

The Revenge of the Rake

or

Honestly Dishonest

“For your bigots in honour are just like those in religion; they fear the eye of the world more than the eye of Heaven, and think there is no virtue but railing at vice, and no sin but giving scandal. They rail at a poor little kept player, and keep themselves some young, modest, pulpit comedian to be privy to their sins in their closets [.]” (IV.III.23-30).

Horner, the male protagonist and rake in William Wycherley’s 1675 comedy The Country Wife, speaks these lines in contempt of the hypocritical majority of characters in Wycherley’s play who publicly disdain the libertine’s life-style, while privately indulging in lasciviousness themselves. They are more afraid of what society thinks of them, Horner asserts, than what genuinely concerns religion and honor. The quote is a veiled attack at the Puritan-regime that kept England in a repressive prison of piety (or the pretense thereof) until 1660. After their reign, the people longed for an outlet for their too-long-repressed desires. The character of the rake, this essay will argue, was so popular because he offered the London theatre audience that very outlet by letting them share in his rebellious life-style that exposed the hypocrisy of the social mask and ridiculed Puritan rigidity. He became the stage-celebrity of his time because both men and women could live vicariously through him: men (and some women) because they wanted to be like him and women because they wanted to be with him.

The character of Horner in The Country Wife offers great insight into how the reactionary backlash of the royalists—who had lost everything after Charles I was executed and had to flee the country or be killed—resulted in a disenchanting, materialistic, ‘live-for-the

moment,' and pleasure-driven life style that defied the simplistic puritanical belief in a stable, ordered world. Horner is the quintessential Restoration-era rake who, both verbally and through his debauched existence, lashes out at the remaining sanctimoniousness of Puritan thought as revealed in the dissembling characters in his society. He leads a dishonorable life, but he is honest about it: Wild nights, squandering money, immorality, and most importantly, womanizing, are all attributes of the rake, which allowed him to become the anti-heroic stock-character in Restoration comedies that replaced the traditional romantic hero. The rake was progressive in his respect for women whose desires he understood and appreciated in a society that denied them their choice of husband, and he was tolerant in regards to other people's way of life as long as it didn't impose on his. With his motto 'live and let live,' the rake became the symbol of the royalists' revenge for the past: The English Civil War of 1642, which was caused by Charles I's decision to rule England without Parliament, resulted in the monarch being executed by the order of Oliver Cromwell and in England becoming a Commonwealth. During the Cromwell-regime England underwent drastic changes. While the civil war was originally aimed at abolishing absolutism, Cromwell turned out to be more of an absolutist ruler than the two kings before him. As a radical puritan, he was intolerant to all other religions but his own and tyrannically pursued his ideology of England being a nation of only Puritans. He ran all Presbyterians out of the country, considered Catholicism seditious, censored the press and intercepted mail. He abolished the monarchy, but then turned what should have been a Commonwealth into a military dictatorship and diplomatically called it 'The Protectorate.' He took all the power from Parliament – as Charles I had done - by assuming total control of the army and dissolved it altogether in 1653 when it tried to get the army back. Therefore the

Commonwealth unofficially became a monarchy again, but Cromwell acted more like a despot than a monarch.

The civil war was interpreted by the Puritans as God's punishment for England's wickedness under Charles I; therefore they lived exclusively for their religion, censored all entertainment, and abolished the arts. With no outlet for pleasure, there existed only two options for people to function under the Puritan regime: repress their natural instincts or hide them beneath a façade of honor and good reputation. Music could only be played in public if it was religious, because nothing was to distract the people from God. The theatres were closed by parliamentary order in 1642, and were not officially reopened until 1660. The Puritans objected to the theatre because it called for actors to pretend that they were somebody they were not. Plays were acts of imposture to them. The irony was that people began to pretend to be someone they were not in real life, because most people simply were not as 'pure' as the Puritan regime demanded. After the ten-year-rule of Parliament and Cromwell, Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. He was greeted by the people with exuberant celebration. When Charles II returned to England, he brought with him a penchant for the theatre and opera, which he had been introduced to during his exile in Paris. Charles was a rake, but amenable and tolerant. He was not interested in a theological witch hunt of heretics and he was on good terms with Parliament; he even created a council that mediated between Parliament and king, which later became the modern cabinet. He addressed the House of Lords at Whitehall Palace on the day of his return to England, May 29th, 1660, with the words: "I find my heart set really to endeavour by all means for the restoring of this nation to freedom and happiness; and hope by the advice of my Parliament to effect it" ([BBC History Magazine](#)). After his speech, he feasted at Whitehall's

Banqueting Hall-the very place his father was executed in- with ambassadors and his favorite mistresses, wasting no time to introduce the ways of the rake to England.

London's social life quickly became the opposite of what it had been after ten years of modesty and god-fearing devotion. The English had tasted enough of the Puritan extreme and longed for a drastic change, which Charles delivered: Entertainment was everywhere. Life was vibrant, abundant, and artistic, but also excessive and debauched. At the same time Charles II returned, many of the sons of aristocrats who had also been hiding in continental exile were granted entry into England again as well. The latter gained their wealth and former way of life back when Charles was restored to the throne. They lived their lives excessively and materialistically, most likely because they had seen how fickle regimes and existences could be. A lot of these young men had watched their fathers lose everything. Thus these gallants soon became hedonistic rakes like Charles: They had time and money, and they spent it on gambling, drinking, good food, women, and watching plays: "The restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660 inaugurated a period of renewed theatrical vitality. As in France the theater was closely associated with royal prerogatives. Upon his return, Charles rewarded patents to [theatre producers] William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew to open theatres under royal authority. These patent theaters (also called 'theaters royal') – Davenant's Duke's Company, and Killigrew's King's Company – thus held a royal monopoly on the production of spoken English drama" (The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama, p.377). To popularize the restoration of the monarchy, Charles skillfully used the arts as propaganda: the theatres' "restoration was a political act; [they] were reopened rather explicitly as ideological state apparatuses, for the plays, subject to state censorship through the offices of the Master of Revels and the Lord Chamberlain were expected to inculcate into their audiences the ideology that attempted to naturalize the right

of the monarchists to rule” (The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth Century Drama, ix). Charles II’s strategy worked: he brought mirth back into England and introduced progressive ideas. A rake himself, Charles was a pleasure-loving hedonist, but he was also tolerant in regards to religion, society, politics, the arts, and women: “By far the greatest innovation in the English theatre was the introduction of actresses onstage. English comedies in this period were often frankly concerned with sexual intrigue, and the actresses who played in them also had a reputation for sexual licentiousness. Indeed, actresses’ ongoing struggle to assert themselves as legitimate performers was born at this time as well, epitomized in the careers of Elizabeth Barry (1658-1713), Anne Bracegirdle (1663-1743),” and Nell Gwynn (1650-1687) (The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama, p.379). While Nell quickly became Charles’s most famous mistress, it was the liberality of the rakish king that had made her and the other actresses’ careers possible.

The Restoration comedy rake was the perfect character to transport the excessive life style as it was exhibited at court onto the London stage. The rake’s devil-may-care existence, which was the opposite of the Puritans’ repressed, inward-directed way of life and an act of revenge against it, became notorious. The rake’s elitist actions and erudite speech appealed to the upper classes both because they were a reflection of their own daily lives, but also because the lower classes did not understand them. Hobbes' philosophy, also a reaction to the civil war, might shed some light on the motivations of the educated royalist rake: instead of holding on to the Puritan idea of an after-life and clinging to a worldview built on certainty, the royalist-rake had learned that the latter was an illusion; instead he turned to what he could hold on to with his hands. As was Hobbes’ philosophy, the rake’s approach to life was individualistic and materialistic, geared towards sensual fulfillment. The latter can be found in both Restoration

Court society and in many of the rakes in the Restoration comedies they went to see. The theatre was for the upper classes by the upper classes. Only wealthy citizens who did not work could attend the theatre. It was expensive, started at 3 pm, when most people were at work, and the theatres were built for a smaller, exclusive audience. The rake and the plays that portray him created a barrier between the aristocrats and the rest of London, exposing the disdain of the upper classes for the lower ones. Much of the contempt the aristocrats harbored for the lower classes was that they blamed the fate of their fathers and Charles I on them. The latter had been an ardent lover of the theatre and had spent a fortune on the performance of court masques, which were short elaborate plays that were acted by members of the court themselves. The masques took place at Whitehall Palace, where Charles I would meet his end in a cruelly ironic execution undersigned by Cromwell: “Charles was led through the room where the masques’ brilliant fantasies had been staged for him to his own last performance – the public stage where he was beheaded” (The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama, p.223).

The twisted manner with which the English monarchy ended in 1649 was likely the reason the royalist-rakes’ ironized life and mocked the lower classes for their simplicity and narrow-mindedness. To shield themselves from the constant threat of disloyalty within their own ranks, the rakes became cynical and always kept a slight distance. The hypocrisy within the upper class that the rake riles against could be explained by the lack of trust people had in each other; betrayal was everywhere and everyone expected double-dealing. The royalists had just been given their power back and were afraid to lose it again, thus scandal was what they feared the most because it would incur the wrath of the masses. By revolting against that fear, the rake lived up to the origin of his name: rakehell: “The rake may end in hell, but the flames surrounding him often make him seem that much more desirable to women” (The Art of

Seduction, p.27). The rake was the character that embodied the emotional outlet his audience longed for. The Restoration playwrights were for the most part members of the upper class and observed the activities at Court to then model a character who would win the upper hand in an unstable world by outwitting the hypocrites in whose existence honor is nothing but a mask and good reputation an act. Real personages and rakes such as John Wilmot and George Etherege became known as ‘the merry gang,’ who roamed around London in pursuit of women, drink, and sensual pleasure, and then wrote plays about their adventures. They were the smooth operators whose sharp wit not only understood the machinations of their society, but also allowed them to be successful with women because they didn’t insult female intelligence by bragging about their conquests or by slandering them. Respect for a woman’s wit and talent is a characteristic of the rake, as exemplified by John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, who tutored the actress Elizabeth Barry and helped her achieve stardom on the English stage.

As the rake Horner puts it in William Wycherley’s 1675 comedy The Country Wife: “there are quacks in love as well as physic who get but fewer and worse patients for their boasting; a good name is seldom got by giving it one’s self, and women no more than honour are compassed by bragging. Come, come, doctor, the wisest lawyer never discovers the merits of his cause till the trial; the wealthiest man conceals his riches, and the cunning gamester his play” (I.I. 48-55). Horner is insightful enough to realize that bragging about one’s conquests doesn’t bring success with women; other people have to build the rake’s reputation. The rake embodies rebellion against the fear of a bad reputation, hence Horner doesn’t mind branding himself a eunuch: “There is the added lure of his reputation: so many women have succumbed to him, there has to be a reason” (The Art of Seduction, p.17). Horner is highly educated, witty, wealthy, aristocratic, elegant, charming, funny, conniving, immoral, cynical, and he doesn’t care one bit

about his reputation. He might appear utterly superficial at first glance, but his lines often belie mere frivolity and carelessness. His ruminations offer insight into someone who is disgusted by the hypocrisy surrounding him, and who has thus become blasé. His disillusionment with his society's failure to look closely enough to discern the true from the false is emphasized by his comment about the braggart Sparkish whose entire existence is built around a void of vanity dressed in fashionable clothes without any wit or honor but much pretense thereof: "a false jewel amongst true ones is not discerned at a distance" (I.I.272-4). Horner realizes that, in a world where only surface matters, most people feign morals: "your arrantest cheat is your trustee, or executor, your jealous man, the greatest cuckold, your church-man, the greatest atheist, and your noisy pert rogue of a wit, the greatest fop, dullest ass, and worst company" (I.I. 301-5). Horner knows that most people's inner motives run anathema to their outward behavior. Peter Thompson asserts: "It is almost too easy to discern an underlying melancholy in this pursuit of pleasure, undertaken by worldly-wise people who know the likely disproportion between desire and its fulfillment" (The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre, p.212).

Horner's way of life might be one of nihilism and empty pleasure, but in a society where everyone solely cares for their reputation, not the ideal behind it, the rake's way of the world seems rather honest; Horner is honestly dishonest. As Horner's friend Harcourt describes society: "Most men are the contraries to that they would seem" (I.I. 293-4). Pinchwife, for example, the husband of the 'Country Wife' Margery whom Horner seduces, embodies the dissembling existence of the quintessential hypocrite. He is only concerned about his vanity and reputation. As a former rake, he doesn't really care about Horner seducing other wives but his own, because if his wife cheats on him, Pinchwife will be labeled a cuckold by his peers and consequentially ridiculed by society: "I will not be a cuckold I say. There is danger in making me

a cuckold" (IV.III. 330-1); "play with any man's honour but mine, kiss any man's wife but mine" (IV.III. 369-370): "what a thing is a cuckold, that every fool can make him ridiculous" (IV.IV. 86-7). Pinchwife certainly doth protest too much, and from Horner's perspective he deserves to be betrayed because the motivation behind his fear of being cuckolded is not the love he bears for his wife, but his narcissism. Therefore, Horner's revenge against his society's hypocrisy is to keep himself busy cuckolding husbands such as Pinchwife by seducing and sleeping with their wives, thus the name "Horner." He gives the married men 'horns.' Since the husbands only married their wives for either money or status, Horner hits them where it hurts them the most: their vanity.

Marriage was the foundation of the Cromwell-regime. It was a conventional civic institution and was arranged between families of the same faith. Romance was not essential and divorce was out of the question. Consequentially, the rake resented marriage and the Puritan convention behind it. The specious attitude toward marriage shared by Pinchwife and Sparkish is exactly what Horner does not stand for. Sparkish, just like Pinchwife did, solely wishes to marry Alithea to show her off to his friends as a status-symbol and to get her dowry: "'Tis true, I might have married your portion, as other men of other parts of the town do sometimes" (V.III. 75-7). Horner detests their behavior: "Vain fops but court, and dress, and keep a pother/ To pass for women's men with one another" (V.IV. 460-461). Horner's wit makes him superior to the other characters in his society, and it also confirms his social insights about people's duplicity: "Affectation is [society's] greatest monster" (I.I. 271). It is no wonder then that the rake's "danger and taboo appeal to a repressed side in women, who are supposed to represent the moralizing force in culture. A woman may succumb to the Rake through her yearning to be free of the constraints of virtue and decency. Indeed, it is often the most virtuous woman who falls

most deeply in love with the Rake,” as is the case in The Country Wife with Margery, the country-girl who falls for Horner (The Art of Seduction, p.26). Margery wants to be with someone she is attracted to, and Horner is drawn to Margery because she has not been corrupted by London’s city-life yet: “’tis the first love letter that ever was without flames, darts, fates, destinies, lying and dissembling in’t” (IV.III. 385-7). Horner points out that Margery’s love letter to him is unlike all the other artificial ones he presumably has received in the course of his career as a rake. Unlike the other women, she uses plain language and still says what she means. Her husband Pinchwife shows no signs of genuine love for Margery. He merely married her because she is young, pretty, and a naïve country-girl- ergo, he believes that she will not cuckold him. Lady Fidget, Horner’s mistress, likewise reveals how lonely and loveless her marriage is: “In vain we must wake in a dull bed alone/ Whilst to our warm rival, the bottle they [their husbands] are gone” (V.IV. 32-3). The lack of love and happiness in marriage is enough to convince Horner to remain single. The latter lack, however, creates a gap in society that Horner knows well enough to fill: literally.

Horner’s cunning scheme of spreading the false rumor that claims he is impotent is meant to give him access to the upstanding married ladies whom he formerly could not seduce due to his bad reputation and the jealousy of their husbands. The fact that Horner is willing to go to the extreme of being thought impotent by the wives of his society to expose the husbands’ hypocrisy, vanity, greed, and stupidity reveals the rake’s profound loathing of buffoons such as Pinchwife, Sir Jasper and Sparkish. Horner’s scheme also exposes that the married women within his circle are more than the commodities their simpleton-husbands trade them as, namely quick-witted personages who lack the agency to express their intelligence and desires. The women quickly figure out Horner’s scheme and play along with it while the husbands are fooled

by it. "Women of quality [nobility] are so civil, you can hardly distinguish love from good breeding, and man is often mistaken. But now I can be sure, she that shows an aversion to me loves the sport" (I.I.175-179). By saying that he wishes to seduce the women who offer a challenge to him, Horner asserts that - unlike the arrogant Pinchwife and the foppish Sparkish - he treasures a woman's intelligence: "methinks wit is more necessary than beauty, and I think no young woman ugly that has it, and no handsome woman agreeable without it" (I.I. 452-5). Horner, it must be pointed out, has high standards, albeit not imposed by society but by himself: he isn't interested in purely sexual encounters, but mainly in the intellectual 'sport' of seduction. Horner's immorality contains a certain morality in that he doesn't treat his women as properties or uses them ill, but he doesn't suffer the foolish husbands gladly for their monetary and status-driven motives for marriage: "Thus, who a married woman's love would win/ Should with the husband's failings first begin:" (I.III. 68-9).

Horner also doesn't care to impress society or his male friends; he lives his life in spite of moral codes, despite what other people think of him. His decision to go against society's norm by not marrying and living off a woman's money is rather honorable: "What the Rake offers is what society normally does not allow women: an affair of pure pleasure, an exciting brush with danger. A woman is often deeply oppressed by the role she is expected to play. She is supposed to want commitment and lifelong loyalty. But often her marriages and relationships give her no romance and devotion but routine and an endlessly distracted mate. It remains an abiding female fantasy to meet a man who gives totally of himself, who lives for her, even if only for a while" (The Art of Seduction, p.24). Horner knows that society turns women into commodities and that they therefore have to be duplicitous: "your women of honour, as you call 'em, are only chary of their reputations, not their persons, and 'tis scandal they would avoid, not men" (I.I. 181-3). The

women who are eager to make love to Horner are all married and unfaithful, in short, libertines themselves. Lady Fidget, for example, repeatedly speaks of her honor and how important it is to her, while it is clear that she doesn't care for it in the least, only the appearance thereof: "Well, Horner, am I not a woman of honour" (IV.III); "But first, my dear sir, you must promise to have a care of my dear honour" (IV.III). Horner is very aware of Lady Fidget's concern with her 'honor.' She is implying that he be discreet about their affair so her husband and the rest of society will not find out about it. Her main concern is her reputation, not the loss of her honor. No matter how debauched the upper classes' life-style had become during the Restoration era, women were still expected to be chaste and faithful while men could live their passions out in the open. Instead of judging the women, however, Horner judges society and the system.

Another desirable trait of Horner is that, despite all of his cunning and deception, he never exposes the women he has affairs with. He knows that most of them are married to men they do not love because their fathers chose their husbands, taking into consideration money and status, but not affection. Horner lives according to his own code of honor and offers women the choice of being with someone who makes them happy, even if it is short-lived and behind society's back: "The Rake is a great female fantasy figure – when he desires a woman, brief though the moment may be, he will go to the ends of the earth for her. He may be disloyal, dishonest, and amoral, but that only adds to his appeal. Unlike the normal, cautious male, the Rake is delightfully unrestrained, a slave to his love of women" (The Art of Seduction, p.17). He gives them the choice they never had in their marriage: "The great seducers do not offer the mild pleasures that society condones. They touch a person's unconscious, those repressed desires that cry out for liberation" (The Art of Seduction, p.25). Horner never forces himself onto a woman. Instead he appeals to her intelligence with his own wit and exquisite eloquence: "Words

are a woman's weakness, and the Rake is a master of seductive language. He chooses words for their ability to suggest, insinuate, hypnotize, elevate, infect. The Rake's use of language is demonic because it is designed not to communicate or convey information, but to persuade, to flatter, stir emotional turmoil, much as the serpent in the Garden of Eden used words to lead Eve into temptation" (The Art of Seduction, p.17, 23-4). The rake understands women for he himself has many feminine qualities: he dresses well, enjoys fashion, is well-mannered, he knows when to talk and when to listen; he writes love-letters and poetry, revels in the arts, knows how to dance, how to show respect, and he appreciates wit, beauty, and sacrifice. A real rake such as Horner does not kiss and tell, and he always tries to protect a lady's honor after he has 'wronged' it, maintaining his standard of moral immorality: "And I must be concerned for a lady's honour, too" (V.IV.285). He tells Mrs. Pinchwife to go home before her husband discovers her because he understands that a woman is forced to be more careful than a man if she wants to be with someone she is attracted to: "'tis that I may love you long. 'Tis to secure my love, and your reputation with your husband. He'll never receive you again else" (V.IV.224-6); "My lady has not her honour, but has given it to me to keep, and I will preserve it" (V.IV.287-8). Lady Fidget confirms Horner's discretion in love matters when she says to her female friends: "Though we get no presents, no jewels of him, we are savers of our honor, the jewel of most value and use, which shines yet to the world unsuspected, though it be counterfeit" (V.IV.181-5). Lady Fidget asserts that, although she and her friends are betraying their husbands with Horner, their secret and therefore their honor is safe with him. Horner doesn't even disclose his impotence-scheme to his male friends to make certain no one can harm the women's honor: "Though I can't enjoy them [women], I shall you [his friends] the more" (I.I.224-5).

Horner does, however, repeatedly lash out at society's pretense of truly being concerned with honor or reputation. Sparkish's comment serves as a good example for utter hypocrisy when he walks in on Pinchwife with his sword drawn on his wife Margery: "What, drawn upon your wife? You should never do that but at night in the dark when you can't hurt her" (IV.III. 53-4). The statement is, of course, a non-sequitur: with a sword at night, Pinchwife is more likely to hurt his wife because he cannot see. What Sparkish means is, that as long as no one witnesses what Pinchwife does with his wife in the dark, it doesn't exist in society. Pinchwife, however, abuses her in the open so "one may know [Margery]" (IV.III. 57). In other words: if society gets wind of the abuse, it becomes a scandal, if not, no one cares how or if Margery dies or not. Society's maxim then is: just don't get caught. Horner resents such behavior. At one point he tells Lady Fidget after she has droned on about her honor ad nauseam: "If you talk a word more of your honour, you'll make me incapable to wrong it. To talk of honour in the mysteries of love is like talking of Heaven or the Deity in an operation of witchcraft" (IV.III.46-50). Horner gains respect for Lady Fidget and her female friends toward the end of the play, when they openly admit to him that they, just like men do, have to pretend to be honorable within society, so they can keep their place in it: "Our reputation! Lord, why should you not think that we women make use of our reputations, as you men of yours, only to deceive the world with less suspicion" (V.IV.106-110). Horner appears to find her admission truthful, fair, and dignified: "I beg your pardon ladies, I was deceived in you devilishly. But why that mighty pretense to honour," he asks (V.IV.124-5). Lady Fidget explains that "'twas for the same reason you men pretend business often: to avoid ill company, to enjoy the better and more privately those you love" (V.IV.126-9). Horner respects and understands Lady Fidget's desire to be able to enjoy a man she is attracted to, and the necessity to hide it from society. As men do, she says, women "think

wildness in a man as desirable a quality as in a duck or rabbit. A tame man, faugh” (V.IV.102-4). Clearly, Lady Fidget asserts that women have the same desires men do: “Do not imagine that women are the tender creatures that some people would like them to be. Like men, they are deeply attracted to the forbidden, the dangerous, even the slightly evil” (The Art of Seduction, p.25). In a society that treats women like pawns, a rake like Horner cannot help but become the outlet for their repressed desires: “The fact that the Rake is so devoted to women, in his own strange way, makes him lovable and seductive to them” (The Art of Seduction, p.26). While Horner doesn’t believe in monogamy, he treats each woman he seduces with dignity and respect, and he offers her the freedom of choice she deserves, the very freedom that society denies her.

Horner knows that he has devoted himself to a life driven by appetite, not spirit. He gets all the pleasure he desires, but constantly yearns for more. His existence appears to be a vicious cycle driven by escapism: “Restoration England was a society that desperately wanted to be able to forget its past, but which forever remained haunted by it” (Harris, Tim: The Restoration: Charles II and his Kingdoms 1660–1685). It is only through the context of Horner’s past, however, that his need for revenge against the hypocrisy in his society that is left over from the Puritan regime can be explained: in a time when the social mask of feigned honor has become the actual face of society, the rake has dedicated his life to exposing this very hypocrisy and to rebelling against it. In that sense, his life is not empty but has great meaning during the Restoration-era, because it is the rake who offers his audience the much-needed and time-appropriate outlet for their repressed emotions and instincts. A rake like Horner enables the men and women in the London audience to live vicariously through him, thus both enjoying the attention of the women while exposing and renouncing society’s hypocrisy.