



The Country Wife (New Mermaids)

William Wycherley

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'He's a fool that marries, but he's a greater fool that does not marry a fool.'

This bawdy, hilarious, subversive and wickedly satirical drama pokes fun at the humourless, the jealous, and the adulterous alike. It features a country wife, Margery, whose husband believes she is too naïve to cuckold him; and an anti-hero, Horner, who pretends to be impotent in order to have unrestrained access to the women keen on 'the sport'. A number of licentious and hypocritical women request Horner's services – the country wife among them.

The Country Wife has provoked powerfully mixed reactions over the years. The seventeenth century libertine king Charles II saw it twice, and is said to have joined the 'dance of the cuckolds' at the end of one performance; the eighteenth century actor-playwright David Garrick declared it 'the most licentious play in the English language'; the Victorian Macaulay compared it to a skunk, because it was 'too filthy to handle and too noisome even to approach'. Twentieth century productions heralded it a Restoration masterpiece. Sexually frank, and as ready to criticise marriage as infidelity, the virtuosity, linguistic energy, brilliant wit, naughtiness and complexity of this ribald play have made it a staple of the modern stage.

This student edition contains a lengthy, entirely new introduction, by leading scholar, Tiffany Stern, with a background on the author, structure, characters, genre, themes, original staging and performance history, as well as an updated bibliography and a fully annotated version of the playtext.

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