

# *Double Entendre* in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy

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*Double entendres* abound in Restoration comedy. One of the most famous examples of such wordplay occurs in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), where Lady Fidget seemingly flaunts her enthusiasm for Horner's china collection in front of her husband Sir Jasper: 'he knows china very well, and has himself very good, but will not let me see it lest I should beg some' (IV. iii. 102-104). What sounds uncompromising to Sir Jasper is in fact an example of *impromptu* wordplay: Lady Fidget here quick-wittedly converts the term china into a *double entendre* for sex in order to communicate her desires to Horner and to lead him to the adjacent room for an adulterous assignation.

Wycherley's notorious china scene suggests that *double entendre* is tied to the generic conventions of late-seventeenth century comedy and farce. My paper reassesses this entrenched view by placing such wordplay at the intersection of dramatic text, theatrical performance, and contemporary criticism in both the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. Among others, plays like Richard Steele's *The Tender Husband* (1704) and Edward Moore's *The Foundling* (1748) indicate that *double entendre*, although controversial because of its raunchiness, was not extinct in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> I will first address issues of definition and distinction between types of wordplay (phonetic similarity, polysemy, situational and metaphorical meanings)<sup>2</sup> and survey views expressed in post-Renaissance criticism; I will then offer exemplary analyses of *double entendres* in the comedies from the Restoration and the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> These examples will illustrate that *double entendre*, constantly reappropriated after the *Interregnum*, joins different comic modes with one another.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g. Jeremy Collier's censure of the *double entendre* in his treatise *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698): 'And when the sentence has two handles, the worst is generally turned to the audience. The matter is so contrived that the smut and scum of the thought now arises uppermost, and, like a picture drawn to sight, looks always upon the company' (p. 12). For a different view, see Edward Moore's essay 'The Double Entendre', which was originally published in *The World*, No 201, Thursday, November 4, 1756 (repr. in Chalmers 237-41).

<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between puns, polysemous wordplay and *equivoce*, see Niederhoff 99-101. Plett (175-79) differentiates between polysemic, homonymic, homophonic, and homoeophonic wordplays.

<sup>3</sup> On performative aspects of *double entendre*, see Styan 201-03.