

Country wives and country girls in eighteenth-century England. A history of theatrical rewriting¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper covers a span of fifty years in the reception of Wycherley's masterpiece, his *Country Wife*. This play has been chosen for study because its linguistic and thematic features made it scarcely eligible as a stage piece for the increasingly prudish and good-hearted audiences that attended the playhouse during the second half of the eighteenth century. The challenge that its rewriting posed on playwrights was not small, taking into account that the piece's most outstanding features are its employment of witty language and its cynic approach to the relationship between the sexes. This paper focusses on the different processes of theatrical appropriation undergone by *The Country Wife* in response to the changing demands of audiences. A number of editions attributed to John Lee (1765, 1786) and David Garrick (1766, 1777, 1808, 1819) have been closely read bearing in mind their theatrical nature. Finally, the analysis of metatextual items has proved a valuable tool to check the mutual relationship between text and performance that was characteristic of the period.

KEYWORDS: country wife, eighteenth century, reception

1. Introduction

The aim of the present article is to cast light on the complex and fascinating history of the dramatic appropriation of Wycherley's masterpiece, his *Country Wife*, during the second half of the eighteenth century.

The changes in the expectations of audiences,² particularly after 1750, are considered as the main factor leading not only to John Lee's hypertextual transformation of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*

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² In the sense of Hans Robert Jauss's *Erwartungshorizont*, as developed in his *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft* (1970).

in 1765 but also to Garrick's theatrical rewriting of the play as *The Country Girl* in 1766. Attention is paid to the thematic and formal characteristics of their versions that, in the case of Lee, fulfil the requirements of *reform comedy*, whereas in that of Garrick, they fit into the pattern of *romantic comedies*.

An illuminating number of paratextual and metatextual items³ are taken into consideration in order better to understand not only the reasons that led both to Lee's and Garrick's rewritings of Wycherley's text but also as a means of assessing the kind of reception that their theatrical versions encountered at the playhouse. The specific characteristics of the period with its strong theatrical monopoly account for the added importance that extralinguistic features had both as the source of rewritings and as a means of mentally picturing what their actual performance could have been like.

At this period, more than at any other time in the history of British Drama, playscripts were a mere pre-text for their staging. The reason lay in the limited number of plays that were licensed for performance, so that the same plays, whose characteristics had made them earn the status of canonical, were staged over and over again. This single fact explains why the performance of actors and actresses attracted so much attention on the part of editors, critics and audiences alike, to the extent that their presence could be used to justify a new rewriting of a text, as in the case of Garrick's 1766 version,⁴ or to turn a deficient script into a successful theatrical event, as was the case with Mrs. Jordan's outstanding performance of Garrick's leading role in his 1785 revival of the play.

³ In the sense given to the terms by Gérard Genette (1982 and 1987)

⁴ Garrick, well aware of the centrality of actors in the theatre of his day, gave as the main reason for his 1766 adaptation of the *Country Wife* the fact that an actress, Miss Reynolds, was available to perform the part of the female protagonist: "The desire of shewing Miss Reynolds to Advantage, was the first motive for attempting an alteration of Wycherley's *Country Wife*." Playbills equally echoed their importance, and, on this particular occasion, the play was advertised by indicating that Garrick himself had "taken many pains in teaching Miss Reynolds, who was approved by the public in his character." This view, however, was not universally shared, as *The London Chronicle* stated in November 11-13, 1766: "*Miss Reynolds does not appear to that advantage in this piece she could in many others.*" And it goes on to assert that she was a "raw and inexperienced actress". The same viewpoint was shared by Thomas Davies (1780: II, 121), who was of the opinion that "*Miss Reynolds, though not deficient in merit, neither in age, person, or look could pretend to be the innocent and simple lass of sixteen.*"

The long lasting theatrical monopoly was also responsible for the high number of acting editions in free circulation during the period⁵. It is this particular circumstance that has made it possible for a good number of editions to reach us, which has allowed a fuller insight into the different processes of theatrical appropriation undergone by *The Country Wife*. A close analysis of significant editions attributed to John Lee (1765, 1786) and David Garrick (1766, 1777, 1808, 1819) has been supplemented with valuable information from a series of playbills which, again, has confirmed our sense of the mutual dependence between text and performance at this period. At the same time it has increased our awareness of the unfixed nature of texts, which were living and changeable objects whose exact nature cannot be determined.⁶

2. John Lee's *The Country Wife* (1765)

John Lee's 1765 version of *The Country Wife* was undoubtedly written to meet the new expectations of mid-eighteenth century audiences, that no longer favoured Wycherley's play.⁷ As a matter of fact, 12 years had gone by since it was last performed in London, and, although reading editions of the play were still in circulation,⁸ its witty and crude dialogue was no longer fashionable on stage. In addition, there was an increasing demand for mixed entertainments that included songs and dances,⁹ which involved the shortening of

⁵ They were so popular that, according to J. Stone Peters (2000:49-50), it was a common practice for mid-century theater goers to take their pocket editions (usually published in 8^{vo}) with them to the theatre.

⁶ The fact that texts were constantly changed in reply to the demands of audiences makes it difficult to decide what kind of performances could have been derived from a particular script. Stern (2000: 286) goes as far as to say that, during the period under consideration, "An audience might, as a result of actor's revision, never see a play as written at all."

⁷ As the *Thespian Dictionary* (1805) points out, the reason why *the Country Wife* was dropped from the stage in 1753 was that "it was then unpalatable to the public taste." Cfr. Gray (1931) for a more detailed analysis of the change of attitude towards stock plays during the 1750s and 1760s.

⁸ As a matter of fact, there was a sharp distinction between stage and press censorship at the time, which, according to Kinservik (2001: 42), would find its peak during the years of the Exclusion crisis and the Popish plot, that is to say, between 1678 and 1683.

⁹ The demand for a variety of entertainments in the same evening, that was already fashionable at the beginning of the century, was often taken to be a helpful means of attracting audiences towards plays that would have otherwise proven unpopular because of their complexity. Emmett L. Avery (1934: 418) in his seminal study on the increasing importance of this varied type of spectacle, went as far as to suggest that it

plays as a means of avoiding too long theatrical evenings. That is why Lee turned Wycherley's play into a two-act afterpiece, that was staged on the 26th of April 1765 preceded by *the Winter's Tale*, and followed, first, by a piece of *dancing*, and, then, by *Tambourine*.

Fortunately, Lee's accommodation to the requirements of his age, which did not tolerate either lengthy plays or eccentric characters, did not prevent his retaining a certain degree of wit in his first rewriting of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*.

He succeeded in reducing its running time without losing the play's clarity of plot. In addition, changes in the course of action were so carefully motivated that the behaviour of characters proved natural.

The audience was therefore offered a play with an amiable tone and a happy ending, that perfectly suited the times. As compared with Wycherley's, it removed the coarsest of the three plots, where Horner, pretending to be impotent, had free access to a number of respectable women, who thus took revenge on their loveless husbands.

As regards the second plot, he basically maintained its romantic quality, that led to the final marriage between Harcourt and Alithea, who broke the engagement her brother Pinchwife had previously arranged with the fop Sparkish.

Even though the argument is basically the same as in Wycherley, Lee improves its structure by taking special care of anticipating changes in the course of action. In his adaptation, Alithea's change of mind regarding the identity of her future husband no longer comes as a surprise to the audience, since they have been allowed to share in her most inner thoughts, as revealed in the monologue that she delivers before breaking her engagement with Sparkish. There Alithea comes to the conclusion that she has no need to marry a fop whom she does not love and who does not care about her. Unlike in Wycherley, Alithea gives Harcourt some hints that allow him to expect a favourable change. Finally, Sparkish is also allowed to guess what his lot is going to be, as he tells Pinchwife when he speaks of his pending *fracas*.

Anticipation is also taken good care of in the other argument that Lee borrows from Wycherley, though, in this case, he introduces

could even eclipse the main piece: "Entertainments seemed frequently to dominate the comedy or tragedy with which they were presented."

important changes into it. The more moderate tone of the play does not allow the rake (Dorilant instead of Horner in this case) to awaken Margery to the pleasures of the town as thoroughly as in Wycherley. Even though he approaches her in the theatre, nothing serious happens, since Pinchwife never loses sight of her long enough for anything to occur. In Lee's first version, Margery is not taken to the theatre in male attire, so that she has no chance of disappearing with the rake she meets on her way to the playhouse, and neither is she later delivered to him under somebody else's disguise (Alithea's).

But even though Margery is not allowed to savour town life completely, she still gets to discover the glamour of its gallants, that strongly attract her. Her innocence leads her, as in Wycherley, to reveal her husband what her feelings towards Dorilant (Horner in Wycherley) are. As in Wycherley, Pinchwife is an old, jealous husband, but here he handles both his wife and his sister less roughly, in line with the end of this plot, that Lee modifies to please a good-hearted audience.

Pinchwife, unlike in Wycherley, admits that he is to blame for the unequal nature of his marriage, since it has been his own device to marry a woman his junior by thirty years. He movingly admits: "How could I reasonably expect happiness, when *I was destitute of every requisite that should form it? Similitude of years, tempers, manners;* and in short, all the qualities that can endear a heart, and warm it into love!"¹⁰ But, since it is now too late to change this state of affairs, his sister suggests him to allow his wife a greater degree of freedom,¹¹ and, especially, to provide her with innocent entertainments that might prevent more dangerous ones. Alithea says:

Would you be happy together? Take my advice? *Release her from her bondage; let her associate with the innocent and sensible of both sexes; and improve that mind, which has hitherto been too un-informed, to*

¹⁰ This same view had already been voiced in 1683 (Anonymous, 1683: 48) by "A person of quality of the female sex" who said: "Never let him [an old husband] be disquieted at what his young brisk and dissatisfied wife does, when *he is the only occasion of all she does himself.*" And blames him for inflicting great suffering upon his wife: "If an old Hunks without life or vigour, have such an inclination to leachery, ... let him not go about to *make a young* and better-deserving *Gentlewoman's life miserable* and loathsome to her, where she expects her greater felicity and enjoyment."

¹¹ This very idea is also stressed in the anonymous (1683: 34) *Fifteen real comforts of matrimony*, where its author says: "Men do not marry to bury their wives alive in a house ... And a man had better be *over-indulgent to his wife in point of liberty*, than be accounted her Jaylor."

defend itself from the attacks of its own passions, or from those of others.

Lee, thus, adapts his plot to the requirements of *reform comedy*, greatly favoured by his audience,¹² and, by taking good care of anticipating changes in the behaviour of its characters, he transforms the play into a coherent whole, where Wycherley's three arguments with different views on love and marriage are brought down to two, that share an optimistic view of human nature. The greater scope that Lee allows to the development of his characters provides a fuller motivation for both plots.

At the same time, Lee's version meets his audience's demand for a convincing moral tone. He succeeds in achieving it through the employment of devices that somewhat differ from those that Garrick would resort to a few months later, since, whereas the development of Lee's characters as shown on stage is the clearest proof of the plausibility of their statements, Garrick's abridged presentation of them makes their behaviour appear sudden and unexpected. An extreme example of this way of dealing with character presentation affects Alithea's change of mind regarding her own marriage, that, unlike in Lee, is not prepared for by means of a suitable monologue. Whereas in Lee Alithea realizes that the match her brother has arranged for her is unsavory and unfair: "Why do I make such a sacrifice to the will, or rather, avarice of a brother? ... where lies the justice ... in giving away my person without my heart?",¹³ her change of attitude towards Sparkish comes unexpectedly in Garrick, because, all of a sudden, she breaks up her engagement with Sparkish and replaces her stubborn decision of marrying a fop she does not love with a sneering handling of him. As a matter of fact, Sparkish's report of her reaction widely differs from Alithea's behaviour in Lee's version:

¹² Lee's essential quality, as pointed out by Stuart Tave (1960) in regard to the comedies they favoured, was their belief in the tractability of human nature. This gave rise to *Reform Comedy* as an eighteenth century subgenre that replaced *contemptuous* (Wycherley's) with *sympathetic laughter* (Lee's).

¹³ A similar concern is expressed by a "Sorrowful and Afflicted Daughter" (Anonymous 1687: 7) in a letter addressed to her Parents "that would have her Matched to one whom she cannot Love": "but if you do resolve that I shall Marry, let it be to one that I can love, or to my Grave, be not over ruled by the thoughts of Avarice."

She walk'd up within pistol-shot of the church, then twirl'd round upon her heel, *call'd me every name* she could think of; and when she had exhausted her imagination, and tired her tongue ... she *sent her footman to buy a monkey* before my face, then *bid me good morrow with a sneer*, and left us with our mouths open in the middle of a hundred people. [my italics]

Lee's depiction of Alithea as a sensible character had made her suitable to voice the moral message of the play, that, unlike Garrick's, openly reflects on the state of marriage. Lee therefore replaces Wycherley's crude satire on marriage¹⁴ with a milder kind of criticism that ends up in a tone of hope, as revealed by Alithea's words to her brother at the end of the play:

¹⁴ Barbara Kachur's (2004: 152) conclusion on the type of criticism that Wycherley's *The Country Wife* makes is particularly sound. According to her, "Wycherley was neither championing women's rights nor advocating adultery, but he did, however, examine male-female relationships in marriage through a lens that viewed *husbands as the oppressors ... and the wives as rebels who resist tyranny*." This unequal situation was sometimes verbalized during the period, as Mary Astell acknowledges in her *Essay of Marriage* (1696). Hers is not the attitude of the rebel who openly tries to subvert the prevailing situation but, even though a tone of moderation is characteristic of her statements, she nevertheless lets her voice be clearly heard in her advices to naive ladies who are looking forward to getting married. To start with, she reminds her readers (1696: 2) that "the Laws of God and Nations have given *man the supreme authority in marriage*", which she does not question, though she recommends wives to bear it with resignation, and she warns young ladies (1696: 1) that marriage is seldom the blessed state they often imagine: "Those that are in extraordinary haste for a settlement, (as they call it) do commonly Advance their Expectation of Happiness, much beyond what they have Possessed in a Single Life, and many times *the Imaginary Heaven proves a Hell*." This situation was more than once the outcome of economic interests in matches, particularly during the Restoration, when many families tried to recover part of their estates by this means. As P.F. Vernon (1962: 370-387) has interestingly argued, playwrights showed their disagreement with this situation by means of their plays, and, instead of championing a libertine code of behaviour, they often resisted a marriage of economic convenience, while supporting the ideal of a mutually satisfying relationship that made a happy and lasting marriage possible. Voices could be heard for and against the relevance of economic concerns for future married couples. Whereas Francis Osborne (1655: 57) quite cynically advises his son to look for a good portion in a wife: "As the fertility of the ensuing yeare is guessed at, by the height of the river Nilus, so *by the greatnesse of a wives portion may much of the future conjugal happinesse be calculated*", others (Anon. 1683: 41) consider those grounds to be degradating: "He that *marries a wife for the portions sake, buys a Concubine*, does not marry a wife." In their view (Anon. 1683: 19), "Lawful matrimony ... [can only be] the effect of *choice and mature consideration of the mutual temper and affection of both parties*."

No more let anxious doubts o'er love preside,
But generous confidence be virtue's guide!
Those wives are chastest, whom indulgence charms,
Those husbands happiest, whom no fear alarms.

3. Garrick's *The Country Girl* (1766)

Garrick proves less interested in delivering a moral message to his audience than in offering them a play with a happy ending. That is what leads him to give a romantic bias to Margery's plot, that no longer deals with the problems of a married couple, as it had done both in *Wycherley* and in *Lee*. Margery, who is called *Peggy* in Garrick's version,¹⁵ is given a true opportunity of leading a happy life, since she is only engaged to Pinchwife, but has not married him yet. At the same time, the man approaching her (Belville) is no longer a rake (Horner in *Wycherley*; Dorilant in *Lee*) with no intention of starting a lasting relationship with her, but a tender youth who immediately falls in love with Margery and ends up marrying her. Garrick, moreover, underlines the happy ending of the play by having Peggy exclaim: "I'm for always loving like a fool!" This final romantic note no doubt contributed to the play's long popularity on stage, since it suited the tastes of eighteenth and nineteenth century audiences alike.

The play's dénouement, moreover, symbolically epitomized the diminished importance of wit that pervaded both the theatre and daily life, since in Garrick's version a well bred youth (Belville) is ready to share his life with an uncultivated, good looking country wench (Peggy). In addition, the lack of sophistication in both characters allows the playwright to dispense with any kind of verbal wit that might have baffled his audience.

It is good feelings, and, above all, sound morality, that seems to have been in favour among audiences. As a result, absence of wit proved no obstacle to the success of Garrick's (1766) version of *Wycherley*'s most accomplished Comedy of Wit. The reason lay in the fact that the greatest part of the new audience was not highly

¹⁵ By choosing this name for the character, Garrick tries to make his audience aware of the relationship his version bears to *Wycherley*'s play. As Hans and Hodges' (1996) entry reads, *Peggy* is an "English variant of *Maggie*, or the obsolete *Meggie*, both pet forms of *Margaret*."

intellectual,¹⁶ but merely squeamish about morals, and was, therefore, ready to favour dull plays over "immoral" ones.¹⁷

Playwrights were so fully aware of this fact, that they even voiced it in the prefaces to their plays. The editor of Garrick's (1808) edition of *The Country Girl*, for example, gives the "alterer's endeavour to clear one of our most celebrated comedies from immorality and obscenity" as the main reason for his re-writing of "neer half of the play". Aware that it is no longer as comical as it used to be, he justifies its lack of wit on moral grounds. As he acknowledges in the *Prefatory Remarks* (1808:5), the play has been "expunged of those parts of it, which probably were thought the most entertaining in the age when it was written, but which an improved taste delicately rejects."

It is worth noting that his arguments closely resemble those that Collier had used to attack the Restoration stage around the turn of the previous century. According to him (1698: 161), "To make delight the main Business of Comedy is an unreasonable and dangerous Principle. It opens the way to all Licentiousness, and confounds the distinction between Mirth and Madness." Moreover, by privileging delight over instruction, "the Marks of Honour and Infamy are Misapplied, and the idea's of Virtue and Vice Confounded" (1698: 145).

But his view, which did not have an immediate effect on the repertory of theatres,¹⁸ was completely imbedded into the new plays

¹⁶ This was evidenced, for example, in their reaction to Jonson's *Volpone*, whose language they found difficult. Cfr. Horace Walpole's (1798, ii: 315) assessment of the play, written sometime between 1775 and 1786, although collected for publication in 1798 as *Thoughts on Comedy*: "*Volpone* is faulty in the moral, and too elevated in the dialogue." Around the same time, Thomas Davies (1783, ii: 98) stressed the high degree of complexity that the play had for average theatergoers, so that, according to him: "*Few, except the learned, can perfectly understand it.*"

¹⁷ As a matter of fact, the number of testimonies in favour of a kind of entertainment that could expose vice and promote virtue was on the increase, as Emmett L. Avery, among others, has underlined (1942: 141-142). The testimony he quotes from the *Public Ledger* (September 25, 1765) is revealing of the moral climate that gave rise to a wave of rewritings of Restoration dramas, which resorted to the concept of 'utility' as an euphemistic term for encouraging such changes. The text reads as follows: "In real utility, I shall not hesitate to give the poets of the present hour a considerable superiority. *Wycherley, Etheridge, and their contemporaries*, were possessed of parts rather brilliant than useful ... hence decency and good sense were continually sacrificed to an ill-timed emanation of vivacity."

¹⁸ Cfr. Calhoun Winton (1974) for a detailed view of the scarce impact that the Collier Controversy had on repertory offerings up to 1710.

and adaptations that audiences were ready to tolerate at the turn of the following century. Mrs. Inchbald's (1808) edition of the play thus remarked that "no kind of wit ought to be received as an excuse for immorality" and she added: "nay, it becomes still more dangerous in proportion as it is more witty." In the same way, Oxberry's (1819) edition of the play unabashedly acknowledged: "there is not perhaps much wit or humour in the dialogue" but he tried to make up for this minor fault by saying that it was "entertaining".

It is true that in Garrick's version we find neither Wycherley's unbeatable instances of witty repartee, nor Lee's more restrained passages of ingenious use of language, but, even though he does not provide his audience with scenes as funny as those offered by Lee, he is careful enough to write some scenes that afford pleasurable moments to his audience.

Garrick does not have as witty a character as Lee's Alitheia, who delights the audience by means of her use of verbal ambiguity. For example, when standing by her groom before a fake priest (Harcourt in disguise), she tells him about the priest he is expecting to marry them: "I now confess that that gentleman may marry one of us, but he shall never marry both," thus hinting to the fact that the "priest" is no other than her beloved.

He neither presents them with a scene as hilarious as that where Lee has Sparkish collect and read the letter that Pinchwife has brought Dorilant from his own wife, and that he despisingly throws away. Unlike in Wycherley, Lee does not have Horner read the letter to himself and discover that Pinchwife has been outwitted by a resourceful wife who has written a love letter instead of a nasty farewell note, but has Sparkish read it aloud to a whole assembly of characters who delight in Pinchwife's deserved humiliation.

This is precisely one of the scenes that Garrick takes dramatic advantage of in order to make his play "entertaining". There are, however, substantial differences as regards theatricality, for Lee's exhilarating scene is toned down to a more restrained kind of humour that avoids Pinchwife's (Moody's) public exposure.¹⁹ In Garrick's version the contents of Peggy's love letter are silently read by Belville, who slyly asks Moody to tell its author that he will obey her in everything. The dramatic irony lies in the fact that Moody

¹⁹ This change is in line with the deliberate avoidance of caricature in the play as contrary to the ideal of naturalness in character portrayal: "*there is much whim but no caricature ... the characters are natural and well discriminating.*"

thinks his obedience consists in never seeing her again, whereas the audience is aware that Peggy has asked Belville to marry her.

This dramatic irony is enhanced at the end of the play, when Moody stands before Belville's house in the belief that he is marrying his sister Alithea, whom he has escorted there. Only too late does he realize that it is not his sister, but Peggy in her clothes, that he has brought to Belville's house for marriage.

The action reaches a melodramatic peak when, on the way to Belville's house, Sparkish, heavily drunk, approaches the couple, and, deceived by Peggy's disguise, tries to remove the veil that covers her face. He regrets Moody's lack of honourability in giving his fiancée's hand to somebody else, but Moody is in a hurry to have Belville marry Alithea, so as to make sure that he does not marry Peggy. All his efforts, however, prove to be vain, to Sparkish's delightful discovery. He cannot hide his inner satisfaction when he spots Harcourt coming along with Alithea, and introducing her to them as Mrs. Harcourt. It is no matter that he has lost Alithea, for he did not care much about her. What he finds satisfying, and partly compensates for his loss, is the punishment that Moody receives in kind for his lack of scruples.

He relishes stating Moody's astonishment when he finds out the truth about Belville's marriage. When he knocks at his door in despair, a servant calmly asks him to wait until his orders have been completely obeyed by his master. (Moody had asked him to do as told in Peggy's letter.)

But even though the play includes some funny scenes like this, it always takes good care to keep it within respectable bounds. That is why the play does not end in a riotous note, but allows space for Peggy's brief justification of her behaviour. She points out that Moody's present disappointment is to be preferred before future suffering that would ensue from a loveless match: " 'twas honest to deceive him./ More virtuous sure to cheat him than to grieve him."

Although Lee's (1765) careful and dramatically effective adaptation successfully held the stage for a number of years,²⁰

²⁰ Starting in April, 1765 and continuing up to November, 1782. It was staged five times in 1765, and then retired from the stage while Garrick's version was performed during 1766 (15 times) and 1767 (3 times). It returned in 1768 (9 performances), when Garrick's adaptation was only performed twice. They continued to be staged simultaneously during 1769 (twice Lee, against four times Garrick) Lee's version then gave way to Garrick from 1771 to 1775 (a total of 7 performances). And the situation was reversed from 1776 to 1782, when only Lee's version was performed, first with

Garrick's 1766 version would be later preferred, probably due to its more romantic tone as well as to the extreme care that he had taken to free the text from any potential term of abuse. Garrick's text was not as comical as that by Lee, but it still retained a part of humour, and even though his characters were not as fully developed and the changes in the course of action were less motivated, the play still retained a simplicity of plot and a double happy ending that fulfilled the audience's expectation of spending an agreeable evening in a variety show, where this play was but a small part of the whole.²¹

4. From Garrick's (1785) *The Country Girl* to Lee's (1786) *The Country Wife*

John Lee's (1786) version of the play shows all the signs of haste, and the reason openly lies in the wish not to let escape a promising theatrical market that the recent revival of Garrick's version a few months earlier (Drury Lane, October 18th, 1785) had opened up, after a 12 year absence of the play from the stage.²²

This version, however, surprisingly contrasts with the effective adaptation John Lee had made of the play in 1765, which could not be equalled by Garrick's (1766) version, in spite of which, there is a rhetorical apology in Lee's text for any misprints or errors that might have unwillingly appeared, due to the haste of preparing an edition

notable success (13 performances in the season 1776-77), then less so (only one performance in 1779 and 1782, respectively). It is worth noticing that a new edition of Garrick's adaptation was precisely issued in 1777, that is to say, during Lee's most successful season (1776-1777), in spite of the fact that Garrick's text was then absent from the stage. And it is somewhat surprising to spot a significant mistake in the title page, for, instead of *The Country Girl*, which was the title Garrick had given to his own version, it reads as *The Country Wife*, which corresponds to Lee's title. This printing error can be taken as a mere accident or, maybe, as an intentional means on Garrick's side of not wholly disappearing from the theatrical arena, precisely when the text of his competitor was being acclaimed on the stage.

²¹ The playbill of its première in Drury Lane, October, 25, 1766, announced that it was to be followed by *The Lying Varlet*, and, two days later, it shared evening with *The Devil is in Him*.

²² According to the advertisement in the playbills, the play "had not been acted these 12 years," and they specify December, 16th, as the last date. *The London Stage*, however, records another performance that took place the following year, on March, 7th. Garrick's adaptation enjoyed 21 performances since October 18th, 1785 until December 29th, 1786, to be followed by another eleven stagings in 1787 whereas Lee's adaptation, although it proved equally successful during 1786, with a total 11 performances, took its final leave from the stage the following year, when it was only performed once (Covent Garden, February 17th).

on occasion of a benefit night.²³ Lee's (1786) edition, curiously enough, emends the scarce errors found in the sections of the text taken from his first version,²⁴ only to leave visible mistakes in the remaining part of the script, where a careless combination is attempted between parts of his adaptation and some scenes from Garrick's version.

Garrick's interest in tightening up the action²⁵ in reply to the tastes of his audience had led him to bring the characters from both plots together in a number of scenes. An interesting case is the "park scene," that Garrick adapts from Wycherley. In his version, Peggy is allowed to go out, disguised as a boy, so as to go unrecognised. Male characters, as in Wycherley, see through her disguise and approach her accordingly, although they handle her more gently.²⁶ Peggy, instead of being kissed and moused by all rakes at hand, is given a chaste kiss by a promising youth who falls in love with her. When left on their own, Belville, instead of making love to her, gently asks her to marry him.

²³ "The following scenes, being intended for a Representation upon a Benefit Night Only, were compil'd with so much haste and inaccuracy, that several mistakes in the copy were obliged to be rectified. (See the subjoin'd Errata)."

²⁴ Such as "Ned" for "Frank" or "to-morrow" for "this morning."

²⁵ Cfr. the prefatory remarks to the 1819 edition of the play, where it is stated that "the incidents are not numerous, but to make amends are *compacted into a whole*." And it adds: "The two parts of the plot are so *well linked together*, and so *intimately connected* that it is not very easy at first to distinguish the double fictions." It looks as though there was an evident interest on the part of the editor to underline the dramatic correctness of the version, that seemed to fit the rules listed by Edmund Burke in *The Reformer* (Nr. 2, February 4, 1748). The third of these rules was precisely "to conduct the Fable so *all the parts seem to depend one on another*, and center in the Conclusion as in a point." This rule, like the ones related to the "propriety" of characters and to the moral aim of the piece, that Avery (1944: 146-147) fittingly highlighted as influential in mid-century drama ("By mid-century Burke's views were those of a greater and often a more influential body of people") seems to have enjoyed a long-lasting life, as the (1819) edition of Garrick's version proves.

²⁶ It should be remembered, however, that this type of scenes continued to be popular on stage, and Garrick's première in 1785 had benefitted from the performance of a promising actress, who would excel in "breeches parts." Although this was Mrs. Jordan's début in Drury Lane, she was immediately successful. Mrs. Inchbald's (1808) edition of the play offers the whole cast, but carefully informs that she no longer performs that part, since she has left the stage. The truth is that she had been very busy bearing children (four by a young man, up to 1791, and ten more by the Duke of Clarence, later William IV, between 1791 and 1811), what allowed her time to act but intermittently.

The park is also the meeting place of the other couple, whose mutual attraction has already been shown on stage, and whose obstacle – Sparkish – is about to be removed, so that they too may end up in happy marriage.

Lee's hasty borrowing of this part, however, gave rise to incongruous situations, that were only due to a lack of proper revision. That it had not been fully effected is revealed by the fact that some of the names from Garrick's version are still retained: *Belville*, for example is kept in the stage direction (*Belville kisses her*) that should allude, instead, to Dorilant's kissing of Margery.

Dorilant, moreover, that is mistakenly addressed as *Dick*, is funnily urged by Harcourt (Belville's uncle in Garrick's version) to kiss Margery. It goes without saying that such a piece of advice, that was fitting for a bashful and inexperienced youth, is redundant in the case of a notorious libertine, such as Dorilant.

But the lack of revision inadvertently leads to still more ludicrous lines, such as Harcourt's sincere remark on Belville's modesty when he is left alone with Peggy in the park. He tells Moody: "My dear friend is a very modest young man, you may depend upon his prudence." These words can only produce a hilarious effect when applied to Dorilant, who does pose a real danger to his honour.

What in Garrick's play helped tighten up the structure of the piece, by bringing together both plots, in Lee's version only leads to confusion as the result of that lack of revision. Thus, for example, Lee inserts the park scene into his play at a point when Harcourt and Alithea are not still acquainted with each other's feelings. It is therefore puzzling to hear Alithea tell Harcourt that their relationship has come to an end: "I will never see you more. I will get rid of your importunities and give my hand to Sparkish tomorrow morning" when the audience has not even seen it start.

It is surprising that such a careless revision of Wycherley's *The Country Wife* as Lee's (1786) version of the play could hold the stage for 12 nights, while Garrick's adaptation was simultaneously performed. It is only conceivable that the uncountable incongruencies found in the published text were, at least partially, solved in performance, presumably after the first night.²⁷ It is

²⁷ This possibility would be in line with the evidence that Stern (2000: 269-270) finds for play rehearsal under Garrick, since, according to him, "Against the tales of Garrick's careful rehearsals, are tales of extraordinary negligence," so that, since

therefore likely that the numerous flaws of structure and characterization in this version were only evident after the first performance, and then partially solved, although the fact that its last performance took place the following year (Covent Garden, February, 17th), whereas Garrick's version continued to hold the stage for the remaining of the century and well into the next one, leads us to doubt that it was properly done, especially if we take into account that Garrick's version, though theatrically acceptable, was far from perfect.²⁸

Another reason that may account for the play's popularity is, no doubt, the memorable performance of an outstanding actress. This fact had been acknowledged, for example, in 1777, when Mrs. Wilson's notable performance undoubtedly contributed to the successful reception of Lee's first version. On that occasion, *The London Magazine* (46, January 1777) declared her "one of the best actresses that has appeared these twenty years on a London stage." As we know, Mrs. Wilson benefited from a satisfactory playscript, which was not always the case at the time, not at least with Garrick's (1785) version of the play, and, even less with Lee's (1786) careless adaptation.

But the centrality of actresses was so paramount that it could turn a deficient script into a successful theatrical event, as it occurred with Mrs. Jordan's outstanding performance of Garrick's leading role in his (1785) revival of the play. In fact, her unanimously acclaimed performance was enough to attract large numbers of spectators to the theatre for several years, even though many of them were aware of the scarce dramatic merits of the text, as Madame d'Arblay made explicit after attending a performance on the 26 of July, 1788: "Mrs. Jordan played the Country Girl most admirably but the play is ... disagreeable in its whole plot and tendency."²⁹ Her gaiety, playfulness and vivacity, that were often praised by critics³⁰ were probably enough to compensate for the play's lack of wit and tediousness.

Lee's (1786) posed an even greater challenge to the performing abilities of Mrs. Brown, who successfully played the leading role

"partial rehearsals followed one another; the notion of a complete play as a single unit was seldom paramount before 'final' rehearsals."

²⁸ As was acknowledged, among others, by Frederick Seeley (1937: 217), who, fittingly, called it "wretched".

²⁹ Cfr. Barrett (1905: IV, 47).

³⁰ Cfr. for example, *The World*, April 7, 1788.

during the only season that the play held the stage (1786-1787). Her doubtless merits, however, seem to have been unable to compete with Mrs. Jordan's vivacity while trying to enliven a twice revised adaptation that was as dull as Garrick's and even less coherent than his.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, as evidence on the reception of *The Country Wife* during the eighteenth century has amply demonstrated, the mutual dependence between text and performance at that time was not a mere theoretical hypothesis, but a live, working principle, so that no text worthy of praise could prove successful unless staged by capable actors, and vice-versa, even though the outstanding performance of actresses could temporarily save a deficient script.

The paratextual elements taken into account for the analysis of the play's hypertextual transformations have, moreover, increased our awareness of the continuous accommodation of playwrights to their audiences' changing set of expectations, thus casting new light on the close relationship that existed between performance and text.

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