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The Role Played by Humour in *The Rover* (1677) and *The Rape of the Lock* (1717)

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A 'mix of high and low [comedy and morality]' (Corman)

Behn's Restoration comedy *The Rover* and Pope's eighteenth-century mock-heroic poem *The Rape of the Lock* (*RofL*) satirise their subjects using the freedoms of the post-Commonwealth stage and witty rhetoric. I will focus on the depiction of social order and gendered conflicts in each text. Whilst Behn employs humour to highlight patriarchal double standards and suggest the dangers of sexual violence, Pope focuses primarily on the superficiality of the beau monde he presents. They both also employ authorial representation to draw comparisons between their status as playwright and poet and the texts themselves.

The Rover establishes a world in which civilised society has been upbraided by the Saturnalian frivolities of Carnival, a period during which hedonism and sexual freedom are pursued. Belvile explains the social utility in disguising oneself: 'whatever extravagances we commit in these / faces, our own may not be obliged to answer 'em.' (2.1.2-3). Willmore, however, has more openly lustful intentions and revels in what he perceives as 'a kind of legal authorised / fornication, where the men are not chid for't' (1.2.124-5), establishing a humorous contrast between the former's level-headed roguery and the latter's unapologetically hyper-masculine appetite for sex. Early on, the audience is primed to expect a series of comedic conceits predicated on misunderstanding. Specifically, Behn makes use of the Englishmen's lack of familiarity with their foreign surroundings to generate humour, almost explicitly mocking them when they encounter '*two men dressed all over with horns* ['the traditional sign of cuckoldry'] *of several sorts*' (1.2.112-3) and Belvile remarks ''[t]is a / satire against the whole sex.' (1.2.113-4). These outlandish costumes foreshadow the gulling of Blunt by Lucetta, who steals his possessions after luring him into her bed and sleeps with her gallant, Philippo, instead. Not only does Behn's use of a trapdoor and low lighting accentuate the physical humour in this scene, but the dramatic irony__Lucetta's pre-established plan to 'flatter [him] into any sort of fool she pleases' (1.2.223)__and Blunt's aside ('she's damnably in love with me' (3.2.16)) build anticipation before his inevitable

humiliation. Despite her focus on honourable and intelligent characters, Behn's comedic set pieces demonstrate her 'mix of high and low [comedy and morality]' (Corman 57) and highlight the absurdity of the Carnival setting.

Pope's text frames an attempt at inter-familial reconciliation as a critique and satire of the ostensibly high-stakes strata of the aristocracy, whereas Behn's satire is targeted towards the ravenous sexual appetites of exiled Cavaliers like Willmore. Through elevated language and an eclectic range of references to epic classical texts, he draws a hyperbolic antithesis between the superficial nature of high society and the nobility of gods and heroes. In listing the series of punishments that might befall any Sylphs who fail to protect Belinda from the Baron's slight, Ariel juxtaposes the torture of Ixion on a spinning wheel in Tartarus with the comparatively whimsical image of being submerged in 'fumes of burning chocolate' (2.135) and even mentions being 'wedged whole ages in a bodkin's eye' (2.128). Despite being Belinda's guardian, Ariel seems to suggest contempt for the purely ornamental aspects of her existence, like the increasing popularity of hot chocolate as a drink amongst the upper classes and an instrument used to thread ribbon through the edges of women's clothing. By extension, he also compares Ixion's defiance of Zeus, king of the gods in Greek mythology, and the Baron cutting a lock of hair from Belinda's head as equally damnable, which serves to trivialise the source of the familial drama. Rumbold posits that Pope's is 'a world of objects rather than persons, of surfaces rather than interiors' (165), and Belinda embodies this vacuousness. The cutting of the lock itself is dramatically prolonged: '[t]he meeting points the sacred hair dissever / [f]rom the fair head, forever and forever!' (3.153-4). Enjambment, dislocated word order, and the tautological repetition of 'forever' exaggerate the gravity of the seemingly irreversible injury. Pope's invocation of a biblical event or a Homeric clash of warriors ('screams ...rend the affrighted skies' (3.156)) and suggestion that she values her

lock more than ‘husbands’ or ‘lapdogs’ (3.158), further serves to satirise the caricature representing Arabella Fermor.

Besides stagecraft, Behn also generates humour in *The Rover* through witty exchanges. By exploring the banter between Willmore and Angellica before he seduces her, a more nuanced portrayal of the play’s gendered power dynamics reveals itself. On one hand, Willmore initially seems to have the upper hand in this transaction, capturing Angellica’s feelings through his boldness and wit. His insulting hypocrisy is displayed when he offers to get his friends to ‘put in for a share’ (2.2.49) of her sexual services straight after employing ‘feigned contempt’ (2.2.116) to chastise her for ‘[setting] such price on sin’ (2.2.14), even though he is interested in sex rather than love. As a result, Angellica admits in an aside that his words have helped his ‘conquest [of her affections]’ (2.2.55). The audience’s knowledge that Willmore’s persuasion is working and his continued employment of devices like flattery, implying her eyes have physically wounded him, and melodramatic gestures (*‘Holds her, looks on her, and pauses and sighs’* (2.2.76-7)) contribute to the absurdity of his commitment to deceit. However, she expertly accuses the rover of the ‘mercenary crime’ (2.2.95) of prioritising the value of one’s dowry over her virtues, alluding both to a military and economic semantic field to subtly mock Willmore’s exile as a former captain. The situation is complicated when he too starts to develop feelings for Angellica, falters in his pursuit of her so as not to betray his lustful disposition, and mirrors her aside: ‘Curse on thy charming tongue!’ (2.2.115). Though Willmore eventually breaks his vow to her, a parallel scene takes place in Act V in which Hellena verbally out-wits him and conjures a marriage bargain in her favour, and Bolam points out that, ultimately, ‘the worldly courtesan is less astute than the convent girl’ (xxvi). Therefore, Behn uses wit and verbal humour to explore nuanced dynamics between male and female characters which also subvert archetypal roles.

Similarly, Pope uses humorous comparisons between Clarissa and the belles around her to underscore her unique and more realistic embodiment of womanhood. With the inclusion of Clarissa's lucid speech in 1717, *RofL* provides an alternative perspective on the central conflict. She employs straightforward rhyming couplets to articulate her argument, claiming 'good humor [sic] can prevail / [w]hen airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding fail' (5.31-2). Pope's meticulously constructed lines of iambic pentameter, along with a neat pair of rhyming antonyms, metrically reflect Clarissa's composed logic. The rhythmic polysyndeton also evokes a comedic mocking undertone, as though Clarissa is drawing attention to the scale of all of Belinda's disproportionate reactions. As well as critiquing the transience of beauty and luxury, she highlights a moral compromise that women in this moment must make, rather than advocating an all-out "battle of the sexes": 'she who scorns a man must die a maid' (5.28). In this way, Clarissa's ambiguous stance frames her as a more nuanced, realistic depiction of aristocratic femininity, especially since she 'with tempting grace' (3.127) gave the Baron the scissors to ravish the lock. This suggests her awareness of the degree to which women must stoop to the whims of men for social advancement. However, the comically bathetic reaction to Clarissa's speech_ '[s]o spoke the dame, but no applause ensued' (5.35)_characterises Hampton Court's women as hysterical and irrational in that they launch a battle against the beaux in response. Moreover, 'the pitying audience melt in tears' (5.1) following Belinda's lamentation. Humour, therefore, serves to emphasise the ridiculous and exaggerated conflict between the two families through a more objective lens.

In *The Rover*, despite Behn maintaining a largely farcical tone, the situational humour often reveals the sinister threat of patriarchal and sexual violence. Blunt's humiliation in Act III manifests into a hatred of all women when he plots his revenge. He declares '[he] shall never be reconciled to the sex / more' (4.5.11-2) and tries to rape Florinda, compelling her with imperatives like '[c]ome, no resistance' (4.5.53) and 'thou shalt lie with me too'

(4.5.56). All the while, he wears nothing much other than ‘*an old rusty sword*’ (4.5.8), a symbol of his wounded virility after Lucetta steals his original sword. Even after Frederick intervenes, Florinda must physically contend with his grappling and convince them both of her nobility which, along with Blunt’s near nakedness and the dramatic irony at play, lends the scene a comic tension. What is more frightening is that the Englishmen only stop because they deem ‘[ruffling] a harlot’ (4.5.143) less grave than raping a ‘maid of quality’ (4.5.142); Florinda was only able to prove she was the latter because of Belvile’s diamond ring. Given *The Rover*’s participation in theatrical comedy conventions, Florinda is not afforded any time to reckon with the physiological aftermath of the assault nor does she waste any time before forgiving her aggressors during the play’s denouement, highlighting the real risks of sexual violence for women during this period. Despite Behn’s status as playwright resembling Angellica’s trajectory, having been subject to ‘numerous contemporary attacks on both her character and works’ (Gallagher 5), she ‘depended and capitalized [sic] on’ (7) these defamatory jibes to gain literary popularity. In the Postscript’s witty conclusion, Behn declares ‘I make verses, and others have the fame’ (26-7), just as Angellica is content being omitted from the play’s conclusion knowing that the inconstant Hellena will avenge her honour. As well as her use of dramatic irony and humour, it is also Behn’s final reflection that draws a comparison between the physical abuse threatening her female characters and the slander she herself endured from male critics, exerting authorial power after the playtext’s publication and even following her death.

Since *RofL* is a satire first and foremost, while Pope deems the matter of female chastity and honour as worthy of poetic form, he ultimately undercuts the fatalistic conflict by drawing attention to his own literary powers. If one reads the Sylphs as the souls of women who died as virgins, given that ‘when the Fair in all their pride expire, / To their first elements their souls retire’ (1.57-8), then much of the poem takes on a new significance.

Namely, the Baron, a symbol of ‘man’s imperial race’ (2.27), transforms from an entitled rake into a sexual predator. On one hand, the excessive gestures he enacts as he erects an altar to Love in hope of attaining Belinda’s lock, like ‘prostrate fall[ing], and beg[ging] with ardent eyes’ (2.43), are humorous in their pathos and hyperbole. On the other, the Baron’s deliberation between ‘[b]y force to ravish, or by fraud betray’ (2.32) and threat that ‘[Belinda] by some other [shall] be laid as low’ (5.98) carry ominous allusions to rape and coercion. Pope’s flowery language thinly conceals darker implications which effectively contrast with the dainty, ornamental imagery which saturates Belinda’s domestic sphere. Even so, the sentiment the reader is left with at the end reinforces patriarchal norms in the literary world. After the cosmic battle for Belinda’s wounded honour, Pope decides ‘[w]ith such a prize no mortal must be blessed’ (5.111) and instead the lock ascends to the heavens, in a comedic anti-climax, implying the longevity of his verse and his confidence in its ability to immortalise this story. He also assigns agency to the poem’s Muse (John Caryl) by having him ‘consecrate [the Lock] to fame’ and ‘inscribe Belinda’s name’ (5.149-50). Despite Pope’s dedication to Fermor, he himself claims the glory of the epic-in-miniature and takes ownership of her narrative.

Both Behn and Pope craft playful and subversive narratives which explore the nuances and tensions found in gendered hierarchies and shared social values through a humorous lens, as well as reflecting the extra-narrative dangers of sexual violence and the role of authorship. Whilst Behn explores the freedoms of a chaotic social order by embracing both wit and visual comedy, Pope adopts a more acutely critical and satirical approach to a trivial society devoid of the vitality and virtue of real life but with all the markings of civility.

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