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The Rover Part I (1677)
Written by a “Person of Quality”: Aphra Behn

María Teresa Quirk

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Treball tutelat per Eva María Pérez Rodríguez
Departament de Filologia Espanyola, Moderna I Clàssica

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Abstract

There is one female playwright of the Restoration period whose work continues to be performed throughout the world. Albeit silenced during the 18th and 19th centuries because of a style of writing not in line with the Romantic and Victorian sensibilities, she was rescued from obscurity in the early 20th century by Virginia Woolf who proclaimed that “all women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.” This analysis discusses one of her plays: *The Rover*, the medium through which, using the language of sarcasm and humor, Behn gave agency to her female characters at the end of the 17th century. In doing so, she gave visibility and voice to the female resistance against male dominance. Aphra Behn has passed the baton, in spite of a two-hundred-year hiatus, to the female resistance movements of the 20th century and now globally, in the 21st century, to the #MeToo movement. These are women who, despite having been given ownership of their own voices still face the challenges of abuse of masculinity, and patriarchal dominance.

Keywords

Comedy, Aphra Behn, Male Violence, Rape Culture, *The Rover*.

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And this one thing I will venture to say, though against my Nature, because it has a Vanity in it; That had the Plays I have writ come forth under any Mans Name, and never known to have been mine; I appeal to all unbyast Judges of Sense, if they had not said that Person had made as many good Comedies, as any one Man that has writ in our Age; but a Devil on't the Woman damns the Poet.

Behn, Preface to *The Lucky Chance*, (as quoted in Caywood 2001, 24)

Introduction

In 1660 Charles II was restored as King of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. The nation was still recovering from the trauma of having beheaded Charles I and a deeply divisive and painful civil war. The monarch came to the throne to heal these wounds in what became known as the Restoration. The new king returned from exile in France and soon began to rebuild a rather licentious royal court in which theater was to play a big part. Five years later, the country would be ravaged once again by the plague. The following year, the great fire destroyed great swathes of London. Not the most auspicious of circumstances and yet the Restoration period which lasted until around the very early 1700s produced exciting works of British architecture, music, painting, as well as varied works of literature of contrasting genres such as *Milton's Paradise Lost* and many sexually themed plays which are still performed today, amongst them the subject of this paper: Aphra Behn's *The Rover; or, the Banish'd Cavaliers*. Part I

Historical Context

In order to contextualize the play within the Restoration period, the methodology of this paper follows an analysis of the British Library's online archives. Two authors stand out with their descriptions of the period: Diane Maybank's *Restoration Comedy* and Elaine Hobby's *Introduction to The Rover*. "Considered ungodly by the Puritans during Oliver Cromwell's Republican period, London's theatres had been closed since 1642. Public theatres reopened in 1660, three months after the return of Charles II to power. In theatres, the tone of the plays was cynical and satirical, while the language and actions were sexually explicit" (Maybank, 2018). The themes of sexuality, adultery, and "double-entendre", were popular during Charles II's reign, reflecting the spirit and behavior of the King and his Court. What came to be known as the "comedy of manners" became Restoration comedy's most popular subgenre with the caveat, as explained by Maybank, that "although the plots eventually adhere to the establishment rules, these plays examine and mock a society that had been under the restrictions of Puritanism and now felt liberated under the influence of Libertinism" (Maybank 2018).

Restoration drama marked a new paradigm on the English stage as women were now allowed to act. Female roles had up to this point been played by boy actors (popular in Shakespeare's time) but they were no longer trained to play female roles. Charles II, having lived in France had a big influence on this decision, however, "allowing women to act was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it meant playwrights such as Aphra Behn could write bigger and better parts for women ... On the other hand, allowing women to act meant that new plays were more likely to highlight scenes containing sexual harassment and rape, which were largely intended to titillate audiences" (Maybank 2018). In that regard, female cross-dressing, also favored in Shakespeare's time was still a popular device: the so called "breeches part" accentuated the female lower body and thus excited the male audience's interest. One such young woman, in a pair of breeches, is Hellena in *The Rover*.

Another innovation of Restoration comedy was the concept of "the rake", who as described by Maybank was: "A young male seducer, full of wit and arrogance, he represented a flattering type of male prowess and drive, much admired in court circles. Through the rake, the plays explore the possibility of a sexual freedom which was simply not possible in London society, but was more than tolerated at Charles II's court" (Maybank 2018). John Wilmot, whose circle Behn was associated with (the "circle of wits" as it was known) and whose Libertine philosophy she admired, is thought to be the inspiration for Willmore; it is clear that

the similarity of his surname to that of Wilmot is not coincidental. The National Portrait Gallery in London has on display a playful portrait of John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester (1647–1680) with his pet monkey, which he is crowning with laurels. The monkey is in the process of destroying folios of his poems. In Maybank’s words it “captures the poet’s wit, charm, and disregard for convention” (Maybank 2018).

Aphra Behn Then and Now

Aphra Behn is, to all intents and purposes, the first English woman to earn her living by writing. Not much is known about her early life, which she alternately tried to conceal or embellish. What we know is that she was born in 1640 in Harbledown, Kent, the daughter of a barber named Bartholomew Johnson. “Her mother appears to be a wet nurse in a more elevated family” (Bragg 2018, 01:47) which probably gained Behn access to great libraries thus, she was mostly self-taught. She possibly traveled to Surinam as a spy for the king and she might have married a German merchant Johann Behn on her return, unfortunately he either died or they separated soon after. It is recorded that she reprieved her role as a spy in Antwerp in 1666 working for Charles II but returned to England penniless and she might have been incarcerated in a debtor’s prison. It is then that she was forced to begin writing to support herself. We do not know for sure how her marriage ended but she did manage to make a living independently through writing, without the support of a father or a husband and that independence is reflected in the female characters of her most successful play, which premiered on Saturday 24 March 1677: *The Rover* Part I, a play whose source text was *Thomaso* or *The Wanderer* (1663), written by Thomas Killigrew, who was himself a Banished Cavalier. According to Duffy, Behn “mined” *Thomaso* for Part I and its sequel Part II, performed four years later (Duffy 1992, ix). *The Rover* Part I production was delayed because she was accused of plagiarizing Killigrew, a fact that she denounced as false in the play’s Post-Script: “though if the Play of the Novella were as well worth remembering as *Thomaso*, they might (baiting the Name) have as well said I took it from thence: I will say the Plot and Bus’ness (not to boast on’t) is my own: as for the Words and Characters I leave the Reader to judge and compare’em with *Thomaso*, to whom I recommend the great Entertainment of reading it” (Behn 1992, 204).

According to Hobby: “Behn’s career as a professional playwright was already well established when *The Rover* appeared. Her first play, a tragicomedy called *The Forc’d Marriage*, had an unusually long first run in 1670, she only wrote one tragedy: *Abdelazer*,

staged in 1676” (Hobby, 2018). Many more plays followed mostly light comedies and farces, in fact from 1670 to 1688 she produced eighteen plays, four more than the most popular male playwright at the time: Dryden. After the great success of *The Rover*, Behn continued to write regularly for the Duke’s Company, named after the Duke of York her patron, the future James II, who persuaded her to write the sequel, which she did in 1681: *The Rover Part II*, also very popular. She was indeed one of the few playwrights still having new plays performed throughout the 1680s. Murray explains that whereas Behn’s contemporaries took the style and structure of their plays from Ben Jonson, “her spiritual begetter is Shakespeare, an allegiance she acknowledged in her preface to *The Dutch Lover*, and that’s apparent in the texts themselves” (Murray 1992, ix). At the same time, she also established herself as a respected poet, gifted translator of French works, and author of prose fiction (her most famous work, *Oroonoko*, which tells the story of an enslaved African prince, was published in 1688). In Caywood’s words: “Aphra Behn was very cognizant that she lived, literally by that which should not have been hers: language ... Modern critics of Behn’s plays have not surprisingly, been intrigued by Behn’s disruptive presence in the boy’s room of Restoration drama” (Caywood 2001, 24). It is the way she used language that assured her long-standing presence in London’s theater life.

However, as a playwright her works were largely ignored for the next two hundred years. Tomé believes that the concept of gender she displayed in her comedies became a threat to social norms: “Having challenged the gender hierarchy in a patriarchal society, it is understandable that Behn’s works were silenced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the exceptional freedom typical of the seventeenth century no longer existed” (Tomé 2009, 120). It is thanks to Virginia Woolf, at the beginning of the 20th century, that interest in Behn’s work was rekindled and in 1994 a filmed version of *The Rover* was made for the Open University in the UK. Gammanpila points out “there was a steady growth in Behn’s productions in smaller London theaters from 2000 onwards ... Clever Monkey followed suit in 2006 with Luke Kernaghan’s production of *The Rover* ... larger fringe venues besides London’s pub theaters have hosted Behn’s drama in recent years” (Gammanpila 2016, 304). The Royal Shakespeare Company staged *The Rover* in Stratford in 2016 to great acclaim. Interest in Behn’s work continues till today. She is in the academic syllabus’ of today’s schools and colleges, where she is considered a proto-feminist playwright of the Restoration period. An adaptation of the play by a student run theater group from William and Mary College in Virginia, called *The Rover: The Shakespeare in the Dark’s 2018 Winter Show*, was accessed

for this paper. Of particular interest is that the end of this adaptation breaks with the original script and conventions: the main character Hellena, on learning her intended had tried to rape her sister, angrily turns to him, and slaps him in the face, ending their engagement (Allan and Moonan 2018, 89:22). It is no coincidence that the play was performed following the 2017 *New York Times* publication of “a story that exposed severe sexual misconduct on the part of Harvey Weinstein, an American film producer ... In the wake of the damaging news coverage, over eighty women in the film industry came forward and accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct thereafter” (Dugan 2019, 247-8). The response to this scandal became the #MeToo movement when some of Weinstein’s victims began to share on Twitter their experiences of rape and sexual assault by him, “And, within a year, the hashtag was reportedly used in over eighteen million Tweets” (250-1). As a consequence of the “Weinstein effect” many powerful men in the film and media industries were exposed for sexual harassment and lost their jobs; Rottenberg reminds us: “We have also witnessed a new phenomenon: (some) self-entitled and privileged men who assume they can do whatever they want with impunity are actually being forced to resign as a result of credible allegations of sexual assault and sexual harassment” (Rottenberg 2019, 47). The empowering of female voices in the 21st Century is the shifting paradigm we are witnessing in the workplace and in college campuses today.

By the same token, the empowering language Behn gave her female actresses, especially Hellena in *The Rover*, is mirrored in the words of the other main character in the play, Hellena’s counterpart, Willmore. As described by Caywood: “Willmore is afire with the power of her language ... her wit and humor” (Caywood 2001, 34). In the Restoration plays of the 17th century, wit meant more than playwrights being able to make people laugh. Wit meant being able to play with words and ideas, being able to use language in an intellectually stimulating way, which is what Behn accomplished in her plays. She died in London on the 16th April 1689 aged 48. Her gravestone reads: “Here lies a Proof that Wit can never be Defence enough against Mortality.”

English Restoration Comedy

Although performed and published during England’s Restoration, *The Rover* is set in 1650s Catholic Naples, an Italian city under the rule of the Spanish at the time. The time of the year is just before Lent, during the Carnival festivities which will be crucial to the development of the plot: “The play presents its 1677 audience with the imagined exploits of its main male

characters, Belvile and Willmore, and a group of the king's supporters" (Hobby, 2018). These supporters give name to the "Banished Cavaliers" which is the play's subtitle. Hobby continues: "The audience would be taken back to the Interregnum period, back to the world of Royalist continental exile and memories of the civil wars of the 1640s which had ended with the execution of Charles I in 1649" (Hobby, 2018). It is important to understand the errant way of life of the cavaliers during their exile, Sarah Olivier stresses "the importance of the historical backdrop of the English civil war to the play, and the status of the cavaliers due to the banishment as it relates to the cultural and legal formulation of woman as property ... Rape partly functions in the play as an act of revenge taken by the cavaliers for the loss of their land, status, worth, and their publicly perceived failures during the civil war" (Olivier 2012, 57-8).

In order to get her play accepted and thus make money, Behn adhered to the conventions of the Restoration period, the "gay and witty" couple who spends most of the play arguing about the fact they do not want to marry, and the "unexciting and conformist" couple, who are desperate to get married but whose path to true love is thwarted by outside forces, generally a disapproving father. "And yet in *The Rover* these conventions are called into question and even inverted. Using the Carnival as an excuse, the play explores the attempts of its heroines in disguise to exert some control over their destinies" (Hobby, 2018). The leading man is also given a comedic twist and ends up thwarting the "unexciting and conformist" couple's plans, a marplot of sorts. Another novelty is the addition of a third important female character, the "courtesan" Angelica Bianca, who happens to share Aphra Behn's initials. Behn's upending of the plot made *The Rover* extremely popular. In order to understand the importance and popularity of this play Evans refers us to theater history: "These studies also allow students to appreciate what a stellar cast *The Rover* had. Thomas Betterton, the leading member of the Duke's Company, well on his way to be the greatest Restoration actor, performed Belvile. Elizabeth Barry, in her first starring role, long before she would be recognized as the greatest Restoration actress, was Hellena. Cave Underhill, a talented comic performer, took the part of Blunt. Willmore was given to William Smith, 'after Betterton, the leading Duke's Company actor'" (Evans 2014, 4).

Female Characters

At the heart of the play, is the role of the two female characters, the Spanish sisters Florinda and Hellena who from the opening scene, run the plot and try to engineer their marriages.

Florinda the eldest sister is “The Saint.” She is the responsible one, the one who obeys the patriarchal rules whether they come from her father or her eldest brother, who have decided whom she should marry. However, she is in love with somebody else. Caywood describes her: “For Florinda, surviving as a woman means confining her self-valuation to those terms male society insists constitute feminine perfection. She is young, beautiful, rich, somewhat passive, gentle, and virginal” (Caywood 2001, 26). What is more, Florinda believes in the sanctity of marriage and in the idea that she should remain a virgin until her wedding. However, she does arrange to elope with her beloved Belvile, which means disobeying the patriarchal power and for that she will be punished. Behn makes Florinda the victim of sexual assault three times during the play. The first sexual assault is only referred to in the play, it happened a few months before in Spain during a rebellion. She was about to be raped by soldiers when Belvile rescued her, which was the beginning of their romantic relationship. The second instance is when Florinda is about to elope with Belvile, who has arranged for Willmore to help them. Willmore arrives early, drunk, and seems to confuse Florinda with a prostitute, although she is in the gardens of a private home. He sees her in a state of undress (she is wearing an expensive nightgown) and attacks her. She protests and cries “Rape”! His response is: “A Rape! Come, come you lye, you Baggage, you lye, what, I’ll warrant you would fain have the World believe now that you are not so forward as I. No, not you, – why at this time of Night was your Cobweb-door set open, dear Spider – but to catch Flies?” (3.3.154). Only Belvile’s timely arrival saves Florinda’s most precious jewel, her honor. The implication here is, Willmore mistook Florinda for a woman of suspect virtue so he had the right to assault her. The third assault takes place when Florinda, naively breaks the rules of feminine behavior by walking unescorted through the streets of Naples, seeks refuge in Belvile’s home to escape her pursuing brother and encounters Blunt inside. The details of this encounter will be explained later in this paper when Blunt’s character will be analyzed. Needless to say, Belville’s timely arrival saves her once more and this time he takes her away and into the custody of marriage. Caywood affirms: “Continually then, Florinda finds herself a victim of men, – of her father, her brother, of marauding soldiers, of Willmore, – of Blunt and in a way of Belvile’s failure to acknowledge even her timid, conventional voice as her own” (Caywood 2001, 28).

In contrast with Florinda, there is Angelica Bianca, the beautiful courtesan who will be referred to as “The Whore”. She is the play’s most powerful female voice, who sees prostitution as a better choice than marriage. When the love-torn Willmore remonstrates with her for charging for sex, she points out to him that men routinely have sex for money, what else indeed

would be his future wife's dowry! A man decides who to marry not because of a woman's appearance or personality but instead, because of her worth: "When a Lady is propos'd to you for a Wife, you never ask, how fair – discreet – or virtuous she is; but what's her Fortune? – which if but small, you cry – she will not do my business – and basely leave her, though she languish for you."(2.2.137). Unfortunately for her Angelica succumbs to the rake's charms and falls in love with him despite herself. When she and her maid realize Willmore is courting Hellena, Angelica confronts her unfaithful lover and then tries to convey her pain to Moretta:

Moretta. What cou'd you expect less from such a Swaggerer?

Angelica. Expect! As much as I paid him, a Heart entire,

Which I had pride enough to think when e'er I gave

It would have rais'd the Man above the Vulgar,

Made him all Soul, and that all soft and constant. (3.1.144)

Angelica was naïve enough to believe in his "vows" of love and constancy, she took them literally, but Willmore only wanted control over her. At this moment Angelica realizes that she was only wanted for her body. Behn highlights here the dichotomy between what sexual freedom means: to men, that they can take advantage of the opposite sex, and to women, that they are denied the same choices.

Hellena stands in stark contrast to Florinda and Angelica. She will be referred to as "The Wit". Caywood describes her as "aggressive, bright, good-humored, resourceful, verbal, and though technically a virgin, anything but chaste in her eager wish to be initiated into the pleasure of sexual dalliance. She is almost extremely witty, which makes her virtue and her character suspect" (Caywood 2001, 31). Her family recognizes this rebellious spirit. Furthermore, she does not have a fortune, so therefore, she is destined to the nunnery as a way of protecting the family's honor. Hellena is the character that takes the most advantage of Carnival time because she plays with the theme of mistaken identity while in disguise both as a gypsy and also as a young boy. She is determined, before she is confined to the nuns, to escape the confinement of her own home and be free to experience life and sensuality: "And dost thou think that ever I'll be a Nun? or at least till I'm so Old, I'm fit for nothing else – Faith no, Sister; and that which makes me long know whether you love Belville, is because I hope he has some mad Companion or other, that will spoil my Devotion; nay I'm resolv'd to

provide my self this Carnival, if there be e'er a handsom proper Fellow of my Humour above Ground, tho I ask first" (1.1.108).

From the moment Hellena, disguised as a gypsy, sets her roving eyes on Willmore, she decides he will be hers, starts flirting with him, and lets him know she has made a vow "to die a Maid" (1.2.118). When Willmore responds, "I am a good Christian, I ought in charity to divert so wicked a Design" (118) she is absolutely delighted. She pretends to read Willmore's fortune and their witty banter begins. Willmore is captivated by her wit and her wild spirit, despite not being able to see if she is in fact pretty. She shamelessly flirts with him: "if you should prevail with my tender Heart (as I begin to fear you will, for you have horrible loving Eyes) there will be difficulty in't that you will hardly undergo for my sake" (1.2.118). Olivier describes the situation: "To a young woman about to be forced into life in a nunnery by her father and brother, Willmore's excited acceptance of her wildness and his avowal to promote her freedom from such a 'prison' must be refreshing to say the least. Behn parallels Willmore's and Hellena's sexual desires before they even meet one another ... The implication is that women feel sexual drives naturally just as much as men; the virtuous modesty of Florinda is the fabricated societal convention" (Olivier 2012, 69-70). Hellena also disguises herself as a young boy because she wishes to "ramble" alone. She knows that dressed as a boy she can walk the streets freely during the masquerade and this increases her fun: she is even so bold as to reach Angelica's quarters and ask her for Willmore's whereabouts, pretending to be an advocate (for herself) as "he" announces: "I am related to a Lady, Madam", (4.2.169).

Behn's dialogue between the three characters plays with identities masterfully. However, Hellena's boldness leads her to a precarious situation, as Olivier explains: "Hellena is always in jeopardy of losing her disguise and the control of its signification and with it the opportunity for self-determination. Although cross-dressing allows Hellena protection (when Florinda goes out as a woman alone, she is always threatened with rape) ... Likewise, Hellena has the upper hand at Bianca's lodging when Willmore believes her to be a man, but as soon as he recognizes her, he plays with her fragile position and Hellena is afraid for her safety" (Olivier 2012, 70-1). Hellena swiftly extricates herself from this dangerous spot and throughout the play she navigates through similar dangerous situations much more adeptly than the other female characters. Even though Hellena is playful, witty, and resourceful, Caywood acknowledges: "At the same time, she is fully cognizant of the price to be paid if she surrenders her virginity too cavalierly. At the end of the play, she insists that if Willmore is to have her, he must marry her. Willmore argues that 'Marriage is a certain Bane to love as lending Money

is to friendship'. To that plea, Hellena retorts: 'What shall I get? A cradle full of Noise and Mischief, with a Pack of Repentance at my Back'" (Caywood 2001, 32). This is another example in which Behn gives a female character agency. Hellena desperately wants to escape the life of a nun and she had "chosen" an imperfect partner who suits her motives, nevertheless it has got to be within the proper rules of society, which means marriage. Near the end of *The Rover*, Hellena's brother complains that her "holy intent of becoming a nun" has been "debauched" by her desire to marry Willmore. She replies: "I have considered the matter . . . and find the three hundred thousand crowns my uncle left me, and you cannot keep from me, will be better laid out in love than in religion, and turn to as good an account. Let most voices carry it: for heaven or the captain"? (Evans 2014, 3). Behn points out that it is financial freedom that has given Hellena the ability to choose her destiny. Out of the three main characters, Hellena is the only character that is in control of her life and happiness, as she understands it.

Male Characters

Of the three main male characters, Belvile is the one referred to as "The Faithful Suitor", the other half of the "unexciting and conformist" couple. An idealist, he is completely devoted to the "divine" Florinda whom he rescues during a siege in Pamplona when she is in danger of being sexually assaulted by soldiers. When Belvile saves her, he feels entitled to possess her as property, as explained by Olivier: "Florinda becomes a commodity purchased through valor, a territory to which Belvile as cavalier is entitled, literally because of his conquest of her, and symbolically as the dispossessed cavalier who needs to be restored" (Olivier 2012, 62). Behn's sympathies with the "Banished Cavaliers" are clear in Belvile. She was trying to rehabilitate the cavaliers' reputation in England. Having been dispossessed of their land and fortunes, they were trying to make a living and sometimes resorted to pillaging, stealing, and even raping. Behn portrays Belvile as chivalrous and idealistic, while at the same time acknowledges his foibles, a fact that Olivier brings to light: "Belvile also plays the role of a traditional romantic hero in the play, motivated by love, but this brand of chivalry tends to define women in terms similar to those that lead to rape later in the play. The chivalric code positions men as aggressive/active and women as passive/vulnerable, thus as a prize to be won." (Olivier 2012, 63). The chivalric code also includes allegiance to his fellow cavaliers. Following Willmore's drunken attempt to rape Florinda, Belvile is furious but also torn because of his genuine affection for and loyalty to his old friend:

Willmore. Whe, how the Devil shou'd I know Florinda?

Belvile. Ah, plague of your Ignorance! if it had not been Florinda, must you

be a Beast? – a Brute? a Senseless Swine. (3.4.156)

Willmore's attitude is one of entitlement, but he is attempting to defend himself. Had he known that the victim was Florinda, he certainly would have respected her. Belvile, in chivalric mode, is defending all women's honor by calling Willmore "a Beast, a Brute and a Senseless Swine". Behn is contrasting Belvile to Willmore. At the same time, Behn gives cover to Willmore by portraying him as hopelessly drunk and thus finds an excuse for his horrendous behavior.

At the other end of the spectrum is a character with a comic name: Blunt, who will be referred to as "The Sex Fiend". Blunt can behave either as a misogynistic revenger or as a fool with money; the ambivalence resides in his own name. Blunt is besotted with an Italian woman he has just met, Lucetta, who will eventually take his money, "Oh such a Mistress, Fred, such a Girl! ... So fond, so amorous, so toying and fine! And all for sheer Love, ye Rogue! Oh, how she lookt and kiss'd and sooth'd my Heart from my Bosom" (2.1.125). What he does not realize is that the woman in question is a courtesan... and a thief. He does not know her name, but he believes she is a "Person of Quality". Tomé explains: "In *The Rover* there are also situations in which the female characters mock men. In my opinion, these situations are the funniest because women become dominant over men and they are completely conscious of that. Moreover, the mockery of male characters is more significant because it is not due to their own behavior but because of the greater intellectual ability of women" (Tomé 2009, 112). The most humorous scene of the play occurs when Blunt is about to consummate a night of passion with Lucetta: the bed actually disappears and he finds himself in a cellar, coatless, pant-less, and penniless! He has been duped! When he realizes it, he laments: "I'm a accursed Puppy, 'tis plain, Fool was writ upon my Forehead, she perceive'd it. Saw the Essex calf there" (3.3.152). Tomé posits: "He is not as rational as the ideal man in a patriarchal society because he does not realize that everything forms part of a trick. Moreover, the humor of this situation comes from the anxiety Blunt shows" (112). This expression of self-pity soon turns into thoughts of revenge because at that moment Florinda, who is escaping her brother while in disguise, ends up in Blunt's quarters, the perfect victim has arrived at his very doors. What follows is a game of cat and mouse:

Blunt. Cruel, adsheartlikins as a Gally-slave, or a Spanish Whore: Cruel, yes, I will kiss and beat thee all over; kiss, and see thee all over; thou shalt lie with me too, not that I

care for the Injoyment, but to let you see I have ta'en deliberated Malice to thee, and will be revenged on one Whore for the Sins of another; I will smile and deceive thee, flatter thee, and beat thee, kiss and swear, and lye to thee, imbrace thee and rob thee, as she did me, fawn on thee, and strip thee stark naked, then hang thee out at my Window by the Heels, with a Paper of scurvey Verses fasten'd to thy Breast, in praise of damnable Women—Come, come along.

Florinda. Alas, Sir, must I be sacrific'd for the Crimes of the most infamous of my Sex? I never understood the Sins you name (4.3.180).

We recognize the other side of Blunt in this scene, the “misogynistic revenger”, the cruel sex fiend: “No, young one, no Prayers or Tears shall mitigate my Rage; therefore prepare for both my Pleasure of Enjoyment and Revenge, for I am resolved to make up my Loss here on thy Body, I'll take it out in kindness and in beating” (4.3.181). Florinda's voice is almost non-existent, all she can do is plead for her honor. Unfortunately, there is worse to come as another cavalier, Frederick, arrives. He is willing to partake of Blunt's invitation to a threesome. He soon realizes that the masked lady might not be the woman of ill repute Blunt is describing: “I begin to suspect something; and 'twou'd anger us vilely to be truss'd up for a Rape upon a Maid of Quality, when we only believe we ruffle a Harlot” (4.3.182). Frederick's knows it is not acceptable to assault a respectable woman, he takes Florinda aside and assures her of his protection, as the other cavaliers arrive on the scene. What follows is one of the most dramatic moments in the play. Behn is clearly demonstrating that what is about to occur is an act of violence and control, which will be made even worse by the arrival of the other cavaliers, a group that includes Florinda's brother Pedro, who fails to recognize his sister because she is in disguise. The audience is aware that this situation is about to degenerate into a gang rape with the horrific implication that one of the rapists is Florinda's own brother. It is a fraught situation, Olivier takes us back to Behn, and Restoration comedy: “As much as this rape scene is about power and revenge, it is also about sex. By pandering to a male audience, Behn safeguards the financial success of her play while also subtly criticizing the libertinism espoused by Charles II court” (Olivier 2012, 64). Florinda has become the cavaliers' property and they devise a game about who will rape her first. They draw their swords, the one with the longest weapon will be the winner. The sexual overtone is evident. Hobby expands on this: “This culturally produced association is used with particular force by Behn, in *The Rover*, when most of the play's men compete over who should rape Florinda first by drawing their swords to measure their relative lengths. As Willmore puts it, ‘the longest sword carries her’, with the result that

Florinda's own brother is the first man to take his turn due to his impressive Spanish Toledo" (Hobby 2012, 184). Fortunately, Pedro is called out, Belvile saves Florinda once again.

The comic star of the play is definitely Willmore, referred to as "The Charming Predator". He represents Hellena's male alter-ego: extremely witty, and sex obsessed. Willmore arrives in Naples after spending a long time at sea, so he has come ashore to enjoy the Carnival and to have a good time with anything in a skirt. He is on the predatory lookout and one of the first women he spots happens to be Hellena dressed as a gypsy. He is smitten by her wit, which rivals his. There is also a wild side to her that he finds irresistible. Throughout the play Hellena is portrayed as "mad". Florinda frequently attempts to curb Hellena's wild propensities: "Art thou mad to talk so? Who will like thee well enough to have thee, that hears what a mad Wench thou art?" and exclaims to her: "What a mad creature's this!" (3.1.140-1). At the same time, it is this same wild attribute which draws Hellena to Willmore, hence she refers to him as her "Mad Monsieur" and "Mad Fellow" (3.1.139-40). They, therefore, seem to be perfectly suited to each other.

Willmore is not satisfied, he soon learns about Angelica, the most beautiful courtesan in Naples. Belvile tells him that she is now available and "the only ador'd Beauty of all the Youth in Naples, who put on all their Charms to appear lovely in her sight" (1.2.123). Naturally, as he considers himself the one with the most "Charms" he has to have her; alas Belvile lets him know that "she is exposed to Sale...for so much a Month". Willmore like all cavaliers is penniless, however in his mind this is no impediment and he responds: "The very Thought of it quenches all manner of Fire in me" (124). There is nothing that excites him more than the knowledge that he has no competition as far as women are concerned. Willmore uses all his charms to seduce Angelica without paying her, instead vowing to love her forever. Angelica takes him at his word, and she succumbs to his charms: "Thou wast a Power too strong to be resisted" (2.2.139). Willmore accomplished his objective. The fact that Angelica has lowered her guard and fallen for the rake is lamented by her maid Moretta, who realizes that by doing this Angelica has lost her worth as a courtesan. But Willmore has that roving eye and according to Evans, he "cannot turn away from a new woman ... after pursuing Hellena, seducing Angelica, and confronting Florinda, he is elated to learn that, yet another woman may be attracted to him. Overhearing dialogue between Angelica and Hellena, he utters this aside: 'So, this is some dear rogue that's in love with me, and this way lets me know it. Or, if it be not me, she means someone whose place I may supply'" (Evans 2014, 3). Attracted to both Angelica and Hellena, Willmore chooses the latter when Angelica unwittingly reveals to him that

Hellena has inherited a fortune from her uncle (Angelica's old lover). Hellena is fabulously wealthy, so he exclaims: "... my Gipsie worth Two Hundred Thousand Crowns! – oh how I long to be with her" (4.2.168). His choice is obvious as his future will be assured. Hellena and her fortune will become his, as the law requires. Hellena knows who she is marrying, but in Willmore, she has also found her freedom from patriarchal dominance and the nunnery! Olivier describes Behn's position on the subject: "Willmore, then, as a comedic hero simultaneously represents the libertine ethos of the extravagant rake towards which Behn is tensely ambivalent, the banished cavalier ethos to which Behn is clearly sympathetic and the patriarchal ethos sanctioning sexual domination of women of which Behn is highly critical" (Olivier 2012, 56). Willmore is also the antithesis of Blunt. He is not out to take revenge on women because women are naturally attracted to him and would not dupe him like Lucetta did to Blunt. Olivier describes Behn's attitude towards cavaliers as: "She also offers a sophisticated critique of the rape-as-revenge formulation espoused by the cavalier characters. Rape in *The Rover* differs from its usual depiction in Restoration drama in two ways. First, Behn neither mimics the intense suffering of rapes in tragedies nor does she show rape in a purely comic light. Second, rape is attempted most often, not by the typical villain or fool, but by Willmore, the play's dashing hero" (Olivier 2012, 55). Despite this ambivalence, it is clear that Behn is depicting the power of men over women. Furthermore, it is only the women who follow conventions and not the assertive ones who are the victims of this abuse of masculinity.

Evans, who has been teaching *The Rover* in the US for nearly four decades, has noticed a shift in student's attitudes towards Willmore. He says their assessment is much more negative in the last two decades. Gender Studies, a subject taught in colleges since the late twentieth century, has more than likely influenced these attitudes, however Evans reminds us that: "the character was originally conceived to emphasize his comic dimension and so to represent him as a flawed yet still desirable partner for Hellena. Such discussion may lead them to see Behn, hardly reluctant to challenge a patriarchal society, as a more interesting playwright – satiric, realistic, pragmatic, and commercial – within the collaborative enterprise of a Restoration theater" (Evans 2014, 3). Gender Studies aside, the realities of sexual harassment and sexual assault in American colleges and in the entertainment world today, have had an impact on our 21st century outlook. The trial and conviction early this year of Harvey Weinstein on charges of rape and a criminal sexual act, and the fact that now, more than ninety women have accused him of inappropriate sexual encounters, continues to galvanize women in movements like #MeToo. Olivier's assessment of *The Rover* ties up the present circumstances with those of the

seventeenth century as well as Behn's genius: "Willmore, as an extravagant rake, exudes confidence and blatant disregard for the consequences of his actions on a grand scale ... underneath its shocking amusement is a biting critique of women's fate in a patriarchal society that continually finds new ways of justifying degradation and violence towards women. The fact that she can pull off both notions at the same time, even in the same set of lines, is more unbelievable than even Willmore's antics" (Olivier 2012, 72).

Conclusion

Aphra Behn's work as a poet, novelist and playwright is sizeable and deserves more study and recognition. This paper has only scratched the surface of her genius by analyzing just one of her plays that has stubbornly remained in the literary canon of the Restoration period: *The Rover*. With this play, Behn had to walk a fine line with her language, between giving agency to women and exposing the power of men over them with humor and sarcasm. Achieving this while at the same time keeping her plays current and popular with her London audiences was a challenge that she conquered. Her work gave visibility to the female plight of the time, patriarchal dominance. She gave women their voice to challenge the gender hierarchy and to decide their own destinies. With her play, she subverted conventions and opened doors for female resistance. Sadly, her words were silenced by a society which found her too bawdy and libertine. That same voice was reprised a hundred years later by Mary Wollstonecraft, whose ideas on the rights of women were considered too radical and like Behn, was silenced until the feminist stirrings of the early 20th century. Virginia Woolf re-discovered Behn and reminded the world that it was Aphra Behn who gave women the right to speak their minds. More and more of Behn's works were published during the 20th century and read by feminist writers, who continued to speak their minds. The reappearance of blatant sexism in the 21st century seems anachronistic, but the election of Donald Trump appears to be the catalyst for feminist movements like the worldwide Women's March, the day after his inauguration, and the #MeToo movement. Male sexual predators are now being denounced and are losing their high-powered jobs as a result of the "Weinstein effect". The #MeToo movement is now global, it has given voice, this time frank and open, to women. Whether digitally or in vast open-air demonstrations, these voices are not silenced anymore; as in Aphra Behn's time visibility is resistance.

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