

Libertinism and Gender Politics in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*

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Abstract:

Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) engages critically with the notions of libertinism, gender politics and social satire in the cultural context of the Restoration period. This thesis claims that Behn converts Restoration humour into a critique of 'sexual double standards' that favoured masculine desire while controlling female virtue. The play points out how the patriarchy's power structures, which marginalise women's autonomy, maintain masculine freedom through the characters of Willmore, Hellena, Florinda and Angellica Bianca. The study uses feminist criticism and theoretical viewpoints such as Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* and Foucauldian theories of power. The carnival is understood as a liminal space, where identities are masked and socially constructed roles are destabilised. Qualitative close reading and cultural analysis is employed as a tool to demonstrate that *The Rover* remains relevant to contemporary debates on consent, gender equality, and the politics of desire.

Keywords: Libertinism; Gender Performativity; Judith Butler; Gender Trouble; Carnival and Heterotopia; Social Satire; Sexual Double Standard; Feminist Literary Criticism; Power and Desire.

Introduction:

Aphra Behn's play *The Rover* is one of the most important masterpieces of Restoration literature, notably in terms of gender, desire and social satire. The play was written in 1677, a moment of cultural change in England, and it represents shifting notions about identity, independence, relationships and social behaviour (Todd 41). Behn utilises satire to point out the double standards in society. She exposes the way men excuse their actions in the name of desire or honour, whereas women are meant to be obedient, silent and modest (Gallagher 64). She counters the conventional view of women as inert or helpless by giving her female characters agency in choosing their own destinies.

The drama features libertinism, a prominent concept among elite men of the era that championed pleasure, independence, and the rejection of rigid moral codes. Willmore is a libertine spirit, amusing and engaging, but also irresponsible and sometimes dangerous (Hughes, 72). With him Behn exposes the charm and the perils of an unrestrained society of desire. Behn also bestows knowledge, courage, and agency on her female characters. They manage love, choice, marriage and identity with confidence and humour (Hobby 51). Thus, Hellena openly challenges why women should accept arranged marriage or religious limitations when males are free. (Todd 104).

This study considers *The Rover* in three related terms: gender, desire and societal satire. It considers Behn's representations of male-female interactions, the ways in which characters articulate or repress desire, and the use of comedy and dramatic devices to critique social conventions (Hobby 62). The idea is not just to get the tale but to look into the deeper meaning underlying the actions, language and connections in the play.

This study starts from the premise that Aphra Behn's *The Rover* is not merely a cool Restoration comedy. It is hypothesised that Behn uses the above-mentioned themes of libertinism, desire and social behaviour to show how men and women were treated unequally during the restoration period. It assumes that in the character of Hellena, Florinda, Willmore, Belville and Angellica Bianca, Behn challenges the normality of the balance of power and reveals that male freedom most of the time is at the cost of female contentment and honour.

It is also suggested that the surroundings of the Restoration and especially the unfair space are symbol genic settings where identity, desire and social rules are challenged. Through the use of conflict, disguise, humour and negotiation, Behn sets up her characters to show the contradictions between society conventions and individual freedom. It is intended that examination of the play will indicate that Behn offers women with a more active and autonomous voice and depicts women as capable of expressing their emotions, making their choices and challenging authority.

By examining these characteristics, the paper seeks to demonstrate that *The Rover* is still relevant today. Its themes of identity, consent, social pressure, gender roles, and personal choice continue to speak to current conversations about equality and power. Although this play is from the seventeenth century, the issues contained within it are very relevant to modern day conversations about feminism, relationships and social expectations. (Gallegher71)

The paper employs a qualitative approach to the analysis of *The Rover* by Aphra Behn. The main objective of this technique is to study the play through interpretation and not stats or statistics. Qualitative methodology is the most appropriate for this research, since the topics of gender, desire and social satire are grounded in ideas, behaviour and meaning.

The main source for this study is the original text of *The Rover*. The play is examined using close reading, a method that involves scrutinising closely the characters, conversation, setting and dramatic action. The main text is supported by secondary sources such as scholarly books, critical essays and journal articles. In order to understand how critics have studied the play before and how this study relates to prior research, experts such as Maureen Duffy, Elaine Hobby, Frederick Link and Jessica Munns are used. Their arguments serve to place the topic in a broader scholarly framework.

The process also includes cultural analysis, especially in terms of how the historical background influences the behaviour and values of the characters. Because the play is set in a funfair, and represents the changing social atmosphere of Restoration England, cultural analysis helps to explain why issues such as libertinism, marriage, and desire are presented the way they are.

The Rover was written and first performed in 1677 and is based on the unique socio-cultural context of the Restoration era, a period when morality, identity and public sociability were redefined following the re-opening of the theatres under Charles II. In the libertine tradition of the Restoration, a man's intelligence was a symbol of his wit, sexual freedom, and aristocratic indifference. Experts on Restoration theatre say that the reopening of the theatres, by Charles II, created a culture where art was full of much appreciated and elevated flirtation, sexual display and verbal prowess. This was not the case for all women equally, even with society appearing to be opening up more. But there were still issues to contend with, such as moral scrutiny and the threat of reputational damage. As Jessica Munns argues, libertinism is often utilised in Restoration comedy to exemplify the social and political status of males (Munns). Jane Spencer also claims that males could have sex but women were meant to be pure. This was a sort of social capital which men carefully regulated (Spencer 23–5). The libertine mode of thinking thus functioned under a double standard of sex that favoured male pleasure while penalising female desire.

In this ideological battle Aphra Behn's *The Rover* examines the relationship between desire, pleasure and gendered authority, revealing how sexual freedom is not equitably shared. Maureen Duffy's *The Passionate Shepherdess* is a pioneering biography that demonstrates that Behn was a pioneering professional female writer who transformed how

women might participate in the intellectual and literary culture. Duffy further claims that Behn's occupation is a political act, because males control literature. Elaine Hobby goes on to argue that in *The Rover* women are shown as thinking, searching, language-using beings and not as commodities to be traded. Hobby sees Behn's play as an early feminist rewriting of women's power and therefore an important part of women's literary history (Hobby).

The fundamental point of this piece, however, is to consider libertinism. This is generally seen as the performative philosophy of Restoration masculinity. The libertine prototype is one that privileges pleasure above restraint, that rejects marriage, and that views sexual conquest as a sign of masculine liberty (Munns, 167). This is how a real man, Willmore, thinks. He's funny in the beginning because he's charming and smart and brilliant at making things up. Behn cleverly masks the issue by showing that Willmore's freedom is a consequence of his being masculine. People think it's okay for him to act that way because he's a man, but not for a woman to do the same thing. Willmore exemplifies this "sexual double standard" mentality by ridiculing women's chastity and promoting men's sexual autonomy: "Why what the Devil should I do with a chaste Woman? "Virtue is but an infirmity in Women." (*The Rover*, Act 4)

The attempted assault on Florinda is a sequence that breaks the cheerful tone and reveals the cruelty that lies beneath uncontrolled male desire. Behn continues to chip away at libertine grandeur. In the words of Catherine Gallagher, these incidents provide the material reality undergirding libertine language, revealing how the pursuit of pleasure can overshadow concern over consent and emotional culpability (Gallagher 123). The scene demonstrates the unequal risks women take in a culture that values male desire.

The female protagonists are not spontaneous libertines, they express their wants carefully and deliberately. Hellena and Florinda want love and choice, but the patriarchal structures in which they exist make it difficult for them to fulfil their desires. Hellena does not want to be a subservient woman since she does not want to live in a convent without question. She uses the absurdity to highlight that 'women can be just as intelligent and knowledgeable of sex as men'. Another method in which the patriarchal dominance is reduced is when Florinda chooses to marry Belville for love and not an arranged marriage. Spencer argues these acts of resistance indicate how little but significant the venues were in which Restoration women might make a difference (Spencer 146).

In the funfair context, these conversations about who you are and what you want seem more real still. Bakhtin's ideas on "festive inversion" have been used by Jessica Munns and other critics to argue that the funfair in *The Rover* is a place where social rules seem to

be suspended for a short time. Masks and disguises allow characters to pretend to be other people. But not all can make this choice. Carnivals offer anonymity to men and they take advantage of it to have intercourse with little risk. Women use disguises to avoid being coerced into marriage, controlled by their families or transformed into a commodity. Carnival illustrates the opportunity for freedom but also the continuous persistence of systemic unfairness (Munns).

Behn's principal mode of critique is to mock things. She uses humour to demonstrate the hypocrisy of men telling women to be chaste when they are free (Gallagher 130). "Even if you do it in a funny way, it's still serious criticism. Derek Hughes has argued that laughter offers a way for people to think about good and wrong and to deal with the conflicts in their own social norms (Hughes 187).

Marriage, a solution and a limitation, offers insights into gender differences. Marriage harms the autonomy of male libertines, but for women it could be one of the few routes to stability and social validity (Spencer 153). Florinda's refusal to accept an arranged marriage exemplifies the perception of women as part of the family honour rather than as independent persons. Most people in the Restoration viewed of women as objects that fathers gave their wives, as Janet Todd argues. Florinda's dilemma is transformed into a symbol for bigger systems of male control in the case (Todd 140).

The courtesan Angellica Bianca complicates the moral economy of desire. She is financially independent but emotionally weak and this is indicative of the duality of women's strength in a sexualised world. Hobby describes Angellica as a heroine who is briefly empowered by her beauty and money, yet subject to the emotional apathy of libertine males (Hobby 229). When Willmore leaves, her feelings are the antithesis of the notion of a "fallen" woman who is silent or ashamed. According to Gallagher, "Angellica's odyssey illustrates how the society that conflates desire with subjugation has inscribed itself on individual psyches" (Gallagher 149). Behn rewrites established hierarchies by claiming her power through language and emphasising the emotional labour of women as opposed to men (Spencer 167).

Behn contrasts different concepts of masculinity. Belville's beautiful devotion to Florinda contrasts sharply with Willmore's unremitting hedonism, provoking spectators to consider opposing masculine ideals. This distinction makes it difficult to accept libertinism as the best or most common mode of being for males.

The Rover is not just a romantic comedy, but also a nuanced study of the interaction between sex, gender, and social performance. The play finishes with marriages that seem to bring everyone together in a hilarious way, but the violence and force make it impossible to see the end of the story properly. Hobby argues that the plays of Behn constantly reveal the failure of women's dreams and the power of men's authority (Hobby 216, 221).

Recent scholarship on *The Rover* has extended and deepened critical readings by synthesising earlier feminist and historicist viewpoints with post-structuralist theory, performative space, and queer analysis. Foucauldian ideas of power and identity throw light on the play's treatment of desire, sex roles, and social pressures. Thus, a funfair or a masquerade is not merely a place of enjoyment but also a space in which individuals can exercise their moral agency and contest social conventions. This is an example of the emancipation of Hellena and Florinda from patriarchal limitations and at the same time the construction of new identities at the crossroads of autonomy and limitation as stated in Michel Foucault's theories on pleasure and self-care.

This Foucauldian reading fits with modern scholarship that depicts the carnival in *The Rover* as a heterotopic space, a space where social hierarchies are temporarily suspended, identities are fluid and the expression of desire exposes normative boundaries (Foucault's spatial theory applied to Restoration drama). Moreover, performance scholars and practitioners working on the Restoration Comedy for the 21st Century project maintain that the adaptation of *The Rover* for contemporary audiences necessitates a focus on themes of sexual power, consent and violence, which echo current debates about theatrical space and audience reception. This study combines performance and adaptation to read historical texts and their implications for gendered power dynamics today.

Contemporary queer theory, spatial and performative approaches are used to analyse the ways gender and sexuality are constructed onstage and offstage in innovative ways. In a doctorate dissertation on queerness in Behn's oeuvre, *The Rover* is read through the lenses of queer temporality and the suspension of hegemonic gender identities in carnival and farce. Cross-dressed characters and homoerotic tension contest normative classifications and unveil latent potentials for non-normative desire. This view broadens and complicates the usual readings that consider normal heterosexual gender alone.

The libertine prototype in *The Rover* can also be analysed via the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as outlined in *Gender Trouble*. Butler contends that gender is not an innate or stable identity, but a performative act. She thinks that gender is produced through socially regulated activities. In this framework, Willmore's libertinism

might be seen not as a natural expression of masculine desire, but as a culturally sanctioned display of Restoration masculinity. His wit, sexual bravado and reluctance to marriage are stylised repeats of acts that represent “manhood” within the ideological framework of the Restoration court culture. Similarly, the performative script that women should be chaste, modest and obedient is discharged onto female bodies.

In refusing convent life or openly attacking the double standard of sexuality, Hellena subverts these mandated activities, revealing gender norms to be socially manufactured rather than necessary. The funfair environment highlights this performativity further: masks and disguises make Butler’s notion that identity is something one “does” rather than something one “is” concrete. Behn’s piece thus dramatizes the volatility of gender norms, showing how libertine masculinity and virtuous femininity are maintained via repetition, monitoring and social enforcement, rather than biological inevitability.

Through its exploration of libertinism, desire and gender roles, *The Rover* shows us that relationships may be shaped by power, and by expectations and social standards. The drama uses comedy, masks and witticisms to expose the hypocrisy and inequalities of Restoration society. Behn changes the mould of women by giving them a strong voice, even allowing them to speak out their opinions. In this way *The Rover* looks to be not only a romantic comedy, but also an investigation of the idea of freedom, identity and human behaviour. With these principles in mind, the final chapter will conclude the dissertation by offering a conclusion on how the work of Behn has remained effective in contemporary day discourse surrounding gender and social equality.

If one is to discuss the impact of libertinism and desire as well as gender politics on the characters and events of *The Rover*, one must realise that the play is not truly a comedy; it is a social reflection on the extremely intense social tensions of the Restoration period. The behaviours of the female and male characters highlight the influence of the inequality of expectation and power systems on relationships. Aphra Behn uses humour, tension and drama to show the limitations that were put on women and the freedom males had with no responsibility at all. With these observations in mind, the conclusion will be written to synthesise the important ideas from both chapters and to elaborate on the relevance of the concepts discussed in the present understanding of gender and society.

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