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### A Mask and Expression

Courtship and marriage during The Restoration period were hardly straightforward even though the standards seemed simple for the commoner and average social class—marriages were usually partially arranged and gender roles were highly defined (women did housework, men “ran” the household). But just because the social norms are widely understood and generally accepted from a structural perspective, the desires and expectations of many individuals and couples were complex and often repressed. Relationships are *never* straightforward—aligning the views of two individuals to act as one can never be easy. But during a time of political and social change as was the case in England during The Restoration people of all classes began to question their social and gender roles that had been in flux since the death of Charles I and the resulting wars and political uncertainty. *The Rover* is Aphra Behn’s attempt to satirize and criticize marriage and courtship through shock and humor. The modern fantasy genre of literature often uses alien races, advanced technology, and alien worlds to portray very common issues humans face individually and collectively. Likewise, Behn’s *The Rover* and William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* venture into the realm of the fantastic to paint a clear picture of the state of relationships and marital roles during The Restoration.

Extreme examples of love, relationships, and marriage found in Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, and Behn’s *The Rover* explain the hidden or repressed desires of the commoner and noble alike. The plays were designed to be comedies and shock their audiences. The actions in each are far beyond what the ‘typical’ family would experience. However, humor is often a mask that hides deeper truth—it’s an expression of honesty that is free (usually) from the criticism one might face if they spoke the truths

directly. Both plays are extreme and use humor to express the mixed emotions and turmoil the families of The Restoration and the events in each are an attempt to understand the changing mores and ideologies of the time.

*The Rover* is all about the masquerade, the mask, the guise. The play itself is a masquerade of Killigrew's *Thomaso*. "Behn, who took so much from Killigrew, seems to have borrowed from *Thomaso* the happy notion of removing her "scene" to Italy. It was her idea, however, to settle upon Naples...to reunite and reinvent all these characters," (Corse, 42). Masks are specifically designed to hide or change one's appearance. While in a literal sense this is sometimes for nothing more than fun and games (such as modern Halloween), during a masquerade ball or other similar even they are used to allow one to act anonymously. When one's identity is anonymous or that of the mask it becomes possible to speak deeper truths and express hidden emotions or urges than if one were one's true self.

But why would Restoration-era individuals find delight in the sexually and morally charged plays? What was being repressed during their lives that could only be expressed through the masquerade that is the play? For the play or theater itself is a mask that covers the face of society and allows actors and actresses to express anything and everything they wish because they do so not as themselves, but while wearing the mask of actors/actresses.

Family life immediately before and during The Restoration period was, on average, a lot more loving and straightforward than most modern-day readers might assume. In the *Oxford Shakespeare Guide* by Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin, they state:

Whatever the social level, there was no necessary conflict between the matrimonial aspirations of young people and the wishes of their families. The contemporary ideal expressed...was marriage with the multilateral consent of all parties involved. The long-cherished notion that family relations were for the most part cold and severely

authoritarian has now been discarded by historians...records provide abundant evidence of warm and loving sentiments both between husbands and wives and parents and children. (Wells, 123)

It's clear from Wells' description of Restoration relationships that marriage and families were, for the most part, happy and simple and that sexual pleasure was focused on (or in) the sheets of a married couple at home. But The Restoration marked a period after wars, a change in the monarchy, and a greater blending of peoples and cultures from across the globe as *The Rover* shows through its setting in Naples. This rapid and dramatic change meant a disruption of the status quo and an opportunity for individuals to question their traditions and sexual customs.

The two plays attempt to give voice to the hidden thoughts and lusts of the average playgoer. Just because an individual is living a relatively happy life with their family does not necessarily mean they don't have unfulfilled or wild desires. Add in the chaos of changing political landscapes across major nations such as England, Spain, Italy, and France, and the result is a society that is trying to find its new identity in changing times. The plays collectively question the established norms (by showing how love and lust are not confined to married couples) and provide playgoers with some relief, showing that they aren't alone in questioning their feelings.

One of the best ways to deal with change and to understand sexuality and desire is through the masquerade, or in this case, the theater. The video lecture for *The Country Wife* states that Horner "is the rake character and is a Rorschach test" for playgoers and viewers. Viewers watch characters treat sexual appetite the same as hunger-appetite (Weber, 50) and question whether their body can "Satisfy the demands of his desire," (51). Bellmour states that "Flesh and Blood cannot bear it always," (1.1.160-61). Both plays were designed to titillate and give place for the unexpressed desires, for that which was taboo. Weber states that "Sexual pleasure before The Restoration usually emerges as a relatively limited

quality, bounded and understood primarily through the chaste sheets of marriage. After The Restoration pleasure becomes a more complex phenomenon, assuming diverse shapes and meanings,” (51). Thus, playgoers could explore their own inner thoughts and desires, they could question fantasize and live vicariously through the actors and actresses who portrayed sexual ideas in the extreme.

The Restoration meant questioning established norms-both in general and specifically relating to the family and sexuality. *The Country Wife* and *The Rover* abound in exotic peoples, locales, and acts. They open what was usually hidden behind closed doors—literally in some cases and figuratively behind the doors of the mind. The plays showed that extreme sexual desires, lusts, and non-traditional relationships existed, that having feelings beyond what was normal or traditional was okay. *The Country Wife* shows the upheaval of gender roles and, through the feminine rake, that the patriarchal hierarchy was more asinine than the inherent deficiencies found in women. *The Rover*, through its exotic setting and themes of disguise, they were showing that relationships are not as simple as a marriage between a man and a woman and the resulting children. Relationships were complicated then (as they are now and always were). Just because standards and rules against various sexual relations exist doesn't mean the rules remove the feelings. Corse explains how the setting for *The Rover* was not by accident and was designed to precisely show how difficult it could be to navigate relationships and social values:

Naples was a Spanish possession, and therefore its population was mainly Italian and Spanish; it was also a cosmopolitan center that attracted travelers and residents from all over Europe, including Turks and Jews...As one would imagine, more than two hundred years of continuous Spanish occupation left a profound influence on the social and political institutions of Naples. **It also caused a great deal of confusion and conflict** (Corse, 42, bold added for emphasis)

*The Country Wife* goes about exploring relationships through shock and awe. The very idea of a woman trying to cuckold someone, doing something tied almost exclusively to males could be considered catharsis for the sexually deprived or repressed. It wasn't sexual acts itself, but it at least showed playgoers that masculinity and femininity could be questioned, that they could feel emotions for another person even if they were married, that women were sometimes considered currency—and that others felt the same way. While it might not have made those topics the equivalent of 17<sup>th</sup>-century water-cooler talk, it likely helped playgoers to process their emotions during an incredibly dynamic period.

*The Rover*, on the other hand, calls into question the normalcy and morality of repressing feelings and emotions. The entire play is about *the mask* as a concept and how it allows people to express their feelings without fear of criticism or consequence. In speaking of the thoughts and intents of the characters it is masking the thoughts of the people in the audience behind the safety of the theater. It portrays the clash of cultures and ideologies common for the time. The play asks questions that contemporary audiences would leave the theater pondering and considering—do the wealthy make their money by fleecing the unsuspecting? Does society treat women as possessions instead of people? The play shows that, yes, in some cases they do. But it portrays the answers safely by doing so under the pretense of being “just a play”, while leaving the audience with lingering doubts and ideas to consider after the final scene.

Both plays use comedy to criticize the established expectations and values of men and women of The Restoration. They tell their audiences that their feelings towards sex, marriage, love, and courtship are okay, that others have the same feelings. Humor is used to soften the blow of such acts as cuckolding, infidelity, and narcissism. “Oh Lord, I'll have some china, too. Good Mr. Horner, don't think to give other people china and me none. Come in with me, too,” (4.3.204-206) Mrs. Squeamish exclaims after Lady Fidget and Horner exit a room, she holding a piece of china. The entire scene drips of sexual

innuendo and comes across as a hilarious back and forth, but it serves to hide a nod towards infidelity and unrepressed sexual desire. The humor and the play are perfect masks to hide behind while questioning sexuality in love in a changing period.

Love and marriage are difficult in practice and discussion at any time; more so during The Restoration. A changing of the guard (literally and figuratively), a blend of cultures and countries, a reassessment of social norms and family values—questioning love and marriage was a natural byproduct of the ‘social soup’ at the time. Both plays helped audiences’ question long-held traditions about their sexual and social identities because the theater was a forum for discussing and displaying the taboo under the “mask” of theatrics. In the theater is found the clearest example of the desires, questions, fears, and beliefs of the average person during The Restoration thanks to the masks of theater and comedy.

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