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## The Rover: Introduction

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*The Rover*, published and first produced in 1677, was Aphra Behn's most successful play. The original full title, *The Rover; or, The Banished Cavaliers*, indicates that the play was a tribute to the formerly exiled cavalier and newly reinstated king, Charles II. *The Rover* is a dark comedy that mixes themes of prostitution and rape with comic buffoonery. The play expresses is author's objection to the vulnerability of women in Restoration society. Perhaps ironically, it also appeals to prurient<sup>18</sup> interests of the audience by putting women in morally compromising situations. Based loosely on her contemporary Thomas Killigrew's 1664 *Thomaso; or, The Wanderer* (1664), Behn's play is leaner, less lewd, and more profound. The plot follows the fortunes of opposing lovers, one a woman of quality (Hellena) masquerading as a courtesan and one a wandering rake (Willmore) whose philandering days end when he falls in love with her. Several near-rapes and the tragic case of a jilted courtesan (Angellica Bianca), another character in the play, balance the comic treatment of sexual politics in the seventeenth century. The rover of the title is Willmore, an exiled English sea captain on shore leave to enjoy the carnival, or Hellena, a young woman hoping to experience life and love before being committed to a convent by her brother (Don Pedro). These two rovers—Willmore and Hellena—fall in love amid witty debates and sexual maneuvering. Willmore has many parallels to Charles II, whose exploits during his twenty-year banishment from England were well known. Charles II enjoyed the play so much that he commissioned a private viewing of it.

*The Rover* premiered 1677 to such great success that Behn wrote a sequel that was produced in 1681. An extraordinarily popular example of Restoration comedy, the play earned an extended run, enabling Behn to make a fair income from it, receiving the proceeds from the box office every third night. Willmore (who may have been a parallel to Charles II or John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester) proved to be an extremely popular character, and four years later Behn wrote

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18. Lustful.



a sequel to the play. King Charles II was himself a fan of *The Rover*, and received a private showing of the play. Behn's work should always be read with an eye toward her contemporary political world. She was a Royalist, and her works frequently treat Puritans roughly. The subtitle *The Banished Cavaliers* is a reference to the exile that the Cavalier forces experienced during the English Interregnum. *The Rover* is the most frequently read and performed of Aphra Behn's plays. First performed by the Duke's Company at the Dorset Garden Theatre in 1677, the play was initially published anonymously. Only in the prologue of the third edition did Behn finally take credit for the play. It is believed that it took her this long to claim authorship because she was afraid of potential plagiarism charges, as the play closely resembles Thomas Killigrew's *Thomaso*.



## The Rover: A Brief Summary

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The action of the play, *The Rover* is set in Naples during a carnival with high-spirited men and women in masquerade and vizards out to enjoy themselves with gay abandon. Among them are the sisters Florinda, Hellena and their cousin Valeria from a noble Spanish family. Florinda's father has chosen the rich old Don Vincentio as her husband but she is in love with an English colonel, Belvile whom she had met at the siege of Pamplona and who had saved her life and honour from the marauding soldiers. She does not want to waste her youth and beauty on old Don Vincentio. Hellena, who has been condemned to lead a life of a nun by her father and brother, wishes to break free of the shackles imposed upon her and seeks a suitor for herself. She wonders why she cannot have a lover for herself for she is youthful, beautiful, vivacious and virtuous. She vociferously rejects the idea of spending the rest of her life in a nunnery. They are dressed as gypsies and move about the carnival pretending to tell people's fortune there.

Florinda who is devoted to the English colonel Belvile, spots him out from among the crowd in which the young and handsome, but poor sea-captain Willmore is also present. Fresh from the sea, Willmore is quite unconventional, fun-loving and pleasure-seeking while his friend colonel Belvile is sober and staid. They are accompanied by Frederick and the English country Squire Blunt in pursuit of happiness.

Willmore, the Rover, the titular character, boasts of one virtue, which is inconstancy. He falls for the exquisite charms of the high-priced courtesan, Angellica Bianca. As luck would have it, she even pays him for his sexual favours but eventually becomes so possessive and jealous that she is ready to shoot him dead for eyeing other women. In a drunken state, Willmore even molests and very nearly rapes Belvile's mistress Florinda. But he falls for the charms of the "sweet gipsy" Hellena and pursues her, while Blunt is duped of all his possessions by Lucetta whom he considers to be a pretty woman of quality. When she turns out to be a prostitute and thief, he is humiliated and attempts to rape Florinda as revenge against all women for the pain and damage that Lucetta has caused him.



Hellena's brother, Don Pedro, is a suitor for Angellica Bianca quarrels with Don Antonio, the son of the viceroy. They are prepared to fight a duel for gaining the favours of Angellica Bianca. But in a case of mistaken identities, Don Pedro gives Florinda's hand in marriage to Belvile while he is annoyed with Hellena for rejecting her chosen calling to spend the rest of her life as a nun in the monastery. If Hellena were to renounce the world, Don Pedro stands to gain three hundred thousand crowns left to her by their uncle. But Hellena frustrates his designs and relentlessly pursues Willmore in spite of his inconstancy because she is convinced that her legacy of three hundred thousand crowns "will be better laid out in love than in religion, and turn to as good an account." In the end, Florinda is married to Belvile and Frederick is married to Valeria, and Hellena and Willmore commit to marry.

### Critical Analysis

*The Rover* follows the escapades of a band of banished English cavaliers as they enjoy themselves at a carnival in Naples. The story strings together multiple plot lines revolving around the amorous adventures of these Englishmen, who pursue a pair of noble Spanish sisters, as well as a mistress and common prostitute.

The titular character is a raffish<sup>19</sup> naval captain, Willmore, who falls in love with a wealthy noble Spanish woman named Hellena, who is determined to experience love before her brother, Pedro, sends her to a convent. Hellena falls in love with Willmore, but difficulties arise when a famous courtesan, Angellica Bianca, also falls in love with Willmore.

As this plot unravels, Hellena's older sister Florinda attempts to avoid an unappealing arranged marriage to her brother's best friend, and devises a plan to marry her true love, Colonel Belvile. Finally, the third major plot of the play concerns English countryman Blunt, a naive and vengeful man who becomes convinced that a girl, Lucetta, has fallen in love with him. When she turns out to be a prostitute and thief, he is humiliated and attempts to rape Florinda as revenge against all women for the pain and damage that Lucetta has caused him. In the end, Florinda and Belvile are married, and Hellena and Willmore commit to marry.

19. Dashing or devil-may-care or jaunty; behaviour marked by a carefree



## The Rover: Analysis of the Plot, Characters and Critical Issues

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*The Rover*, Behn's most successful play, skillfully incorporates intrigue, disguise and slapstick into a complicated plot which ends in marriage. The central male character Willmore, the Rover, is a rake or libertine, a familiar dramatic type. The rake, who exists outside the structures and mores of organised society, seeks liberty and pleasure; he often makes explicit criticisms of the institution of marriage because it suppresses sexual desire by incorporating it into the economic system. The heroine and rake are attracted to each other's love of pleasure and wit. In the fifth-act conversion typical of the genre, she persuades him to marry her in spite of his former critique of marriage as an institution.

One of the unusual elements of *The Rover* is that it presents issues usually introduced by the rake from the perspective of women characters. *The Rover* opens with a discussion by virginal women of their positions in the marriage economy. (The scene includes Hellena's vivid speech describing the disgust of a young woman married to an older man.) Later Angellica Bianca argues that wives and prostitutes have much in common, in that they are treated as commodities in a system in which women are objects of economic exchange. In plot, structure, and characterization, the early parts of the play expose the sexual double standards by which women are judged, but these inherent contradictions in sexual and economic relations are blunted by setting and plot development.

Setting the play in Naples in the 1650s, Behn evokes a non-specific "exotic" foreign setting and places the events in a misty past. By 1677, the royalist cavaliers had been in exile twenty years earlier were established as Tories in England; in retrospect, the instability and poverty of the interregnum is transformed into cheerful bohemianism. Willmore, the Rover, is a romanticized and comic figure of the libertine cavalier, seen from a nostalgic distance. (The character was so popular with contemporary audiences that Behn wrote a sequel in 1681, *The Second Part of The Rover*.)



As the early scenes make clear, there are three options for women in the society represented in *The Rover* – marriage, the convent, or prostitution. Marriages are arranged by fathers or brothers for their own political or financial benefit – in *The Rover* Florinda's brother Pedro tries to marry Florinda to his own friend rather than to their father's candidate for her husband. After marriage, the wife moves from being controlled by the men of her family to being controlled by her husband. Hellena's description of Florinda's future as a wife dwells on her confinement in the country and in the bedroom. Hellena's own fate is to become a nun. The nun's position, like the wife's, is arranged by her family, and has some elements in common with marriage – she is given a dowry to take to the convent, where she is called a bride of Christ. In the play, Hellena characterizes the nun's life by images of confinement such as the grate and cell.

The young women conclude their discussion of their oppressed and confined situations in the act of resistance – they go out in disguise to join the carnival celebrations which are in progress. Since everyone wears costumes and masks at the carnival, Florinda disguises herself in a generic carnival habit, while Hellena becomes a gypsy. The anonymity made possible by carnival disguise functions temporarily, to free the young women from the family. Disguise drives the plot in many ways, and gives the characters opportunities to meet the men they will marry at the end of the play. After first appearing as a gypsy, Hellena adopts the conventional "breeches part," which the heroine uses not as a way to examine gender roles but as a means to an end. Hellena does not mention any strategies needed to play a male convincingly. She dons the breeches to wean Willmore away from the possessive and jealous courtesan Angellica Bianca.

There is a total transformation in the character Angellica Bianca after her sexual liaison with Willmore, the Rover. She feels that she has never loved anyone as intensely as she does Willmore, though she has been a mistress to many. After she falls in love, she changes from an articulate and intelligent character, aware of the ways in which economic and sexual systems interact to control women, to a stereotype of the jealous and emotional woman. Ultimately, she is a melodramatic figure who is written out of the play and hustled off stage before the questions she has raised can be fully resolved.

If Angellica is the clichéd whore with a heart (though not of gold), the other prostitute, Lucetta, is a mercenary "jilting wench." When she robs and humiliates Blunt, who has believed her to be attracted to him, his anger unleashes his hatred of all women. Prostitutes who are



mercenary, like Lucetta, may gain money and keep control, but they bring the rage of their victims on other women. At several points the plot shows men's resentment against prostitutes, and the boundaries between prostitutes and "respectable" women are blurred, all women become potential targets of rage..

(The vulnerability of women who are not under the protection of men is represented at numerous points in *The Rover* by attempted rapes.) Florinda, the prototypical romantic heroine, is especially targeted. Before the play begins she is rescued by Belvile from soldiers invading Pamplona. During the play she is twice threatened with rape. When she is waiting for Belvile in the garden at night, the drunken Willmore stumbles into her and argues that since her garden gate was open, she must have meant to entice him. She is rescued by Belvile and Frederick, who condemn Willmore for drunkenness and bungling but not for his violent struggle with Florinda. Later, when Florinda is escaping her brother she runs into Belvile's house wearing carnival disguise and mask. The only person present is Blunt, bitterly angry at his betrayal by Lucetta, and determined to beat and to rape the next woman he sees. (While Blunt is threatening Florinda, Frederick returns and amusedly decides to join Blunt.) Florinda persuades the men to delay their proposed rape by giving them a diamond and promising to prove her identity as a respectable woman. The jewel makes Frederick pause, since he does not want "to be taken for raping a maid of quality when we only mean to ruffle a harlot." *prostitute* Later, virtually all the male characters, including Florinda's brother, draw swords for the first chance at her. Although Belvile arrives, he cannot think of a way to stop the man from chasing her around the room without revealing her identity to her brother. Florinda is saved not by her fiancé, but by the wit of her cousin Valeria. When her identity as respectable woman betrothed to Belvile is revealed, her future husband's friends make only perfunctory apologies, and Florinda does not seem to expect more.)

The difficulty Blunt and Frederick have in telling a "maid of quality" from a "harlot" is shared by all the men in the play. Blunt mistakes the prostitute Lucetta for a rich wife who loves him; Willmore mistakes Florinda for a prostitute and the masquerading women wear papers on their clothing "as if whores." The boundaries separating "woman of quality" and "whore" have been destabilized. Yet the implications of this instability are not developed. Angellica Bianca is emotionally weakened when she stops selling herself and gives herself for love, but the sympathy which the character begins to evoke



is undercut when she becomes jealous and threatens violence. In the end, all the problems raised by Angellica are erased, since her challenge to Willmore is not resolved.

In this comedy, which, conventionally, ends in marriage, the figure of the prostitute cannot be integrated. Marriage is seen as a problem by the women of quality at the beginning of the play; by the end, marriage is a solution to a problem, though not an ideal one. Hellena pragmatically chooses marriage against Willmore's offer of free love because she recognizes that no matter how bad marriage might be, the hazard of being unmarried is greater. Sleeping with Willmore outside of marriage will lead, she argues to "a pack of troubles and a cradle full of repentance"; to avoid it, she calls for "old gagger Hymen" to regularize the union. Hellena's disguise has given her insight into Willmore's inconstancy, but her insistence on marriage seems less a strategy to control him than a way to protect herself from the consequences of being defined a "whore."

Hellena's utilitarian attitude to marriage can be contrasted to that of Belvile and Florinda, who adhere to a romanticized view of woman as a prize to be won by a man's prowess. They first fall in love after Belvile saves her at the siege of Pamplona; later Belvile fights a duel in disguise and wins Florinda again. When he asserts, "She's mine by conquest, sir, I won her by the sword" he speaks not to her but to her brother; the focus is not on his love for her or choice of him, but on his skill at winning a wife. The early parts of the play define him as a protector of his beloved, yet no character comments on Belvile's ineffectual presence when Florinda is being chased by his friends. The third marriage that of Valeria and Frederick, is a conventional dramatic one, the result of an immediate attraction which has not been analyzed or tested. No explicit attention is drawn to the problematic nature of any of these marriages, except perhaps in the couplet, which refers to "the storms o' the marriage bed."

Critical appraisals of *The Rover*, like other developments in Behn criticism, have until recently focused on her life. Frederick Link's survey of Behn's body of work (1968) concisely categorizes and summarizes her many literary productions. Since the early 1980s there has been a noticeable increase in critical discussions, though many of these studies still have a primary interest in Behn's professional and sexual life. Most of the criticism is devoted to her fiction with a decided focus on *Oroonoko*. A rapidly growing critical debate on her poetry has been encouraged by the publication of Germaine Greer's edition of *The Uncollected Verse of Aphra Behn* (1989) and Janet Todd's



edition of Behn's *Poetry* (1992). Behn's plays are often considered briefly in general discussion of women writers or Restoration drama. A relatively small but growing body of criticism analyzes individual plays, especially *The Lucky Chance*, *The Window Ranter*, and *The Rover*. Some insightful discussions of *The Rover* are included in two recent anthologies, *Curtain Calls: British and American Women and the Theatre, 1660-1820*, edited by Mary Ann Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (1991) and *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theatre and Criticism*, edited by Heidi Hutner (1993).

Critical responses to *The Rover* generally acknowledge that there are a number of tensions and contradictions inherent in the play. In their discussions of the extent to which the play criticizes its society, critics give different emphasis to the beginning of the play and its conclusion, to the explicit and the implicit, and to conventional and unconventional elements. The plot includes duels, robberies, and attempted rapes; characters make casual anti-semitic slurs; anti-Catholic comments acknowledge the inquisition in the background. Lara Brown argues that "the form implies a condemnation of that very society whose standards constitute the terms of action," while Jessica Munns suggests that the content, not the form, is the source of social criticism, when she mentions "uncomfortable moments that throw off-balance the more to a happy ending" (Double Right). The 'uncomfortable moments' include anti-Semitic slurs used in conversation as well as the proposed rapes of Florinda, but these problems are rarely explored in criticisms of the play.

Another concern is how to define and understand Behn's unusual portrayal of male and female characters. Some critics prefer to define her as a proto-feminist or feminist writer (Langdell). However, this perspective is qualified by arguments such as Nancy Cotton's that she represents male libertine characters much less critically than do Etherege and Wycherley ("Pattern Hero") might account for these relatively uncritical male representations, their characterizations put into question the seriousness with which we are to interpret the women characters' criticism of marriage. The women's complaints about marriage focus on their own places in the social structure; male control of the institution is not emphasized so much as the position of women as pawns within it. The play opens with a sympathetic portrayal women subject to male control, but there is throughout an indulgent tolerance of individual male characters. Although all of the men except Belville propose rape, not even the women criticize the practice. Blunt's angry explicit statements of his desire to beat and



rape women in revenge of his treatment by Lucetta are incongruous elements in a character who is introduced as dim-witted comic butt. And Willmore's drunkenness and pursuit of all women are represented as endearing foibles. (Belvile does criticize Willmore, primarily for his tendency to interfere drunkenly with Belvile's secret meeting with Florinda.) While Willmore makes many speeches attacking mercenary relationships, his practice is not as honourable as his arguments would suggest. He may not be explicitly seeking a rich woman, but when finds one he does not hesitate to exploit her financial resources.

Cotton's arguments that Behn "seems unconcerned about these masculine doubts" ("Pattern Hero") implies that Behn is more interested in the women than the men. Alternately, the relatively unproblematic portrayal of Willmore and other male characters might be interpreted as part of a realistic or unsentimental representation of a culture characterized by violence and discrimination. The violent setting can also be seen as exotic local colour introduced by a playwright who knows what the audience wants. Whether or not *The Rover* is most striking for its protofeminist perspective on women characters in which, as Jacqueline Pearson argues, "images of female power are ...most emphatic" or is characterized by "a restoration of patriarchal authority" (Hutner), its many tensions and contradictions make it a fascinating play. [Anne Russel]