

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Rover, or the Banished Cavaliers 1677

Aphra Benn (1640-1680)

OVERVIEW

The writer

Aphra Benn was an English prose writer, dramatist, and poet of the Restoration period. The play before us deals with a fast playing chance taking amorous bunch of Englishmen, who played fast and loose with some amorous ladies in Naples, during carnival time, as well as with the most amorous whore in the city, Angelica, who has just lost her long term support guy, and is on the town. The cutups and flirtatious machinations of this play set a new standard for daring women's writing. Writing under the pen name Astraea, Aphra Benn keeps company, and wit, with such mondains gentlemen as John Willmore, Earl of Rochester, and rakes iike Blunt and Frederick. There are many and divergent accounts of her birthplace and amours, as well as of her numerous plays. The most successful of her prose narratives was Oroonoko, and of the plays The Rover and the Banished Cavaliers.

CHARACTERS

Women

Florinda: sister to Don Pedro and Hellena. Devotedly In love with Colonel Belville.

Hellena: sister to Florinda, destined to the career of a nun—a destiny she is eager to forget during carnival.

Lucetta, a lusty Spanish woman who sets out to seduce Blunt; a woman who knows her own mind, and represents the Spanish fascination toward the British.

Collis; the governess of Belinda and Hellena.

She is eventually locked in a chest, to prevent her from stopping the marriage of Florinda and Belville.

Valeria; kinswoman to Florinda. Often joins Belinda in the carnival. A sidekick type.

Angelica Bianca; celebrated Spanish whore, whose last great supporter, a Spanish general, has stopped bankrolling her. She offers herself for sale in Naples at a fee of 1000 Spanish crowns. Despite having several suitors, and those of the deepest pockets, her heart goes out to Willmore. Only later, after Willmore has proved to be unfaithful to her, does she threaten to shoot him.

Moretta; lady in waiting to Angelica.

Lucetta; a conniving Spanish whore.

Men

Frederick; a violent and brutal man who agrees to beat and rape Belinda.

Blunt; a naïve and short-sighted English country gentleman.

Don Antonio; the Spanish Viceroy's son. Strongly attracted to Angelica, and prepared to pay for her.

Don Pedro. Brother of Belinda and Hellena, a noble Spaniard and friend of Don Antonio. Gives in to his two sisters marrying Englishmen.

Colonel Belville; British colonial, desperately in love with Belinda. He eventually wins Belinda's hand in marriage.

Don Antonio, the King's son.

Don Belville, an English colonel, deep in love with Florinda. Faithfully true throughout the play,

Willmore; the 'rover' of the play. A roving naval

Captain, shades of Hollywood swashbuckling—The Three Musketeers, Zorro...A charmer and ladies' man, who gives his name to the title, and who ultimately wins the heart (or gonads) of Angelica. Having later two-timed the famous whore, he finds himself at the wrong end of Angelica's pistol, from which he is saved by her graciousness.

Frederick; English gentleman. One of the crowd off to the continent on holiday, as Britishers to this day flock to the same Mediterranean watering holes, for a break from the foggy British winter.

Blunt; a foolish English country gentleman, who gets robbed of all his possessions. One has to imagine, in all such instances, that Aphra Benn is having her chuckle at the ingenuousness of her own male country people.

Philippo; Lucetta's boyfriend.

Sancho; Pimp to Lucetta.

Diego; page to Don Antonio

Officers and Soldiers

PLOT

Aphra Benn's play (*The Rover*) is involved, lusty, and flirtatious. Hellena and Florinda are destined to paternally ordered marriages, to men they do not fancy. They are determined to make what fun they can of the high spirits of Carnival, which is approaching. The excitement starts cooking when Hellena, Florinda, and Valeria (their cousin) start arranging rendez vous with the British men they meet at the carnival, and Willmore and Helena start to flirt with one another. Other members of the English party join in. Lucinda starts to seduce Blunt, Florinda sets up a meeting with Belville. Not much later the men catch sight of a picture of Angelica, the most luscious whore in Naples. She is advertising herself. She laments because no one of the men has enough money to take advantage of her services. Willmore ultimately persuades Angelica to sleep with him. That is the breakthrough of the play.

The plot is at this point just getting warmed up, exceeding other Restoration comedies in daring and flirtation, pressing beyond the chance taking of Wycherley and Etherege, who still lie to the comic side of flirtation and downright seduction. By the end of Act III of *The Rover* there has been a major melee with the English and Spaniard 'gentlemen' beating one another up in their ardor to get a piece of Angelica. Men fight men for primacy over the ladies, and the ladies writhe in their efforts to ward off rape.

In the midst of the melee Florinda is locked in a room, then released onto a scene of mass rape, led by the rowdy English and Spanish gentlemen. She is saved when Valeria arrives, disguised in different costumes, herself having luckily escaped the rape-ready Pedro. Florinda reenters, chased by the incorrigible Willmore. Florinda then ducks into a door to avoid the gentleman; It happens to be Belville's house. Blunt is staying in Belville's house. Upon entering, Florinda asks Blunt for help. Blunt, full of contempt for women, now tries to rape Florinda. Frederick enters, convinced that Florinda is a prostitute. He locks her in a room.

Florinda, in flight, runs out of her room, this time pursued by Don Pedro. She is saved when Pedro relents, and agrees to remove his mask. Florinda removes her mask and is told by Valeria, who tells Belinda and Florinda to get married at once. Frederick and Blunt realize that they have almost raped Belinda, and they beg for forgiveness. Belville, Florinda, Valeria, and Frederick all exit to get married. Willmore stays behind to guard against Don return.

Angelica enters, pointing a gun at Willmore, and ready to kill him. Don Antonio enters, takes the gun from Angelica, then takes the gun from Willmore, then recognizes Willmore as the one who stole Angelica's picture. He offers to shoot Willmore. Angelica decides to let Willmore live, and leaves.

Hellena enters, still in boy's clothes, and banter with Willmore; he wants to sleep with her but not to marry her. Hellena finally persuades him to accept marriage. Pedro, Belville, Belinda, Frederick, and Belinda enter the picture. The play concludes with carnivalesque music, and marriage vows between Hellena and Willmore.

The plot is complex, the interplay violently sexual, and full of conflictual intrigue, but there is little construction of character. Willmore and Angelica are the most prominent figures, but apart from them we have little to sustain us. Nor is there any considerable social framework, for instance local color spilloff from the carnival and its exotic-tinny mystique.

SCENES

Two Spanish women, Florinda and Hellena, prepare for Carnival in Naples. Each is raging to have a good time--and to bask in the sun of a Mediterranean holiday venue. They have not much to anticipate, beyond carnival time. One is destined to become a nun, and one to marry a rich and pompous business man. In other words they are under the thumb of their patriarchal father and their nurse. They will cut up when they are given a chance. Naples and its carnival will give them their chance.

Upon the meeting of the two women with the English contingent—who don't know the women, and are on their own holiday jaunt--Belville, Blunt, Frederick, and Willmore—the women, and their nursemaids, move into a new social milieu. They set up rendez vous, dates, and assignations of every sort.

The Englishmen view a picture of Angelica, in front of her house, and are stunned by her beauty. But none of the men has enough money to buy her. Finally Don Pedro, a Spanish noble, arrives with enough cash to contract for the lady. This brings forth a major quarrel between Don Pedro and Don Antonio, the Viceroy's son, who quarrel, then duel, over who is to get Angelica, until finally Willmore comes on the scene, and the lady much prefers him to the other men. Classic meeting of fiery Hispanic temper with devil may care James Bondish British sangfroid.

Meanwhile a boisterous cops and robbers type scene bursts forth at Angelica's house. After a long night alone with Willmore, she discovers that Hellena has also intruded into Willmore's bed, without a word to Angelica. Angelica is enraged, Willmore is forced to promise that he will never see Angelica again.

In the final act—after his further acting out-- Willmore makes a drunken effort to rape Belinda. Belville, Antonio, and Willmore stage a drunken brawl, the confused purpose of which is rape, though the outcome is a madhouse.

After further brouhaha, during which marriages are exchanged, ridiculed, and replaced, Angelica returns to Pedro and the scene of the brawl, points a pistol at Willmore and threatens to kill him. Don Antonio enters, and seizes the gun from Angelica who consents to leave Willmore in freedom. At the end wedding bells ring for Willmore and Hellena.

THEMES

Violence Class. The entire play transports us into the world of European travel, tourism, and exploitation of less wealthy populations. Such could be said for the English upper-classes—Willmore, Blunt, Frederick—who are off for a smashing good holiday in a culture which is commercially inviting them for a mutual, no holds barred holiday. Such could also be said for the Spaniards, who do their best to milk the British tourists and men of swagger.

The historical moment is relevant here. We are at the end of the seventeenth century. Britain rules the seas, and on its vessels ride the first waves of international travel, plus of course the tonnages of cargo which had for two centuries made of the Mediterranean a closed British lake. From this setting the upper classes of England travelled for their pleasure and profit and established the grounds, may it also be said, for what was to become a colonial Empire. Why turn this into a discussion on violence? The historical situation, to which we barely allude here, was ripe with force majeure, power at work governing little guys' lives. From Colonialism on, with its relaxed appropriation of others' cultural and material wealth, we will be not that far distant from the rough behavior of British football clubs chanting their way across Belgium with foaming lagers streaming on the air.

Sexuality The entire play Angelica gladly participates in her own commodification, restless to sell herself again, after dismissal by her long time sugar daddy.

Loss of inhibition Sexuality freely expressed is already a breaking of inhibitions, but Benn goes farther than to free up sexuality. As a rare independent woman writer, of her male moment, Aphra wishes to emphasize the lady's personal freedom. Does she make one think of Marguerite de Navarre, Georges Sand, or Simone de Beauvoir? Her much admired poetry, ornate in the fashion of its moment, is meaty and sensuous, but kind to the ear, and fresh. (Her novel, *Oroonoko* (1688), carries this freshness over into the experience of Suriname, to which Aphra made a life-changing travel as a teen ager.) The reader will have noticed, at once, the headlong energy with which this writer plunges into melodrama, violence, and boundary breaking, in a fashion strikingly different from the tightly constructed 'classical' comedy of her contemporaries, Etherege or Congreve.