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**ONCE A 'RAKE', ALWAYS A 'RAKE': UNPACKING THE COMIC RAKE
ARCHETYPE IN RESTORATION COMEDY**

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Abstract:

In the earlier Restoration period, the rake's unrestrained behavior and exuberance epitomized the libertine spirit that defied conventional norms. As society's values evolved towards the end of the 17th century, comedic narratives began to reflect a shift towards moral reformation. The rake, who once reveled in chaos and dominance, found himself increasingly subjected to the moral and social expectations of a more orderly and regulated society. This paper tries to examine the transition, which underscores the rake's changing attitudes towards personal liberty and societal cohesion in Restoration England.

Keywords: *Restoration Comedy, Social Norms, Comic Rake, Morality, Mannerism, Satire, etc.*

Introduction:

The rake was a familiar stock character in Restoration drama. These stock characters became notably more popular during the last two decades of the Restoration period. In the high Restoration comedies, where the Hobbesian view of a war of all against all is often regarded as the natural state of society, the rake is celebrated for his tempestuous energies and audacious delight in power. However, in later comedy, this character is typically either degraded or accommodated to the treaties that govern individual appetites and restore social order. By means of this impious iconoclasm, the Restoration rake positions himself as the subversive counterpart to the immaculate protagonists of heroic tragedy, who serve as the guiding spirits of the mythic 'Restoration'. The term 'Restoration Comedy' is apt not merely for historical convenience but because these comedies, in their crafty and connotative manner, actively engage with the concept of restoration itself. They explore the reformation of civil order amidst the ever-present threat posed by vicious, yet natural momentum toward tyranny, anarchy and revolution.

Wit and Waywardness: The Perennial Appeal of the Comic Rake in Restoration Plays:

In its essence, Restoration Comedy reflects the complexities of a society grappling with the aftershocks of political upheaval and the tension between chaos and order. The rake, with his defiance and hedonism, embodies the disruptive forces that challenge societal norms, making these comedies a mirror to the ongoing struggle to balance individual liberty with communal stability. This dynamic interplay highlights the delicate process of rebuilding a civil order,



emphasizing the perpetual negotiation between maintaining control and accommodating natural human impulses.

Restoration playwrights deftly utilized the rake to explore the tensions between personal freedom and social order. These characters, with their sharp wit and irreverent demeanor, became conduits for commentary on the complexities of power, desire, and morality in a rapidly changing world. By depicting rakes as both heroes and villains, playwrights engaged audiences in a nuanced examination of human nature and the consequences of unchecked hedonism. The persistent appeal of the rake in Restoration drama lies in its ability to embody and confront societal contradictions with audacious charm. This archetype, often portrayed as a libertine with a penchant for pleasure-seeking and rebellion against moral constraints, captivates audiences by daring to live outside the norms of polite society. In an era marked by political instability and cultural redefinition following the English Civil War and the restoration of the monarchy, the rake serves as a provocative symbol of individualism and defiance. The libertine rake encapsulates the evolving challenges of masculine authority from the mid-seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century, reflecting shifts in societal values that address these issues. Initially, masculine authority was tied to court-based prestige, affirming the sovereign's privilege and hierarchical sexual differences. Over time, however, these values transitioned towards civic respectability and the celebration of the sovereign individual. This evolution marked a shift from hierarchical to oppositional models of sexual difference, and from character defined by performative mastery to character as an expression of subjective integrity. As the social and political landscape transformed, so too did the depiction of the rake. The earlier rake thrived on his association with aristocratic privilege and his ability to navigate the intrigues of court life with performative flair. His authority was derived from his proximity to the sovereign and the court's endorsement of his libertine behavior. However, as the notion of authority became more individualized and aligned with civic virtues, the rake's role adapted to reflect these changes.

In this new context, the rake's charm and wit became tools for negotiating the shifting boundaries of personal and societal expectations. He now symbolized the tension between maintaining traditional masculine dominance and embracing emerging ideals of individual rights and moral integrity. This transformation is mirrored in the dramatic narratives of the time, where the rake's journey often involves a confrontation with his own excesses and a potential path toward redemption or social accommodation. Thus, the libertine rake's character arc from the Restoration through the early eighteenth century illustrates broader cultural transitions. It charts the movement from a world defined by rigid social hierarchies and courtly excess to one increasingly valuing individual agency, moral introspection, and civic responsibility. Through this evolution, the rake remains a powerful lens for examining the complexities of masculine identity and authority in a changing society.

Manners, Mirth, and Morality: The Comic Rake's Role in Reflecting and Challenging Restoration Society:

The comic rake and the villainous antagonist of tragedy represent different facets of the destructive forces that threatened the fragile constitutional stability of the Restoration era.



These characters, in their respective genres, offer alternative expressions of the turbulent energies undermining societal order. In some plays, these two archetypes are skillfully combined to create a powerful and multifaceted commentary on the era's inherent tensions. The comic rake, with his irreverent wit and libertine excesses, embodies a playful yet subversive challenge to social norms and moral expectations. His antics, while often humorous, expose the underlying chaos and potential for disorder that lurks beneath the surface of Restoration society. In contrast, the tragic antagonist, driven by darker, more malevolent impulses, directly confronts the audience with the violent and destructive potential of unchecked ambition and moral corruption. By juxtaposing these two characters, playwrights could explore a spectrum of disruptive forces, from the seemingly benign to the overtly malignant. This combination allows for a nuanced examination of the period's anxieties about authority, order, and the delicate balance required maintaining social cohesion. The comic rake's charm and the tragic antagonist's menace together highlight the diverse ways in which individual desires and ambitions can threaten the collective stability.

The Restoration period in England, was a time of profound social, political, and cultural transformation. Following the turmoil of the English Civil War and the austere rule of the Commonwealth, the monarchy's restoration under Charles II brought a resurgence of theater, art, and libertine culture. Amidst this vibrant backdrop, the figure of the comic rake emerged as a central character in Restoration comedy, serving both as a mirror to society and a challenge to its norms. The comic rake, typically portrayed as a charming, witty, and morally dubious gentleman, embodied the hedonistic spirit of the age. With the monarchy's return, the court became synonymous with excess and pleasure, and the rake's antics on stage mirrored the libertine ethos prevalent among the aristocrats. Characters such as Dorimant in George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* or Horner in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* epitomize the rake's seductive allure and relentless pursuit of sensual gratification. These characters reflect the shifting values of Restoration society, where traditional hierarchies and moral codes were being questioned and redefined. The rake's defiance of conventional norms—his casual flouting of marriage vows, his manipulation of social rituals, and his irreverent humor—captures the period's experimental and often cynical attitude towards established authority and decorum. The rake's behavior underscores the growing emphasis on individual pleasure and personal freedom, which contrasted sharply with the rigid Puritanism of the preceding Commonwealth era.

Beyond merely reflecting societal changes, the comic rake also served to challenge and critique Restoration society. Through their exaggerated exploits and moral ambiguities, rakes exposed the hypocrisies and contradictions inherent in the social fabric of the time. Their very presence on stage questioned the sincerity of societal values, particularly regarding issues of power, gender, and class. The rake's interactions with other characters often highlighted the double standards and injustices of the age. For instance, the rake's conquests and deceptions frequently revealed the precarious position of women in Restoration society, who were often subject to stringent moral scrutiny while men's transgressions were celebrated or overlooked. Plays like Aphra Behn's *The Rover* showcase this dynamic, using the rake's amorous pursuits to critique the limited agency afforded to women and the often exploitative nature of gender relations. The comic rake's ultimate fate—whether redemption, punishment, or continued



impunity-offered audiences a lens through which to examine and debate the values of their society. When rakes were brought to heel, as in William Congreve's *Love for Love*, it suggested reconciliation with societal norms and the possibility of moral reform. Conversely, when rakes escaped unscathed, it underscored the enduring allure and power of libertine ideals, perhaps reflecting a more cynical or resigned view of human nature and social order. In the broader context of literary history, the comic rake's influence extends beyond the Restoration. The themes and conflicts embodied by the rake can be traced in later literary movements and genres, from the rakish heroes of the 18th century novel to the anti-heroes of modern drama and film. The rake's legacy is a testament to the enduring power of characters who, through their charm and transgressions, invite us to question the boundaries of acceptable behavior and the true nature of societal values.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the comic rake remains one of the most compelling figures in Restoration drama, capturing the essence of an era marked by both exuberant freedom and profound social questioning. Through his rakish escapades, he offers a window into the complexities of Restoration society, reflecting its desires and tensions while also challenging its norms. As we continue to explore these timeless plays, the rake's legacy endures, reminding us of the perpetual dance between individual liberty and social order. In essence, the rake in Restoration drama remains a timeless figure, resonating across centuries for its portrayal of rebellion, desire, and the perpetual quest for authenticity amidst societal expectations. As audiences continue to revisit these classic works, the rake endures as a compelling reminder of the enduring tension between individual passion and societal norms. Moreover, the rake's everlasting appeal can be attributed to its role in challenging and reshaping traditional narratives of virtue and vice. Audiences were drawn to the rake's charismatic allure and his ability to navigate the intricacies of courtship, intrigue, and political maneuvering with effortless flair. Through their exploits and eventual reckonings, rakes in Restoration drama offered reflections on the consequences of excess and the elusive quest for personal redemption.

Furthermore, the interplay between these characters in certain plays underscores the complexity of human nature and the multifaceted threats to societal order. The comic rake's eventual reckoning often mirrors the tragic fall of the antagonist, suggesting a universal vulnerability to hubris and moral failure. This duality serves as a reminder of the constant vigilance required to preserve the fragile peace of the Restoration settlement, emphasizing the ongoing struggle to reconcile personal freedoms with communal responsibilities. The comic rake's dual role as both a reflection and a challenge to Restoration society ensured his enduring appeal and relevance. By embodying the tensions and contradictions of their time, rakes provided a vehicle for playwrights and audiences to explore complex issues of authority, morality, and identity. Their continued presence in literature and theater attests to the timeless fascination with characters that defy convention and expose the underlying truths of their society.



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