A HAPPY IMMORALIST: THE CASE OF RICHARD RICH
Steven M. Cahn

Many philosophers, past and present, have been loath to admit the possibility of a happy immoralist. Here is a historical case featured in the play and film A Man for All Seasons.

A Man for All Seasons, Robert Bolt’s 1960 play about Sir Thomas More, is usually interpreted as a defence of living and dying in accord with strict adherence to moral principle. The situation, however, is not so straightforward.

The plot, based on the historical record, is well known. King Henry VIII’s desire for a son leads him to seek a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, in order to marry Anne Boleyn. Thomas More, previously named Lord Chancellor of England, is a devout Catholic who does not agree with the King’s desire but remains silent. The King, however, demands that on pain of being judged guilty of treason, all members of his court must take an oath affirming the King’s supreme power in English religious affairs. More refuses and is brought to trial, where a witness commits perjury by testifying, contrary to fact, that he heard More say that Parliament did not have authority to make the King the Head of the Church. As a result, More is sentenced to death.

Such is what most remember about the story. Yet few pay attention to that damaging witness, whose name is Richard Rich. He first appears as a hanger-on, beseeching More for a place at court, but More refuses, urging Rich to pursue a career as a teacher. Rich, however, seeks a more influential position. When he is approached by Thomas Cromwell, Secretary to Cardinal Wolsey, who wants...
information about More, Rich provides that help, and in exchange Cromwell arranges for Rich to become Collector of Revenues for York.

At More's trial for treason, Richard Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, administers the oath to Rich, who swears that the evidence he gives will be truthful. Rich then tells the lie that dooms More. As Rich leaves court, More notices that Rich is wearing the chain of office as Attorney General for Wales, the position he has been given in exchange for his perjured testimony. More remarks to Rich, 'For Wales? Why, Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world. But for Wales!'

In the 1966 movie version of the play, directed by Fred Zinnemann and starring Paul Scofield as Sir Thomas More, the action ends with More's execution, but the audience is then informed of subsequent developments. Eventually Cromwell was beheaded for high treason and Cranmer was burned at the stake. Finally – and here is the shocker – 'Richard Rich became Chancellor of England and died in his bed.' On that note the movie ends.

In fact, throughout his life Rich was a remarkably treacherous individual. For example, he trapped Bishop John Fisher, the Chancellor of Cambridge University, into revealing that he did not accept the King as supreme head of the Church, thus leading to Fisher's trial and beheading. Later Rich participated in a plot against the King's sixth wife, Katherine Parr, which involved his personally torturing the English writer and Protestant martyr Anne Askew. Rich even provided damaging testimony against his former patron Cromwell, who then was executed. The historian Hugh Trevor-Roper concludes that the 'dreadful Rich' is an individual 'of whom nobody has ever spoken a good word' (Trevor-Roper 1981: xiii, xviii).

Yet Rich's career turned out to be remarkably successful. First consider his full title: Sir Richard Rich. He also acquired extensive wealth and property, became Speaker of the House of Commons and later Lord Chancellor of England. He remained active in court until his death from
natural causes at about age 70. Finally, he had many children, and the line of nobility he established continued for over two centuries.

Ironically, More’s taunt to Rich, ‘For Wales?’, might have been answered: ‘Not merely for Wales, but to acquire wealth, achieve fame, and become Lord Chancellor of England.’

A *Man for All Seasons* is obviously a defence of the moral life. Yet it also portrays how someone who is immoral may nevertheless achieve success. In that sense it accords with the view of the ethical theorist Bernard Gert, who wrote that ‘a person does not need to be moral in order to be happy or live a fulfilling life’ (Gert 2004: 19).

Many philosophers, past and present, have been loath to admit the possibility of a happy immoralist. They regard the concept as a threat to morality, because the greater the divergence between morality and happiness, the greater the loss of motivation to choose the moral path.

Thus they are inclined to dismiss as unrealistic any supposed examples in which by doing wrong we serve our long-term ends. I urge those inclined to take that position to consider the case of Richard Rich.

*Steven M. Cahn is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the City University of New York Graduate Center. scahn@gc.cuny.edu*

**Note**

1 The following information is found in the entry devoted to Rich in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

**References**
