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Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

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Valentina Rossi*

The Function of Horner's Irony in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*

Abstract

The present contribution investigates irony in William Wycherley's masterpiece, *The Country Wife* (1675), from a pragmatic perspective. The qualitative analysis focuses on the utterances spoken by Horner, the main character of the comedy. By using a methodological framework based on the main studies published by Grice (1975), Sperber and Wilson (1981), Clark and Gerrig (1984), Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995), and Dynel (2014; 2018), I intend to demonstrate that irony is determinant for both the development of the plot and the achievement of the protagonist's purpose. Furthermore, the linguistic phenomenon mentioned above can be considered an ingenious device that Wycherley employs to expose the hypocrisy of Restoration society.

Keywords: Restoration comedy; William Wycherley; *The Country Wife*; pragmatics; irony

The present study explores the function of irony[1] as performed by Horner, the main character of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), in order

[1] The *OED* defines irony as follows: "irony, n . . . 1. Originally *Rhetoric*. a. As a mass noun. The expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect; esp. (in earlier use) the use of approbatory language to imply condemnation or contempt (cf. Sarcasm n.). In later use also more generally: a manner, style, or attitude suggestive of the use of this kind of expression. Cf. Ironia n . . . b. As a count noun. An instance of this; an ironic utterance or expression . . . 2. Dissimulation, pretence . . . 3. A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected; an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations" (last consulted: June 2023). With regard to the origins, Aristophanes used the term *εἰρωνεία* (*eirōneia*) for the first time between the third and the second century BCE, to refer to lying (see, among others, Lane 2006, 58). In due time, Socrates' maieutic method – as illustrated in Plato's *Symposium* – contributed to modifying the meaning of the term ineluctably: "*Eirōneia* [was] no longer lying or deceit but a complex rhetorical practice whereby one can say one thing but mean quite another" (Colebrook 2004, 2). The idea of dissembling associated with this linguistic device was furtherly expanded in Aristotle's writings (see, among others, Barbe 1995, 62).

* eCampus University of Novedrate - valentina.rossi1@uniecampus.it

to demonstrate that such a linguistic device is essential to both activate the plot and help the protagonist be recognised by the others as impotent, so to exploit such a pretext and have affairs without risking his (and his lovers') public reputation.

The essay is structured as follows: Section 1 illustrates the methodology, which has its roots in the pragmatic domain and spans theories by Grice (1975; 1978), Sperber and Wilson (1981), Clark and Gerrig (1984), Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995), and Dynel (2014; 2018); Section 2 analyses selected excerpts of the sex comedy in-depth to determine the linguistic peculiarities as wells as the functions of Horner's irony throughout the play. Lastly, in the Conclusion, I remark on the importance of the trope concerning the rake's characterisation, the fortunes of the play as well as the criticism towards Restoration sociability as contained in it.

1. Methodological Framework

Pragmatics proves to be a suitable arena to investigate irony (see Colebrook 2004, 11-12), in consideration of its context-dependency.[2] In this domain, the initiator of the line of studies about this linguistic device was Paul Grice. In *Logic and Conversation* (1975), he indicated it as a potential device to flout the first maxim of Quality – "Do not say what you believe to be false" (1975, 46) – by providing the following definition: "the most obvious related proposition [that] is the contradictory of the one he [the speaker] purports to be putting forward" (1975, 53). Afterwards, he expanded on the topic in *Further Notes on Logic and Conversation* (1978), concluding that

> irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt . . . To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretence to be recognised as such, to announce it as a pretence would spoil the effect. (1978, 125)

In time, critics judged his arguments lacking and inadequate (see, for instance, Holdcroft 1983, 125). From the 1980s onwards, several scholars tried to

[2] Following the so-called Direct Access View, a supporting context suffices to comprehend the ironic meaning of an utterance (see Gibbs 1984; 1994; 2002). Such position was partially shared by Rachel Giora's Graded Salient Hypothesis, as it "deflates the traditional distinction between literal and nonliteral language. However, instead of assigning context an exclusive role in comprehension, it posits the familiarity continuum as a crucial factor in language comprehension (alongside contextual mechanisms)" (2003, 71). On this matter, particularly pertinent is Colston and Gibbs (2007, 7-11).

overcome his widened breach with alternative theories. In this respect, Sperber and Wilson (1981), Clark and Gerrig (1984), Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995) and Dynel's studies (2014; 2018) are determinant.

Arguing against the traditional account that irony is a deviation from the norm, Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber introduced two binomials: "use" *vs.* "mention" and "reporting" *vs.* "echoing".[3] By formulating the Mention Theory of Irony in 1981, they defined the rhetorical figure as "a variety of echoic utterance, used to express the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed" (Wilson and Sperber 1992, 59). The primary goal of the ironist was not to communicate the opposite of what he/she expressed; instead, "an ironical utterance [had] to *remind* the hearer of the thought it echoes" (Wilson and Sperber 2012, 125; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, they recognised attitude, normative bias and a characteristic tone of voice as three necessary features to echo some prior utterances or sentiments. Finally, they indicated the Relevance Theory[4] as the most suitable approach to "[set] an upper limit to what the ironist can rationally expect to achieve" (Wilson and Sperber 1992, 55).

Overwhelmingly, the Mention Theory of Irony received a positive appraisal,[5] although it did not convince Clark and Gerrig, who proposed the Pretense Theory of Irony in 1984, inspired by Grice and Fowler's research. By remarking on its superiority compared to that of Sperber and Wilson's, they argued that neither mentioning nor echoing was enough to decode irony:

[3] The scholars recur to the term "use" when a word is employed "to refer to a word", while "the self-referential use of words or other linguistic expressions is known in the philosophical literature as 'mention'" (Wilson and Sperber 1992, 57). Concerning the second binomial, they offer the following definition: "[a] report of speech or thought merely gives information about the content of the original . . . An echoic utterance simultaneously expresses the speaker's attitude or reaction to what said or thought" (Wilson and Sperber 1992, 59).

[4] "Relevance theory claims that humans do have an automatic tendency to maximise relevance, not because we have a choice in the matter – we rarely do – but because of the way our cognitive systems have evolved. As a result of constant selection pressures toward increasing efficiency, the human cognitive system has developed in such a way that our perceptual mechanisms tend automatically to pick out potentially relevant stimuli, our memory retrieval mechanisms tend automatically to activate potentially relevant assumptions, and our inferential mechanisms tend spontaneously to process them in the most productive way. This universal tendency is described in the First, or Cognitive, Principle of Relevance . . . Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance" (Wilson and Sperber 2004, 610).

[5] For instance, Jorgensen et al. (1984, 117-20) supported the validity of the theory and corroborated it with a test. The outcome was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* in 1984. Not only did it confirm the thesis mentioned above, but it also underlined the importance of background information and shared knowledge when deciphering irony.

> In being ironic, the theory goes, a speaker is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience; the speaker intends the addressees of the irony to discover the pretence and thereby see his or her attitude toward the speaker, the audience, and the utterance . . . Suppose S is speaking to A, the primary addressee, and to A', who may be present or absent, real or imaginary. In speaking ironically, S is pretending to be S' speaking to A'. What S' is saying is, in one way or another, patently uniformed or injudicious . . . A' in ignorance, is intended to miss this pretence, to take S as speaking sincerely. But A, as part of the "inner circle" (to use Fowler's phrase), is intended to see everything – the pretence, S''s injudiciousness, A''s ignorance, and hence S's attitude toward S', A', and what S' said. (Clark and Gerrig 1984, 122)

Hence, pretence qualified as a powerful weapon to disclose the peculiar features of irony, namely its asymmetry of affect, its victims and the typical tone of voice (122-3).[6]

Sperber and Wilson's method was also criticised by Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995). These scholars argued that an "echoic interpretation is not a necessary property of discourse irony. Instead, the more general claim is that an allusion to some prior prediction, expectation, preference, or norm is a necessary property of discourse irony" (5). They presented a general and more inclusive approach:[7] the Allusional Pretense

[6] Although Clark and Gerrig asserted the superiority of the Pretense Theory to the Mention Theory, it is worth mentioning that the methods share a common ground, as Winner (1988) and Barbe (1995, 50) point out. For instance, both display a derogatory attitude, rely on shared background knowledge, require a change of voice, and are finalised at criticising.

[7] The Allusional Pretense Theory offered some further critical considerations about politeness, claiming that "[s]peaking ironically in such situations would be a face-saving way to express one's feeling about what has gone awry" (Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown 1995, 21). Such position recalls that of Brown and Levison. In their pivotal book, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1978), they qualified irony as an off-record politeness strategy, namely "[a] communicative act [that] is done . . . in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the actor leaves himself an 'out' by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations; he cannot be held to have committed himself to just one particular interpretation of his act. Thus if a speaker wants to do an FTA [Face Threatening Act], but wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it, he can do it off record and leave it up to the addressee to decide how to interpret it. Such off-record utterances are essentially indirect uses of language . . . Essentially, though, what is involved is a two-stage process: (i) A *trigger* serves notice to the addressee that some inference must be made. (ii) Some mode of *inference* derives what is meant (intended) from what is actually said, this last providing a sufficient *clue* for the inference" (Brown and Levinson 1978, 211; emphasis in the original). In performing irony, the speaker S breeches Grice's Maxim of Quality to indirectly convey his/her intended meaning by saying the opposite, saving his/her face at the same time. See Brown and Levinson 1978, 121-2.

Theory of Discourse Irony, in the conviction that the key to detecting irony in conversation was focussing on allusions to a failed expectation and insincerity – this latter referred to the violation of the Gricean Cooperative Principle and Austin's or Searle's Felicity Condition.[8]

In any event, the concept of pretence also found space in Marta Dynel's contemporary studies about irony. Drawing from the Gricean theories illustrated above, she introduced the notion of "overt untruthfulness": an essential feature deployed when "the speaker does not subscribe to the meaning of his/her utterance and wants the hearer to appreciate this fact" (Dynel 2014, 621). Such element was then combined with "a particular negative *evaluation* of a *referent* (an action or an utterance, for instance)" (2014, 621; emphasis in the original), emerging as an implicature. On these premises, she identified four types of irony:

> 1) propositional negation irony, when "the central evaluative implicature recruits a proposition opposite to the one expressed literally";
> 2) ideational reversal irony, in which "the intended meaning arises as a result of negation of a chosen element of the literally expressed meaning or the pragmatic import of the entire utterance";
> 3) surrealistic irony refers to utterances which are "blatantly absurd, and which no type of meaning negation can render truthful";
> 4) and verisimilar irony, when "the utterance conveys (truthful) *what is said* or implicature … and thus it gives rise to an untruthful implicature involving propositional or ideational meaning reversal for the sake of obtaining the focal evaluative implicature". (2014, 624; emphasis in the original)

Echo, pretence, allusion, overt untruthfulness, (negative) evaluation of a referent: the pragmatic elements laid bare from the 1970s onwards qualify as appropriate instruments to shed light on irony as detected in *The Country Wife*; moreover, they dovetail with Horner's ironic speeches, whose meticulous genesis and deployment deserve to be explored in-depth in the following section.

[8] Until the 1990s, scholars agreed in considering Speech Act Theory inefficient to study irony, as this latter reluctantly falls within the categories theorised by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). On this matter, see Holdcroft 1983 and Haverkate 1990. However, Kumon-Nakamura, Glucksberg and Brown (1995, 19-20) demonstrated that the linguistic device can be detected in Searle's five macro-classes: declarations, demonstratives, representatives, commissives and expressives.

2. Pragmatic Analysis

2.1 "A Machiavel in Love": the Ironic Functions of Horner's Utterances

Irony has a crucial function in *The Country Wife*: it ignites the plot, building the premises for specific situations to happen. Horner – the rake of the play – is the sole performer of this rhetorical figure (Thompson 1984, 39) and he employs it as a privileged linguistic strategy to achieve a peculiar goal: fake impotence[9] – a condition due to a disease he said to have contracted during a journey in France –, build up an alibi and seduce his female acquaintances undisturbed by their otherwise jealous husbands.

The comedy begins in *medias res*, with the main character being busy cooperating with a fellow doctor, working on a cover story to approach women while pretending to be other than his Self or his opposite:

> Horner . . . Well, my dear doctor, hast thou done what I desired?
> Quack I have undone you for ever with the women, and reported you throughout the whole town as bad as an eunuch, with as much trouble as if I had made you one in earnest.
> Horner But have you told all the midwives you know, the orange wenches at the playhouses, the city husbands, and old fumbling keepers of this end of the town? for they'll be the readiest to report it.
> Quack I have told all the chambermaids, waiting-women, tire-women, and old women of my acquaintance; nay, and whispered it as a secret to 'em, and to the whisperers of Whitehall; so that you need not doubt 'twill spread, and you will be as odious to the handsome young women, as —
> Horner As the small-pox.
> (1.1.2-15)[10]

The rumours about his legitimised diversity spread fast throughout London and, when people inquire about his health, he delivers ambiguous answers that may be interpreted as ironic. This is significantly evident in Horner's first dialogue with Sir Jaspar, Lady Fidget and her friends, namely the

[9] In showing less than he actually is/has to reveal the truth about the social class mentioned above, Horner resembles Aristotle's *eirōn* – this latter's characterisation being inspired by Socrates (see, among others, Pavlovskis 1968, 25; Gooch 1987, 104). Indeed, the correlation between the protagonist of *The Country Wife* and the "mock-modest man" described in *Nicomachean Ethics* (4.7, 69) has already been validated by the critics (see, for instance, Frye 1957, 40, 173). However, no further analogies can be detected between Wycherley's "eunuch" and Aristotle's character, since the philosopher praises this latter as ultimately trustworthy; furthermore, he recognises a pedagogical aim and even a sort of appeal to him. Horner's characterisation does not feature such elements.

[10] All quotes from the play are drawn from Wycherley 2014. The line numbers are provided between parentheses after quotes in the text.

representatives of Restoration upper society, the guardians of the moral code typical of the late seventeenth-century London, aimed at preventing people (especially, women) from losing decorum:

> SIR JASPAR (*Aside*) So, the report is true, I find, by his coldness or aversion to the sex; but I'll play the wag with him. – Pray salute my wife, my lady, sir.
> HORNER I will kiss no man's wife, sir, for him, sir; I have taken my eternal leave, sir, of the sex already, sir.
> SIR JASPAR (*Aside*) Ha! ha! ha! I'll plague him yet. – Not know my wife, sir?
> HORNER I do know your wife, sir; she's a woman, sir, and consequently a monster, sir, a greater monster than a husband, sir.
> SIR JASPAR A husband! how, sir?
> HORNER So, sir; but I make no more cuckolds, sir. (*Makes horns*)
> . . .
> SIR JASPAR Business must be preferred always before love and ceremony with the wise, Master Horner.
> HORNER And the impotent, Sir Jaspar.
> (1.1.61-70; 99-101)

In playing the "eunuch", Horner's words serve for a double interpretation: the former indicates the actual state of affairs, that is, it presents a rake faking erectile dysfunction to lure women and satisfy his sexual appetite without running the risk of destroying his and his lovers' public images; the latter features a disabled man who despises women, being deprived of his masculine equipment. Because of this bidimensionality, "[w]ords shift meaning from character to character and from moment to moment" (Thompson 1984, 75).

By recurring to both propositional negation ("I will kiss no man's wife") and ideational reversal irony ("I have taken my eternal leave . . . of the sex already"; "but I make no more cuckolds"; "And the impotent"), Horner strives to persuade Sir Jaspar to consider the report about his physical non-normativity confirmed. Determined to convince the man of his unfortunate condition, the "false Rogue" (5.4.140) says the opposite of what he means, even corroborating his contempt for women with hyperboles (". . . a monster . . . a greater monster than a husband"). On the one hand, the Quack and the audience promptly detect the ironic tone and understand the real meaning of the utterances mentioned above, since the opening dialogue – the one illustrating Horner's plan – still echoes in their mind; on the other one, Sir Jaspar falls prey to the pretender, as he can only interpret words based on his background and situational context.

Thus, following Clark and Gerrig's Pretense Theory of Irony, the Quack and the audience are Horner's inner circle[11] or, A: the informed addressees.

[11] As we will see in Section 2.2, the Fidgets too will access Horner's inner circle in

Conversely, the remaining characters on stage are A': the ignorant addressees, to whom S' (the "eunuch") speaks; they depend on Horner's deviant version of the facts and act accordingly. As a matter of fact, the plan succeeds and, by the end of Act 1, Sir Jaspar not only believes that the rumour is true, but he is also convinced that, as Horner is unable to have sexual intercourses, he is no threat to his reputation or his marriage. As a further proof of such conviction, in Act 2 he even invites Horner to spend some time with his wife in their lodgings:

> Sir Jaspar (*Aside*) So, so; now to mollify, wheedle him. (*Aside to* Horner) Master Horner, will you never keep civil company? methinks 'tis time now, since you are only fit for them. Come, come, man, you must e'en fall to visiting our wives, eating at our tables, drinking tea with our virtuous relations after dinner, dealing cards to 'em, reading plays and gazettes to 'em, picking fleas out of their smocks for 'em, collecting receipts, new songs, women, pages, and footmen for 'em.
> Horner I hope they'll afford me better employment, sir.
> Sir Jaspar He! he! he! 'tis fit you know your work before you come into your place. And since you are unprovided of a lady to flatter, and a good house to eat at, pray frequent mine, and call my wife mistress, and she shall call you gallant, according to the custom.
> (2.1.460-72)

When invited to "keep civil company" and "[visit] our wives", Horner provides an answer that serves again for a double interpretation: "I hope they'll afford me better employment, sir". The informed addressee (A or, the audience) easily recognises the ironic tone of the words; on the contrary, the ignorant addressee (A' or, Sir Jaspar) cannot decipher the message. Unaware of Horner's real intentions, the future cuckold just laughs in return and paves the way for a speech exchange between him and Lady Fidget:

> Sir Jaspar Come, come, here's a gamester for you; let him be a little familiar sometimes; nay, what if a little rude? Gamesters may be rude with ladies, you know.
> Lady Fidget Yes; losing gamesters have a privilege with women.
> Horner I always thought the contrary, that the winning gamester had most privilege with women; for when you have lost your money to a man, you'll lose anything you have, all you have, they say, and he may use you as he pleases.
> Sir Jaspar He! he! he! well, win or lose, you shall have your liberty with her.
> Lady Fidget As he behaves himself; and for your sake I'll give him admittance and freedom.

Act 2, as he discloses his secret to them.

HORNER All sorts of freedom, madam?
SIR JASPAR Ay, ay, ay, all sorts of freedom thou canst take. And so go to her, begin thy new employment; wheedle her, jest with her, and be better acquainted one with another.
HORNER (*Aside*) I think I know her already; therefore may venture with her my secret for hers.
(2.1.476-93)

Here, Lady Fidget and Horner participate in a banter that mostly revolves around the gambling metaphor – as the term "gamester" (2.1.476, 477, 479) and the emphasis on verbs such as "win" (2.1.480, 484) and "lose" (2.1.479, 481, 482, 484) indicate. The atmosphere seems to intrigue the lady, as she suspects the rake's words "the winning gamester had most privilege with women; for when you have lost your money to a man, you'll lose anything you have, all you have, they say, and he may use you as he pleases" (2.1.480-4) may have some sort of hidden meaning. Hence, she sends a signal to Horner by providing her boastful husband a provocative answer: "I'll give him admittance and freedom" (2.1.486-7). It is in this moment that Horner strikes the attack, whispering aside[12] to Lady Fidget and informing her of his pretended impotence: "I think I know her already; therefore may venture with her my secret for hers" (2.1.492-3).

2.2 "Let us throw our masks over our heads": the Women's Response to Irony

The confession marks a major turning point in the comedy and, more importantly, its linguistic pattern. With Sir Jaspar offside, the dissimulation proper of the "eunuch" helps narrow distances between the rake and his victim; he gradually penetrates Lady Fidget's space and strips her of the discretion that forges her characterisation as well as her public image (see Weber 1982, 113): as a result, he makes an accomplice out of Lady Fidget.[13] Above all, from Act 2 onwards Horner becomes the main referent of a new linguistic code that is grounded in sexual allusions, and it is exclusively accessible to him and his lover. Sheltered by mutual understanding, they deliberately employ a vague language to commit to each other to the same intent, to be their real Self and satisfy their libido:

[12] *The Country Wife* abounds in asides, addressed either to the audience (98) or to other characters on-stage (40). Mora (2019, 556) claims that "both types of asides make up 40% of all references".

[13] In this respect, scholars consider Lady Fidget the female version of Horner (see, for instance, Stern 2014, xv).

Lady Fidget But, poor gentleman, could you be so generous, so truly a man of honour, as for the sakes of us women of honour, to cause yourself to be reported no man? 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? but, indeed, sir, as perfectly, perfectly the same man as before your going into France, sir? as perfectly, perfectly, sir?
Horner As perfectly, perfectly, madam. Nay, I scorn you should take my word; I desire to be tried only, madam.
(2.1.503-11)

Furthermore, as the comedy unravels, Horner, the archplotter designer of both the storyline and the discourse, is gradually eclipsed by Lady Fidget who, eventually, ends up dominating the floor together with her friends, leaving the protagonist with barely a few lines to speak. Irony, which qualified as the rake's privileged linguistic device so far, is replaced by the Fidgets' double entendre. Indeed, this latter becomes the predominant trait of the fornicators' utterances, and it grows more and more explicit throughout the comedy, reaching a climax in the hilarious – not to say orgasmic – "china scene" (4.3),[14] where Horner pleasures Lady Fidget in a locked room with Sir Jaspar next door, unaware of the betrayal:

Sir Jaspar Wife! my Lady Fidget! wife! he is coming in to you the back way.
Lady Fidget Let him come, and welcome, which way he will.
Sir Jaspar He'll catch you, and use you roughly, and be too strong for you.
Lady Fidget Don't you trouble yourself, let him if he can.
(4.3.120-4)

Sexual innuendo is also the distinguishing feature of the following dispute between Lady Fidget and her dear friend Mrs Squeamish, another secret lover of Horner's,[15] vying for his attention:

[14] On the peculiarities of the 'china scene', see Soncini and Virdis' contributions, both in this volume.

[15] It is only in the final act and, more precisely, during the so-called 'dinner party' that Lady Fidget, Dainty and Mrs Squeamish find themselves to be not only dear friends but also "sister sharers" (5.4.153). Indeed, in a state of inebriation or, as Chadwick (1975, 102) defines it, in an "orgy of confessions", the women disclose their intimate relationship with Horner, a relationship they thought to be consummating unbeknownst to the others: "Lady Fidget . . . Come, here's to our gallants in waiting, whom we must name, and I'll begin. This is my false rogue. (*Claps him on the back*) / Mrs Squeamish How! / Horner (*Aside*) So, all will out now. / Mrs Squeamish (*Aside to* Horner) Did you not tell me, 'twas for my sake only you reported yourself no man? / Dainty (*Aside to* Horner) Oh, wretch! did you not swear to me, 'twas for my love and honour you passed for that thing you do? / Horner So, so. / Lady Fidget Come, speak, ladies: this is my false villain. / Mrs Squeamish And mine too. / Dainty And mine. / Horner Well then, you are all three my false rogues too, and there's an end on't . . . Come, faith,

LADY FIDGET And I have been toiling and moiling for the prettiest piece of china, my dear.
HORNER Nay, she has been too hard for me, do what I could.
MRS SQUEAMISH Oh, lord, I'll have some china too. Good Master Horner, don't think to give other people china, and me none; come in with me too.
HORNER Upon my honour, 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-waggon for you too, another time.
(4.3.169-86)

2.3 "Poor Master Horner": Irony Regained to Cover up Treachery

In any event, Horner regains momentum when Lady Squeamish abruptly interrupts the fight. The attention required by another representative of London respectability sounds like a *rappel à l'ordre* for the rake. Thus, he engages in a polite conversation with the old woman and repeats the linguistic strategy he had successfully employed in the initial part of the play, that is, emphasising his hatred for women by means of an ironic tone, in the guise of a "eunuch":

OLD LADY SQUEAMISH Poor Mr. Horner, he has enough to do to please you all, I see.
HORNER Ay, madam, you see how they use me.
OLD LADY SQUEAMISH Poor gentleman, I pity you.

madam, let us e'en pardon one another; for all the difference I find betwixt we men and you women, we forswear ourselves at the beginning of an amour, you as long as it lasts" (5.4.139-52, 164-6). Despite the strongly-worded exchange, not only does Horner manage to preserve his sexual circle, but it would be also fair to assume that such perverted partnership is meant to stand firm for a long time, given that at the "dinner party" the women out-Horner the rake, who is eventually subjugated and reduced to a sexual puppet. That is the reason why Zimbardo (1965, 150-2) associates Wycherley's "dinner party" with Juvenal's sixth *Satire*, this latter displaying women's shamelessness while performing the rites of Bona Dea. In addition, the debauchery typical of the scene recalls Kermode's *topos*: the Banquet of Sense (1971, 84-115), which has its roots in both mythology – Hercules' temptation, for instance – and biblical references – Paul's allusion to "the table of devils" (1 Cor. 10.21).

Horner I thank you, madam: I could never find pity, but from such reverend ladies as you are; the young ones will never spare a man.

Mrs Squeamish Come, come, beast, and go dine with us; for we shall want a man at ombre after dinner.

Horner That's all their use of me, madam, you see.

Mrs Squeamish Come, sloven, I'll lead you, to be sure of you. (*Pulls him by the cravat*)

Old Lady Squeamish Alas, poor man, how she tugs him! Kiss, kiss her; that's the way to make such nice women quiet.

Horner No, madam, that remedy is worse than the torment; they know I dare suffer anything rather than do it.

Old Lady Squeamish Prithee kiss her, and I'll give you her picture in little, that you admired so last night. Prithee do.

Horner Well, nothing but that could bribe m! I love a woman only in effigy, and good painting as much as I hate them. – I'll do't, for I could adore the devil well painted. (*Kisses* Mrs. Squeamish)

(4.3.190-209)

As in Act 1, the propositional negation ("No, madam, that remedy is worse than the torment"; "nothing but that could bribe me") and the ideational reversal irony ("That's all their use of me, madam, you see"; "they know I dare suffer anything rather than do it"; "I love a woman only in effigy, and good painting as much as I hate them") detectable in Horner's words permit a double interpretation: like Sir Jaspar, Old Lady Squeamish (A') ignores the rake's most hidden intentions, as she cannot decode the real meaning of his utterances, being outside the protagonist's inner circle; on the contrary, the filthy ladies and the audience (A) read the room effortlessly, thus recognising the ironic tone as well as the real purpose of said affirmations. Nevertheless, although the recurring strategies are the same as Act 1, it is worth remarking that irony serves for a different scope in Act 4 .

While at the beginning of the play the rake employs the trope to lay the foundations of his Machiavellian plan aimed at gaining the husbands' trust by force of his unfortunate condition (impotence) to enjoy their wives' company away from prying eyes, in the second half of the comedy he deploys such a weapon as a containment measure in order to preserve his cover from blowing up. The stratagem proves successful, and he can finally reap the benefits of his work: he can both kiss married women in public and consummate relationships in private without raising suspicion or suffering scandal.[16]

[16] Considering that the *incognito* sexual predators never feel the urgency to redeem themselves or confess, it does not surprise that Jeremy Collier severely criticised the impudence and the moral corruption typical of *The Country Wife* in his famous *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage: Together with The Sense of Antiquity Upon this Argument* (1698). Indeed, the play is the first to be mentioned in

2.4 Conclusive Remarks

The present study has investigated the function of irony in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* from a pragmatic perspective, following a methodology that encompasses the main theories that have been published about the linguistic device from the 1970s to the present day. The results of the qualitative analysis here offered allow us to draw the following concluding remarks.

First and foremost, irony is a *conditio sine qua non* for Horner, that is, it is an essential weapon he must deploy if he wants to be identified by the others as a "mere eunuch" (1.1.92) and have affairs with married high-society women, unbeknownst to their husbands. Moreover, considering that the protagonist is the sole ironist of the whole comedy, the rhetorical figure intervenes in emphasising his characterisation and his un-conventionalised seductive praxis, thus remarking on the uniqueness of both. Indeed, in courting the ladies, Horner neither emulates his most dear friend Dorilant, the stereotypical rake of the comedy – and, broadly speaking, of early Restoration England – who treats women as objects and despises matrimony, nor does he follow in Harcourt's footsteps, that is, to reject libertinage, fall in love with a woman (Alithea)[17] and spend the rest of his life with her, in

Chapter 1, *The Immodesty of the Stage*, where the Reverend is determined to "kill the Root rather than Transplant": ". . . I shall point to the Infection at a Distance, and refer in General to *Play* and *Person*. Now among the Curiosities of this kind we may reckon *Mrs. Pinchwife*, *Horner*, and *Lady Fidget* in *The Country Wife*" (1698, 3). In Chapter 4, *Immorality encouraged by the Stage*, special attention is devoted to the female characters' attitude: "And as I have observ'd already, the Toping Ladies in . . . *Country Wife* . . . are Smutty, and sometimes Profane. And was Licentiousness and Irreligion, always a Mark of Honour? No" (146). Nevertheless, unlike Congreve and other eminent Restoration playwrights, Wycherley did not react to such provocation (see Phelps 1900, 509).

[17] The speaking name of Pinchwife's sister qualifies Alithea as a dichotomic character, if compared to Horner. Indeed, besides advising Margery ("Mrs Pinchwife Indeed I was a-weary of the play, but I liked hugeously the actors! They are the goodliest, properest men, sister. / Alithea Oh, but you must not like the actors, sister"; 2.1.20-3), supporting the "poor tender creature" (2.1.35) when she suffers from her husband's jealous rage, and remarking her own irreprehensible behavior ("Brother, you are my only censurer; and the honour of your family shall sooner suffer in your wife there than in me, though I take the innocent liberty of the town . . . who boasts of any intrigue with me? What lampoon has made my name notorious? What ill women frequent my lodgings? I keep no company with any women of scandalous reputations"; 2.1.39-41, 44-7), Alithea proves to be a strenuous defender of truth, honesty and morality. This is particularly evident when she politely refuses Harcourt's courtship in force of an engagement with Sparkish, and she promptly informs her fiancé of it ("Harcourt . . . I see, madam, you can guess my meaning. I do confess heartily and openly, I wish it were in my power to break the match. By heavens I do! . . . / Alithea The writings are drawn, sir, settlements made; 'tis too late, sir, and past all revocation . . . I must marry him; my reputation would suffer in the world

matrimony.[18]

Moreover, the linguistic pattern employed by Wycherley contributed to the achievement of a dramatic and ethic purpose. As far as the former is concerned, it is renowned that *The Country Wife* marked a turning point in the history of English drama. The innovation fostered by the playwright was already disclosed by a quotation drawn from Horace's *Epistulæ* (2.1.76-9) that we read on the title page of the play – "Indignor quicquam reprehendi, non quia crasse / Compositum illepideve putetur, sed quia nuper: / Nec veniam antiquis, sed honorem et praemia posci" [I am impatient that any work is censured, not because it is thought to be coarse or inelegant in style, but because it is modern, and that what is claimed for the ancients should be, not indulgence, but honour and rewards]. Nevertheless, the *double entendre*, which has its roots in the explicitness achieved only by using irony – as we have seen – allowed the performance of a risqué scene that brought "the cuckolding play at once such perfection as to establish its vogue on the Restoration stage" (Smith 1948, 86). Concerning the latter, in a century where "the satirist's public grew more sceptical and literate" (Duncan 1981, 300), Wycherley exposes the viciousness as well as the hypocrisy of his times through a polysemic and corrupted language significantly indebted to irony which reflected the (un) civilised values typical of Restoration upperclass society.

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else . . . Master Sparkish, pray come hither, your friend here is very troublesome, and very loving . . . He spoke so scurrilously of you, I had no patience to hear him; besides, he has been making love to me"; 2.1.163-5, 198-9, 216-17, 221-2, 242-3). Stern (2014, xvi) points out that, in due time, Alithea to will learn the art of lying and betraying but, overwhelmingly, it is fair to assume that, for most of the time, she plays Horner's opposite game, and that may be the reason why they seldomly meet on-stage.

[18] Dorilant and Harcourt's position about weddings is exemplified in the final act of the comedy: "Alithea There's doctrine for all husbands, Mr. Harcourt. / Harcourt I edify, madam, so much, that I am impatient till I am one. / Dorilant And I edify so much by example, I will never be one" (5.4.349-51).

for S. Keble at the Turk's Head in Fleetstreet, and R. Sare at Grays-Inn-Gate in Holborn.

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