

“Come, The Longest Sword Carries Her”: Constructions of Masculinity in Aphra Behn’s

The Rover

Though it has become conventional, in the study of Restoration drama, for critics to treat gender as a major concern, they differ as to whether it ought to be regarded as “liberated or misogynist; rapacious or castrated; homoerotic or homophobic” (Rosenthal 107). The plays of Aphra Behn have become the focus of a great deal of contemporary criticism on account of Behn’s status as English literature’s first professional female writer and the complexity of the gender politics expressed in her plays. Feminist critics, who consider much of Restoration comedy to be misogynist, have largely explored Behn’s concern with female rights. Dagny Boebel states that Behn’s *The Rover* (1677) “invert[s] the violent hierarchy” (Boebel 56) of patriarchal social structures. Peggy Thompson writes that Behn is “revolutionary” (Thompson 81) as she “renounces the conventional” (80) and “sexist” (80) in her sequel, *The Second Part of The Rover* (1681). Thus, feminist critics have firmly established the notion that Behn’s plays stand out from the Restoration comedy repertoire in terms of their treatment of gender. Although Behn’s female characters have received considerable scholarly attention, notably less criticism addresses Behn’s constructions of masculinity and her depiction of male sexuality.

The lack of scholarly attention that Behn’s male characters receive can be explained by the fact that her protagonists – like the male characters of other Restoration comedies written by men – rape, scheme, lie, seduce, threaten, and connive. Indeed, the gratuitous sexual violence that takes place in *The Rover* can be deeply disturbing for a contemporary audience. Behn’s depiction of male characters as unapologetic libertines – men who pursue sexual pleasure and have few moral restraints – seems to function as an obstacle to the argument that Behn is an early

advocate for women's rights. Susan Staves, a feminist critic, responds to this difficulty and suggests that Behn was forced to appeal to a mass audience and, therefore, was unable to "imagine alternative, less misogynist constructions" (Staves 27). Certainly, Behn had limited space to critique libertinism when her audience would have contained male spectators who aspired to libertine values, not the least of whom was the monarchy, Charles II. However, I believe that the ironizing and mocking of male sexual aggression throughout *The Rover* suggests that Behn is in fact critical of sexual violence towards women. Consequently, this essay will deal heavily with the issue of sexual assault as depicted on the Restoration stage and it will investigate Behn's motives and limitations in depicting sexual violence.

The following argument is not intended to contest feminist perspectives of Behn's comedies, but to support these feminist arguments from the alternative perspective of male characters. I will argue that Behn complicates those libertine philosophies that promote total male dominance over women. First, Behn places her male characters in notably compromised states of authority and strips them of many conventional sources of power such as wealth, status, and the territorial advantage of being in England. Though, conventionally, rakes are resourceful, this lack of power amplifies the protagonists' libertine behaviors by forcing them to behave in ways that are especially opportunistic. Secondly, Male sexual aggression, specifically rape, is heavily ironized as the depiction of rape is often coupled with dramatic irony. Finally, while the libertine code of values is immensely important to Behn's male protagonists (including the male homosocial bonds discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) the male characters often betray the values to which they are supposed to adhere. I will argue that Behn carefully exposes libertine

masculinity in such a way as to criticize, not libertinism as a whole, but the contradictions and flaws of libertine behavior that promote male superiority and dominance.

Compromised Male Authority

Behn places her male characters in a context in which their authority has been compromised. As in other Restoration comedies, such as William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) and George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), Behn's protagonists must confront a lack of wealth, competition for power, and disruptive women refusing submission to their husbands and authority figures. Behn, however, seems to provide her male protagonists with a conspicuously high degree of obstacles to overcome. *The Rover*, for example, is set in Naples during the carnival season. The male protagonists – Willmore and Belvile – are cavaliers (supporters of Charles II) who have been exiled on account of the Interregnum (an eleven year period following the execution of Charles I during which time England was ruled by a republican government). The royalist men have lost the status and wealth that they previously held. The plot of *The Rover* follows the antics of Willmore, Belvile, and their foolish friend, Blunt, as the men pursue various women. Ultimately, both Willmore and Belvile are married to beautiful, young aristocratic ladies (Hellena and Florinda respectively) in true comedic fashion. Unlike the other “great libertine plays” (Novak 62) of the Restoration, Behn's characters do not have the home advantage of being in London or even England, nor do they have wealth or high social standing. Bereft of the conventional forms of authority, Behn's male characters are *forced* to rely on their wits.

In *The Rover*, Behn compromises masculine authority by monetarily impoverishing her male protagonists, while enriching her female leads, along with the male antagonists. Owing to Don Antonio's great fortune, Belvile is placed at a disadvantage in his quest to marry Florinda.

Don Pedro, Florinda's brother, admits that Belvile deserves "honour" (Behn 2012, 1.1.75), but that Antonio – and even the elderly Don Vincentio – are better marriage partners because of their wealth. Similarly, Willmore finds himself at an economic disadvantage as he pursues the courtesan, Angellica Bianca. Pedro and Antonio can afford the "thousand crowns" (2.1.187) that Angellica demands, where Willmore cannot. Therefore, Willmore must resort to his seductive skills to tempt Angellica. In *The Second Part of the Rover*, in which Willmore pursues another prostitute whom he cannot afford (La Nuche), his lack of funds reaches chronic proportions. La Nuche is not considered a high class courtesan like Angellica, but she has a greater ability to resist Willmore because of his "poverty" (Behn 1996, 1.1. 35). Petronella Elenora, La Nuche's bawd – an elderly woman in charge of the brothel – tells Willmore to leave La Nuche alone as his "poverty [is] catching" (1.2.469). Eventually, after employing a variety of disguises, tricks, and manipulations, Willmore convinces La Nuche to have sex with him. While the depiction of romantic protagonists as impoverished is a conventional comic trope, the economic disadvantages that Willmore, Belvile, and other male protagonists face in *The Rover* forces them to rely on their resourcefulness. While this resourcefulness is one of the hallmarks of the libertine rake, and the comedic protagonist more generally, it is essential to Behn's characterization of the libertine as it forces them to behave in ways that are more easily criticized.

Women being unwilling to submit to authority is a common theme in Restoration comedy and causes a great deal of anxiety for those male characters who wish certain women to remain submissive. The authority of patriarchal figures is particularly tenuous. In the first scene of *The Rover*, Pedro tells his sister Hellena that she will serve "everlasting penance in a monastery" (Behn 2012, 1.1.138) and that their other sister, Florinda, must marry his friend, Antonio. These threats engender the action of the plot for the rest of the play as the two young women refuse to

bow to their brother's will. Notably, Pedro's intentions for his sisters comes at the cost of usurping his own father's authority. Pedro, explaining his plans, says to Florinda:

I've only tried you all this while and urged my father's will – but mine is, that you would love Antonio; he is brave and young, and all that can complete the happiness of a gallant maid. This absence of my father will give us opportunity to free you from Vincentio by marrying here, which you must do tomorrow. (1.1.158)

Pedro, by usurping his father's role as patriarch and imposing his authority upon his sisters, is guaranteeing that his own authority will be undermined and that he will be defied and disobeyed throughout the play.

Of course, it is not only unlikeable patriarchal figures that are made anxious by female dissension. Willmore, for example, is greatly angered when a woman he believes to be a prostitute, Florinda, refuses to sleep with him. Willmore is convinced that she is a "wench" (3.5.16) who is, therefore, "obliged in conscience to deny [him] nothing" (3.5.40). Florinda struggles and cries out, "Help! Help! Murder!" (3.5.73). Willmore simply offers her money and, at her refusal, forces himself on her. Only an interruption by Belvile stops the rape from being completed. For Willmore, the idea of a prostitute refusing to submit to him – a gentleman – is completely and totally absurd. He is shocked that she will not submit to his male authority.

Behn emphasizes the compromised nature of her protagonists' authority in *The Rover* and *The Second Part of the Rover*. While a lack of wealth and authority is not an uncommon way to portray libertine characters, or comic/romantic heroes, Behn strips her protagonists of almost every possible means of gaining power: money, status, respect, and territorial advantage. The protagonists, in order to succeed, must either manipulate other characters into appeasing their

desire – whether it be for money or sex – or, they must take what they desire by force. It is within this context that Behn critiques libertine masculinity.

Irony and Male Sexual Aggression

Ironic depictions of sexual aggression are common in *The Rover*, particularly within the scenes involving sexual assault. Jane Spencer, in *Aphra Behn's Afterlife*, discusses the excessive amount of male aggression that Florinda encounters, “fac[ing] the threat of rape at almost every turn” (Spencer 192). Two attempted rapes take place in *The Rover*. The first occurs when Florinda is attempting to meet her beloved, Belvile, and unfortunately encounters an intoxicated Willmore. The second takes place when Florinda, running from her brother as her “life and honour are at stake” (Behn 2012, 4.4.4), enters a house and finds a revengeful Blunt within. In fact, Florinda faces excessive sexual violence before the play even begins. Florinda and Belvile first meet at “the siege of Pamplona” (1.1.48) where he saves her from “the licensed lust of common soldiers . . . when rage and conquest fl[y] through the city” (1.1.71-72). Belvile protects Florinda from being ravaged by soldiers. Yet, what is most ironic about the aggression that Florinda faces is the fact that Belvile, who saved her from an army of rapacious soldiers, will, in *The Rover*, have to save her again from his closest friends, Willmore, Frederick, and Blunt, who all attempt to rape her. It is ironic that the heroic characters of the play behave in ways that are revealed to be villainous. These sorts of ironic details surrounding male sexual aggression are rampant within *The Rover*, primarily in the attempted rape scenes, and provide compelling evidence that, in this play, Behn criticizes the libertine approval of rape.

When Willmore first attempts to rape Florinda he appears to be seducing her while ironically explaining that there is nothing she can do to stop him from forcing himself on her. Spencer explains that Willmore uses a depraved kind of reasoning to explain to Florinda why it

is not possible for him to rape her. Willmore argues that “because of her provocative behavior, no violence from him could be properly judged as rape” (Spencer 192). Other critics, such as Jean I. Marsden, in “Rape, Voyeurism, and the Restoration Stage” suggest that “no real danger exists” (Marsden 194) for Florinda when Willmore attacks her as “both Belvile and her brother Pedro appear” (194). While it is technically true that the presence of Belvile and Pedro saves Florinda from rape, I disagree that Willmore presents no real threat to her. The legitimacy of Willmore’s threat is proven by the ironic gap – as Anita Pacheco notes in “Rape and the Female Subject in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*” – between “what Willmore says and what he does” (Pacheco 328). Willmore claims to be “involved in a seduction” (328), yet he continues to apply “a low level of physical force” (328). At Florinda’s reluctance, Willmore says:

look you here, child, there will be no sin in’t because twas neither designed, nor premeditated. ‘Tis pure accident on both sides – that’s a certain thing now. Indeed, should I make love to you, and you vow fidelity –and swear and lie till you believe and yielded – that were to make it wilful fornication, the crying sin of the nation. Thou art, therefore – as thou art a good Christian – obliged in conscience to deny me nothing.
(Behn 2012, 3.5.34-40)

Willmore, while appearing to woo Florinda, is explaining to her the legal and social reasons why she cannot refuse him. Willmore claims that, since she is a prostitute, he can not possibly rape her; yet, as he explains to her why she cannot deny or refuse him, he is inadvertently revealing his own awareness of laws regarding rape and is acknowledging that he knows full well what he is doing. After Florinda threatens Willmore, saying she will “cry rape” (3.5.50) if he continues to force himself on her, Willmore simply replies “you lie, you baggage, you lie” (3.5.50). Florinda is made aware that if she accuses Willmore of rape, he can simply claim that she is lying. She

switches tactics and appeals to Willmore as a “gentleman” (3.5.62), but he continues to struggle with her. Only Belvile’s interruption of the rape stops Willmore from continuing.

In the second rape scene, Pedro’s unknowing sexual pursuit of his sister functions to further ironize male sexual aggression in the eyes of the audience. Pedro, from the first scene of *The Rover* and throughout, is extremely concerned with Florinda’s health and welfare. He jokes that he wishes to be “ranked in [Florinda’s] esteem, equal with the English Colonel Belvile” (1.1.68-69). When Antonio, Pedro’s friend whom he wishes to marry Florinda, shows sexual interest in Angellica, Pedro furiously cries, “Florinda scorned!” (2.1.164). The revelation that Pedro loves his sister so immensely becomes a source of irony when Pedro, entering the cavalier’s lodgings and learning that there is a woman locked in one of the rooms, says, “let us see her . . . I can soon discover whether she be of quality” (5.1.84-85). Pedro and the cavaliers cannot decide who will first assault the woman they have imprisoned; so, they decide to hold a thinly-veiled phallic competition. They all draw swords and agree that “the longest sword carries her” (5.1.95). Pedro wins. Florinda, masked, runs from Pedro, who does not recognize her, and he says, “[t]is but in vain to fly me; you’re fallen to my lot” (5.1.108). Florinda’s fate seems sealed when her cousin, Valeria, attempts to save Florinda by entering the room and crying out to Pedro, “[o]h, that I have found you, sir!” (5.1.122). Pedro, in the most ironic of moments, turns to Valeria and asks, “[i]s Florinda safe?” (5.1.124). Valeria knows that Florinda is far from safe and, turning toward the audience, she adds in an ironic aside “from any fears of you” (5.1.125). Valeria tells Pedro that Florinda has escaped their home and Pedro, furious, cries “dishonourable girl” (5.1.133) and leaves. Pedro’s genuine affection for his sister Florinda, coupled with his willingness to violently attack a woman, becomes darkly ironic when it is she whom he unknowingly attacks. Pedro spends an entire scene unknowingly threatening the woman he most

desires to protect. In a similarly ironic vein, Willmore is obviously aware of the rape he is committing, but pretends to be participating in some kind of romantic seduction. In these ironic depictions of male aggression, Behn complicates the libertine lifestyle as she shows her protagonist's "gallantry" (Spencer 205) to be simply a facade that hides the ugliness, perversity, and hypocrisy of male dominance over women.

Hypocrisy and Libertine Values

Behn's protagonists in *The Rover*, who embrace a libertine lifestyle (which includes the pursuit of sex, pleasure, and male camaraderie), reveal varying degrees of hypocrisy throughout the play with regards to their libertine values. While the male brotherhood is of utmost importance to the male characters in *The Rover*, it is undermined by those who abandon male friendship for their own gain. The brotherhood that is established at the beginning of the play crumbles as male characters compete for the same limited resources: money and sex. Furthermore, Willmore adamantly adheres to the libertine belief in free love while simultaneously revealing his willingness to commodify sex. The hypocrisy of the libertine men in *The Rover* leaves space for Behn's criticism of their behavior.

Restoration comedies often begin with a scene between male characters in which they show their friendly devotion for each other and proceed to discuss their amorous pursuits. In Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, Medley enters the stage shortly after Dorimant and says, "Dorimant, my life my joy, my darling sin!" (Etherege 1.1.70-71). The two are later joined by Young Bellair whom Dorimant refers to as "a good third man" (1.1.127). In the first scene of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, Horner meets up with his friends, Harcourt and Dorilant, and greeting them declares that "[g]ood fellowship and friendship are lasting, rational, and manly pleasures" (Wycherley 1.1.226-27). In the second scene of *The Rover*, Willmore and Belvile

unexpectedly meet in Naples. The men are delighted to see each other and Belvile cries, “welcome ashore, my dear rover!” (Behn 2012, 1.2.57). Belvile introduces Willmore to Blunt, saying, “[p]ray know our new friend, sir; he’s but bashful, a raw traveler, but honest, stout, and one of us” (1.2.67-68). Belvile reveals the significance of male friendship by describing Blunt as a part of the male group (1.2.68). Clearly, male friendship is an important component of all of these libertine plays. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, considers the emphasis that is placed on male same-sex bonds in Restoration comedy plays. She describes heterosexual sex as being part of the larger “strategy of homosocial desire” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 49). Notably, in *The Rover*, the male characters, despite their stated affection for one another, struggle to honour these homosocial bonds. Willmore, particularly, betrays the group for his own sake. Considering Kosofsky Sedgwick’s emphasis on the importance of male bonds, I argue that Willmore’s behavior is an act of betrayal to the male group and to the collective identity of libertinism.

The various attempted rapes of Florinda reveal the hypocrisy that pervades the male characters’ supposedly meaningful bonds. Only a few scenes before Willmore’s attempted rape of Florinda, Belvile shows Willmore a small picture of her. Willmore looks at the picture and says, “[t]is a fine wench!” (Behn 2012, 3.1.77). Frederick explains that the picture is of Belvile’s mistress. When Belvile confronts Willmore after Willmore has attempted to rape Florinda, Willmore cries, “how the devil should I know Florinda?” (3.6.1). Neither Willmore nor Belvile bring up the fact that Willmore actually saw an image of Florinda only a few hours before and should have recognized her. However, Belvile accuses Willmore of being “a beast – a brute, a senseless swine” (3.6.3). Willmore refuses to accept responsibility for his violence and it is made clear that nothing, including a close friend or a woman’s lack of consent, will keep Willmore

from seeking his own pleasure. In the second attempted rape of Florinda, Blunt and Frederick briefly pause in their attack when Florinda explains that she knows Belvile. Blunt still wishes to rape her and has “no faith” (4.5.127) that she is a person of quality. Frederick, however, overrules Blunt and decides that they should “reprieve” (4.5.132) until Belvile arrives. Again, Belvile’s friendship is undermined for the sake of personal pleasure. Blunt and Fredrick still fully intend to perform the rape with little regard for Florinda’s relation to Belvile. Their only hesitation is the fear of raping a woman of high status.

Willmore, throughout *The Rover*, claims to pursue free love; yet, he hypocritically reveals his own willingness, when it suits him, to both pay and be paid for sex. Owens’ explains that Willmore “expects free sex, both in the sense that he wants to open about it, and because he wants it without monetary cost” (Owens 73). In fact, most of the male characters in *The Rover* profess distaste for paying for sex. Blunt explains that no “honest woman” (Behn 2012, 1.2.45) takes money from a man. When Willmore hears that Angellica charges for sex by the month, he says that the thought “quenches all manner of fire” (1.2.18) in him. Later, angry at Angellica’s high price, he curses, “may she languish for mankind till she die, and be damned for that one sin alone” (2.1.93). Willmore’s reluctance to pay for sex carries into *The Second Part of the Rover* when he calls La Nuche “a devil” (Behn 1996, 1.1.38) for refusing to sleep with him without payment. Willmore is attracted, both physically and intellectually, to Angellica and then to La Nuche, but their required payment revolts him. Yet, despite Willmore’s emphatic disgust with sexual commerce, he is willing to abandon these convictions when the moment suits him. When Florinda refuses to have sex with Willmore, he pulls out a coin and says, “[I]ook here, here’s a pistol for you” (Behn 2012, 3.5.60). When she declines his offer he angrily states, “I never give

more” (3.5.65-66). Willmore’s belief in free sex is conveniently forgotten and he reveals his hypocrisy regarding to his own libertine values.

Willmore further undermines his belief in free love after sleeping with Angellica when he is willing to take the money that she offers him. Moretta, Angellica’s bawd, is furious and cries “[w]hy did you give him 500 pounds, but to set himself out for other lovers?” (4.2.142-43). Indeed, Willmore takes the five-hundred pounds that Angellica gives him and proceeds to pursue another woman, Hellena. A number of critics have debated the meaning of Willmore’s willingness to take compensation for sex. Rosenthal suggests that Willmore takes on the role of a prostitute in *The Rover*. Margrete Rubik, in “Love’s Merchandise: Metaphors of Trade and Commerce in the Plays of Aphra Behn” sees Willmore’s compensation from Angellica, not as an act of prostitution, but “a bonus to the sexual bargain” (Rubik 229) which he will “prize as a means of minimizing costs and maximizing gains” (229). However, though Rubik does not see this particular instance as indicative of Willmore’s prostitution, she does identify the hypocrisy he exhibits by commodifying his sexuality while simultaneously preaching free love. When Willmore refers to himself as a “merchant of love” (Behn 2012, 2.2.41) he places himself in the position to “sell [his] sexual services to a female buyer” (Rubik 229). Though, as Rubik points out, it is not monetary payment that Willmore generally expects, but sexual gratification. By taking money from Angellica, whether as an act of prostitution or simply part of a more broad understanding of his sexuality as a commodity, Willmore undermines his libertine values that dictate that love and sex should be free, revealing his own tendency for acquisitive behavior.

By revealing her male characters to be hypocritical regarding their loyalty to the male group and their participation in free love, Behn attacks libertine behavior at its most basic level. For example, Willmore and Blunt both fail to remain loyal to the male group. Willmore

contradicts himself continually as he decrees that sex should be free, yet, at times, he is willing to take part in the commodifying of sex by paying for a prostitute or by taking money from one. Libertines, though notorious for their immorality, are still considered ideal masculine figures in this period of the Restoration. Behn, by having her libertines betray each other and betray their own values, attacks libertinism as it inches perilously closer to nihilism. Willmore, who claims to hold certain values in high regard, contradicts these values by behaving in greedy and grasping ways. He exposes his own mercenary attitudes and, therefore, loses his blasé libertine charm.

Conclusion

As feminist critics have established, Behn often portrays libertinism in a negative way. However, it is not only through her female characters that Behn portrays certain libertine behaviors in an unfavorable manner, but through her construction of masculinity. Yet, such an argument is complicated by the complexity of Behn's loyalties. Certainly, Behn has a concern for female agency that is not only explicit in many of her plays, but also in her prefaces to them. In the preface to *The Lucky Chance* (1686), Behn begs for the same freedom of expression that is given to her male counterparts, calling her "masculine part the poet in [her]" (Behn 2001, 1428). On the other hand, Behn is limited in her ability to express her opinions publicly for a number of reasons. Willmore, is not only a romantic and comic hero, but he is also a reflection of Charles the II. Behn, a staunch royalist, is faced with the political imperative to not insult her monarch by casting such a protagonist in an unfavorable way. From an economic perspective, the plays must attract a paying audience and Behn, therefore, must portray her libertine hero in a desirable fashion according to the expectations of the time. Thus, Behn offers what appears to be a very conventional treatment of Restoration masculinity. However, if it is true that Behn faces obvious limitations in her criticism of libertinism, but that this criticism *can* be found in her plays, one

must ask what portrayal of the libertine rake emerges from her comedies. Behn subscribes to the customary standards of royalism and libertinism; yet, within the necessary conventional forms that she adopts, one can perceive a subtle strain of critique of libertine masculinity. Without explicitly attacking libertinism, Behn reveals its limitations and contradictions. Libertinism is a crumbling edifice that, though still standing, is exposed by the plays of Behn to be ridden with cracks, flaws, and imperfections.

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