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Rake

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Mots-clés

Literature
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Résumé

This entry explores the rake archetype from his literary origins as a symbol of male elitism and excess, to his cultural impact on eighteenth-century collective consciousness. From his inception during the Restoration to his apparent decline towards the end of the Georgian era, the figure seems deeply intertwined with the specific *hic et nunc* of eighteenth-century Great Britain. As such, the rake's initial reception and subsequent trajectory identify him as a cultural indicator, with which to measure the shifts in gendered sociability and expectations towards upper-class men throughout the period.

The term 'rake', short for 'rakehell', has been used to describe a licentious man of loose morals since the mid-sixteenth century. But it is during the long eighteenth century (1660-1820)1 that the term came to evoke a distinctive cultural figure. It is then indeed that the rake

became the widely recognisable archetype of a witty, hedonistic man, often from the nobility or at the very least wealthy, bent on sensual gratification. The character's class and gender privileges enable him to disregard social conventions without being held accountable, in plots of intrigues and seduction which offered ideologically-charged commentaries on eighteenth-century sociability.

The rake can thus be seen as a leading artistic creation of the eighteenth century, his presence nearly ubiquitous. However, his aura and influence over the lives of eighteenth-century Englishmen and women go well beyond the bounds of fiction. In fact, the archetype embodies a specific form of masculinity that resonates with the historical reality of the period: the figure's potential for social disruption as an upper-class male magnifies the political and ideological instability at play throughout the eighteenth century.

The rake archetype made his foray into the literary world through the comedies of the Restoration, as the wild and scheming seducer perpetually engineering -and coming out triumphant- of outrageous ventures. Besides some rare authors critical of the values embodied by the character,2 the Restoration rake is portrayed sympathetically, inspiring not only good will but also admiration in the audience. This is due in large part to the fact that the authors of what can be called rakish narratives -plots in which the rake archetype is either the protagonist or plays a significant part in the action- were almost exclusively male, and identified themselves as rakes, or associated with men who did.

One of the most popular plays of the time, and as such one of the most frequently studied by scholars, is George Etherege's 1676 *The Man of Mode*. Its protagonist Dorimant serves as the mould from which many canonical rakish traits were shaped: a privileged social standing, seemingly insatiable sexual appetite with a propensity to view women as preys and other men as rivals or pawns, and a distaste for marriage and authority in general.

Etherege, though not a peer himself, belonged to group of artists and courtiers known as the Merry Gang, due to their intimate footing with Charles II, nicknamed the Merry Monarch. Other notable members include the infamous Earl of Rochester and the playwright William Wycherley, creator of another great canonical rakish text, *The Country Wife* (1675). The works of these men built upon their own lifestyle and sought to elevate it to a legitimate philosophical stance: it is no wonder then that Restoration comedies praise rakery rather than condemn it.

Nor is it surprising that such glamorous depictions of flippant upper-class male characters would flourish under the Restoration. The triumphant return in 1660 of the newly crowned Charles II could not conceal the fact that the English monarchy had been irremediably weakened by the 1648 Civil War, which had resulted in the execution of Charles I and the decade-long exile of his son. The king's sobriquet reveals his own penchant for lavish celebrations and sensual pursuits, but Charles II is also remembered as a politically impotent sovereign, considerably restrained by Parliament. He was in fact mistrusted by some of his ministers, his exile in France and overt Francophilia reigniting fears of a Catholic monarch on

the English throne. Highlighting yet further the link between literary rakes and their real-life counterparts, Francophilia and 'Frenchified' manners are common traits found in rakish characters throughout the whole eighteenth century.[3] Ultimately, members of Charles II's inner circle like the Merry Gang would have been keenly aware of their waning political power. Under their pen, the rake becomes a nostalgic figure, the remnant of past glory revisited through stories of sexual antics and social slights.[4]

The rake can be presented as an illustration of unregulated sociability, driven by two opposite forces. On one hand, rakish narratives elevate the cult of pleasure to a philosophical stance, in which unbridled hedonism blurs the line between public and private as pleasure becomes a performance. On the other hand, this pseudo-creed also expresses itself through staunch irreverence towards established forms of authority in which the rake's own social standing is rooted, such as the Crown, the Church and the Law. Rakery thus disrupts sociability by undermining the very institutions that structure society, the figure styling himself as his own monarch and perhaps even his own god, subjecting others to his will.

There is therefore a nostalgic, even reactionary, quality inherent to the rake's characterisation, fuelled by the time and place in which he emerged. These elements, as well as the core characteristics of the rake's social status, sexual proclivity and overall impudence, remain stable throughout all eighteenth-century depictions.[5] What changed however is the light in which authors portrayed such traits, and to a certain extent how they were received by the public. This testifies to the ideological mutations of the period, as the understanding of what it meant to be sociable underwent profound transformations. The eighteenth century witnessed the rise of the nascent middle-class, with professional men and women bringing about new ideals of soberer sociability and taste, of personal worth no longer based on status alone. In this context, the perception of the rake archetype was bound to evolve.

Though still a comedy staple on the stage, the figure was successfully integrated within the then-emergent novel genre, strengthening both his longevity and cultural outreach. But the sympathetic portrayal of the Restoration stage was no longer the hegemonic mode: representations of the rake grew more accusatory, mirroring the growing number of women and middle-class artists taking on rakish narratives. For many of them, the character's disruptive nature was increasingly becoming an object of disgust rather than admiration. With his 1732-34 paintings series *A Rake's Progress*, later reproduced as engravings and widely circulated in print, William Hogarth depicted the downfall of a young man coming into his inheritance and ultimately succumbing to the excesses of his new rakish lifestyle. Hogarth's moralising series announced the entry of the rake archetype into the visual arts, and has remained to this day one of its most evocative representations, adapted into an opera by Stravinsky in the 1950s and reinvented by queer artist David Hockney in the 1960s.

Another notable example is Mary Davys' 1727 novel *The Accomplished Rake, Or Modern Fine Gentleman*, in which the undue pride and failed education of the young protagonist Sir John Galliard are identified as the very evils that ultimately led him to rape and impregnate the character of Miss Friendly. This message is reinforced by the fact that the rake's victim is

the daughter of a socially inferior neighbour, and that the assault is committed partly as retaliation against her father for a perceived slight. Although Sir John eventually atones by offering a purely transactional marriage to Miss Friendly, Davys warns that she will keep her readership apprised of any relapse. Her book stages the rake archetype as the product of an instruction corrupted by unchecked social and gendered privileges, with sexual terrorism presented as the weapon of choice to assert his authority.

Such an interpretation of the figure would later be recycled in what is arguably one of the most famous incarnations of the rake: the character of Robert Lovelace from Samuel Richardson's 1748 novel *Clarissa*. The book continued Richardson's didactic intent, already on display in his 1741 *Familiar Letters*, which offered templates for appropriate written correspondence between intimate friends and relatives. But it is with fiction that Richardson honed in on his preoccupation with the moral and sentimental education of Britain's youth, first in 1740 with *Pamela*, where the figure of the rake is already established as the main threat to the young heroine's virtue. Unlike Mr. B, who is eventually redeemed and becomes a supposedly devoted husband to the former servant Pamela, *Clarissa*'s Lovelace is denied such a resolution. With his second novel, Richardson once again made use of the rake archetype as a means of policing the behaviour of young women, while going further in his condemnation of licentious upper-class men. Lovelace spends most of the plot agonising over Clarissa's refusal to submit to him, her status as a woman, the daughter of a mere country gentleman and – perhaps worst of all – a rival author[6] fracturing the grandiose image he has of himself. This struggle eventually ends in the rape and later death of the heroine, with Lovelace committing suicide-by-duel as a means of expiation. The socio-sexual violence exhibited by the rakish characters of Davys and Richardson betrays a deep-seated anxiety to reassure themselves of their superiority. Like their Restoration forefathers, the Georgian rakes are the illustration of a masculinity and male sociability in crisis, at a time when what it meant to be a man, and a man of high standing, was being reassessed.

Yet Richardson's goal of creating the blackest of rakish villains appears to have had the opposite effect, with numerous – mostly female – friends and readers championing Lovelace and writing to the author demanding a happier resolution.[7] This testifies to the gap between the values advocated by new generations of writers and the pre-existing expectations of their public. While ideals of sociability and male behaviour did evolve across the period, the tastes and attitudes of an entire nation did not transform overnight. The rake was designed from the start as a beguiling figure, whose archaic and predatory dimension captivates as much as it repulses.

It can still be argued however that Richardson, with characters such as Lovelace's penitent friend John Belford and Sir Charles Grandison, was instrumental in ushering in the age of the 'modern polite gentleman'.[8] This new model offered an ideal of male virtue whose nobility was determined by moral character rather than pedigree, more in tune with emerging middle-class ideals. This foil to the rake was championed in the literature of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth, with authors such as Fanny Burney and Jane Austen taking direct inspiration from the works of Richardson, among others. A new cohort of women

writers thus advocated for their own desired model of masculinity, while still making use of the figure of the rake to better contrast their wholesome heroes. Much declawed, the late Georgian and Regency rake did not carry the same direct threat of sexual violence as his predecessors. The figure's inclination towards socio-sexual predation remained intact, though its disastrous effects were now merely hinted at in the margins of the plot. Incidentally this later manifestation coincides with the reign of the last Georgian king, first as Prince Regent then as George IV; perhaps most remembered for his sexual scandals, his womanising and cruelty towards his many lovers being well-documented and identifying him as perhaps the last great rake of the age.

In the same way the figure had emerged during the Restoration from earlier incarnations of tricksters-seducers,[9] the rake in turn morphed into new avatars. The influence of the eighteenth-century rake cannot be denied in later archetypes such as the Gothic villain, the Byronic anti-hero and even the vampire.[10] In recent years, the rake has enjoyed a renewed interest, thanks to the popularity of historical romance fiction, with works such as the book series *Bridgerton* and its Netflix adaptation, set during the Regency, bringing the figure back into the mainstream. The more recent depictions have adhered to less patently predatory portrayal of the character, though the elements retained as part of rakish glamour raise the same issues as to what constitutes appropriate sociability and male behaviour now as they did in the eighteenth century.

1. Different chronological conceptions of the long eighteenth-century co-exist. I favour the incarnation delimited by monarchical changes: Charles II's 1660 ascension to the throne marks the start of the Restoration, whereas 1820 saw the end of the Regency as the Prince Regent became George IV.

2. Thomas Shadwell's 1676 tragedy The Libertine highlights the rake's filiation with the earlier figure of Don Juan, and like his namesake Shadwell's villainous Don John faces divine retribution for his crimes. John Vanbrugh offers a more comedic approach with The Provoked Wife (1697), where the rake figure is presented as a brutish, philandering husband.

3. In The Man of Mode, Dorimant and his supposed rival Sir Fopling embody two very different approaches to Francophilia, one refined and the other ridiculously excessive. Overall, the rake is usually understood as a worldly, well-travelled character.

4. The poetry of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, strikingly captures the clash between aristocratic pride and bitter awareness of English peers' diminishing prestige. Relevant texts include, among others, 'A Ramble in St James's Park', 'A Satire on Charles II', and 'The Disabled Debauchee'. See John Wilmot, Selected Poems, ed. Paul Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5. As exemplified in the aristocratic, and often predatory, male protagonists of Eliza Haywood's novels (Count D'Elmont in Love in Excess in 1719 and Fantomina's Beauplaisir in 1725, to name a few) and prolonged two decades later with the Richardsonian antagonists Mr B, Lovelace and Sir Pollexfen.

6. The epistolary format, with the parallel correspondences of both characters and Lovelace's practice of intercepting letters, does add a layer to the conflict between the two protagonists. 'But she was a thief, an impostor, as well as a tormentor. She had stolen my pen. […] and thus she wrote with it in a hand exactly like my own.' Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady, 1748, ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 848.

7. See in particular: Samuel Richardson, 'Correspondence with Lady Bradshaigh and Lady Echlin', in Peter Sabor (ed.), The Cambridge Edition of the Correspondence of Samuel Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

8. I borrow the term from Erin Mackie's excellent Rakes, Highwaymen, and Pirates: The Making of the Modern Gentleman in the Eighteenth Century.

9. A lineage can be identified between the rake and earlier types such as Don Juan and even Satan, the original tempter. See for examples Anthony Kaufman, ‘Wycherley's The Country Wife and the Don Juan Character’, Eighteenth-Century Studies (vol. 9, n° 2, 1975) p. 216–31 and Diane Purkiss, ‘What Do Men Want? Satan, the Rake and Masculine Desire’, in Catharine Gray and Erin Murphy (eds.), Milton Now: Alternative Approaches and Contexts (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p. 175-92.

10. Notable examples include Montoni in Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of the Udolpho (1794) or Ambrosio in Matthew Gregory Lewis’ The Monk (1796). In the 19th century, the Byronic anti-hero stands as a later rakish heir, with examples such as Lord Ruthven in J.W. Polidori’s The Vampyre (1819, directly influenced by Byron) and the aptly-named Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847).

Citer cet article

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