# The mythic archetype of don juan in the country wife and the rover

In Wycherley’s The Country Wife and Aphra Behn’s The Rover, both authors explore masculine ideals through the legendary character of Don Juan, as respectively exemplified by Harry Horner and Willmore. By casting their heroes as embodiments of this mythic figure of virility and sexuality, both Wycherley and Behn reveal the masculine ideals of their time. In his article “ Wycherley’s The Country Wife and the Don Juan Character,” Anthony Kaufman defines the myth of Don Juan as being “ transcultural” and taking “ many forms,” alternately portrayed as a “ vulgar seducer… a seeker after a full, ideal lover… the embodiment of masculinity” (216). With this definition in mind, Don Juan becomes the fundamental model for both Horner and Willmore’s characterizations, thereby rendering the secondary male characters as inferior specimens.

Kaufman further characterizes the emblematic Don Juan figure as displaying distinct overtures of sexual hostility. He labels this aggression as “ overt sadism directed toward his female victims” (Kaufman 217). Interestingly, it is not the actual performance of sex or even explicit female sexuality that Don Juan enjoys; rather it is the “ hostile joke, the triumph in sadism,” that satisfies him (Kaufman 217). This characterization solidifies Willmore and Horner into their roles as Don Juan figures, for both of them visibly hold a strong antagonism and resentment towards the entire sex of females.

Horner’s entire ruse –pretending to be impotent, and thus getting access to heavily protected wives – is meant not only to further his sexual conquests, but also to reveal the blatant hypocrisy of womanhood. There is obviously a more nuanced agenda to this subterfuge; he could easily hire prostitutes or consort with lower-class women if all he wanted sexual fulfillment. Instead,

he seems to derive a unique and sadistic joy in exposing the flaws of his female acquaintances, without trying to understand the limitations of their agency. To take it further, he consistently dehumanizes those women around him, therein revealing the intensity and narrow-mindedness of his derision. After an encounter with Lady Fidget, he says, " Oh women, more impertinent, more cunning / and more mischievous than their Monkeys, and to me almost as ugly" (l. 525). Later, he equates the state of wifehood to being a dog, saying, " A Spaniel… can fawn, lye down, suffer / beating, and fawn the more/… gives your Fleas, / and the mange sometimes" (l. 479). To Sir Jasper Fidget, he says, " I do know your Wife, Sir, she's a Woman, Sir, and / consequently a Monster, Sir" (75). Horner does not only label women as animals; he takes it a step further by associating them with monsters. Yet this does not stop him from deliberately seducing them. By cuckolding husbands and aiming to seduce and thereby corrupt women, Horner gains a perverse sense of accomplishment, in direct accordance with Kaufman's definition of Don Juan.

Willmore is the titular character of The Rover, though he may not be the protagonist in a traditional sense. Yet he too, fits into Kaufman's description of Don Juan, for he displays a similar hypercritical and contemptuous attitude toward womanhood. He does not fit the mold as neatly as Horner; after all, he ends up married to Hellena by the end, while Horner escapes the confining strictures of matrimony. But because of Willmore's philandering and aggressively sexual nature – and because Behn allows Hellena to die in the sequel to her play – he is still firmly situated as a Don Juan figure. And while he may not blatantly animalize women in the same vein as Horner,

Willmore still views women as playthings or commodities, and not as human beings. He says to Beau, “ Change… of Place, Clothes, Wine and Women. Variety is the Soul of Pleasure, a Good unknown… (l. 134). Here, Willmore reveals that he views women in terms of economic wealth, directly comparing them to common articles of trade such as clothes and alcohol. Not only does he dehumanize them by stripping them of their individuality, but he sees them as disposable goods as well, championing “ variety” as a necessity of pleasure.

In his article, Kaufman describes another dimension of Don Juan’s portrayal in literature as “ fascinating,” for he simultaneously acts as a “ diabolic” yet “ godlike” character (218). While these forces may seem diametrically opposed, the ambiguity of both Horner and Willmore adds to their charm and allure. Kaufman writes that Don Juan “ stands alone in his society, with no close friends or confidants, alienated and isolated, incapable of any meaningful action except repeated and unsatisfactory seduction” (Kaufman 220). This is highly supported in The Country Wife by Horner’s actions, and his inner thoughts that the audience is privy to from his monologues or asides. He starts out the play confiding in the “ Quack” doctor, and he has a handful of friends or acquaintances that are featured in the play, including Sparkish and Fidget. He professes, “ Good fellowship and friendship, / are lasting, rational and manly pleasures” (220). But these statements ring false. There is never any sense of real friendship or camaraderie; rather, it seems as if Horner is manipulating those closest to him for his own gain. His lack of intimacy – indeed, his resolute dedication to being isolated in the midst of society – sets him up to be ideal Don Juan figure.

Willmore differs from Horner in this regard, for he is not firmly set apart from the fellow cavaliers that he associates with, aside from his greater wit and charm. He is isolated, however, in his lack of connection with the females surrounding him. This stems largely from his own volition: he unceremoniously tries to rape Florinda, vows to seduce Hellena, and immediately afterwards sleeps with Angellica. Here, Willmore again displays his skewed vision of females as malleable and sexual objects, wholly dependent on men. Even when Willmore marries Hellena at the end, it is only for the reason that he can bed and conquer her. He says, " Therefore, dear creature, since we are so well agreed, let's retired to my chamber, and if ever thou wert treated with such savory love! Come, my bed's prepared for such a guest all clean and sweet as thy fair self" (l. 430). She refuses to acquiesce until they are married, but the fact that he only agrees to marry her for sexual reasons seems to nullify any true or lasting bond they might have had. Again, the mystery and isolation that surrounds Willmore – stemming from his own actions and desires – renders him into an alluring and enigmatic figure, attractive not only to the other characters, but to the audience as well.

Perhaps the most salient way that Horner and Willmore are elevated to their statuses of Don Juans is in their marked contrast to the other male specimens in the respective plays. Wycherley and Behn's characterizations of the other men seem strikingly obvious in their purpose of making Horner and Willmore even more attractive. In The Country Wife, Pinchwife and Sparkish are two of the other central male figures, and in many ways catalyze the plot. Through Pinchwife's close-mindedness and mean-spirited

protectiveness, his wife becomes susceptible to Horner's charms. Similarly, Sparkish's bumbling antics and foppish ways cause him to lose Alithea, and cause him to be cast as a ridiculous and ultimately pathetic character. Despite Horner's vindictiveness and sexual depravity, he emerges as the most likable and admirable male character in this circle of characters. Only Harcourt is more virtuous. But though Harcourt fits the traditional understanding of the male hero, he is a largely flat and one-dimensional character, primarily defined by his affection for and devotion to Alithea. Horner, freed from messy love affairs, has plenty of opportunities to showcase his roguery and wit, and therein win the audience's heart. The same holds true for Behn's The Rover, with Blunt serving as the violent, but comically ineffectual, male. Compared to Blunt, Willmore's virility and phallic strength is shown to be estimable. Belvile, of course, is the established young hero, winning Florinda's love by the end of the play. Yet, as with Harcourt, the audience gives off a lackluster response to his ostensible heroism. Willmore, the rover who gives the play its name, is the audience's true favorite.

Ultimately, Horner and Willmore emerge as the most beloved – or at least the most admired – protagonists of their plays. Rakes they may be, libertines they may be, but the truth remains that Wycherley and Behn never wholly condemn them for their unsavory actions. Neither of them receive negative endings: Horner is left free to continue his licentious ways, while Willmore is joined in holy matrimony to the play's most appealing heroine. In part due to their actions throughout the play, and in part due to their endings, both of these characters are revealed to embody the ideal masculinity of Restoration

Comedy. The transmutability of Don Juan enabled both Wycherley and Behn to use his figure in their own plays, and to great affect. The fact that Don Juan still remains a popular and mythic archetype highlights the extent to which masculine ideals are steeped in the surrounding culture. More than anything, however, the Don Juan quality of both Horner and Willmore is indicative of gender roles during the age in which the comedies were written. Men are allowed to be predatory, depraved, and dishonorable, and are even celebrated for these defining attributes; women are restricted to their limiting statuses as animals, monsters, or commodifiable objects.