Louisiana" (48), as he describes his phallus

upon donning the eunuch mask, operates to all effects as a code-breaker, a tool for acquiring the information he needs in order to "play a role in this Hobbesian juggernaut called history" (44). Some of the white characters in the play, including Cornet's half-brother Pincepousse (Pinchwife's alias), look with favour on Napoleon's prospective restoration of harsh slavery laws in multiracial, multicultural New Orleans. In the second act, the libertine's hopes that France's infamous *Code noir* will be cracked for good when Louisiana is finally sold to the young, freedom-loving American nation are brutally shattered by Thomas Jefferson's decision to open the newly acquired territory to slavery. The play ends with Cornet shackled, stripped of any authority over his play and sold at auction with the rest of his property, of which he is now just one more item.

Cornet's literal commodification in the play's bleak ending creates one final, powerful connection with the china motif in *The Country Wife*. Though not a china collector, this Horner is nonetheless an avid consumer of luxury commodities from the Far East – hence his obsession with maps that will hopefully reveal the Northwest Passage or, as he puts it, "the magic route to deliver me the treasures that I need like bread and water" (3). These treasures are the Shanghai silks and other expensive textiles that go to make his flamboyant wardrobe and enable his self-fashioning as a Restoration rake. As we learn in the opening scene, Cornet's utopian, undying belief in the power and possibility of self-invention is entirely predicated on the social power inhering "the sanctity of surfaces. The value of veneer" (2). To his servant Murmur, who wonders how, as a former slave, he could ever feel entitled to write a play, the free man of colour readily replies: "Brocade gave me confidence" (2). These highly treasured imports are key assets in Cornet's empowering play of surface; as such, they show an unmistakable kinship with Restoration china and its embedded theatricality: just like the fine porcelain vase that Lady Fidget once held in her hands, they open up an imaginary space of perpetual invention and reinvention, unquenchable desire, and seemingly endless travel.

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