

Mediating Masculinity : Virility Circles in The Rover

Deeksha

Abstract-

This paper will consider the ways in which Behn manages to write a successful Restoration comedy, complete with the conventions of the time, while concurrently critiquing the libertine masculinity that was highly celebrated in the Restoration period. Firstly, Behn places her male characters in notably compromised states of authority and strips them of many conventional sources of power. Secondly, Male sexual aggression, specifically rape, is heavily ironized throughout the play. Thirdly, Behn's male protagonists are often hypocritical regarding the libertine code of values to which they are supposed to adhere. This paper also analyses the interrelationship between subjects & objects of desire. The Rover will be examined in terms of the Girardian and the Sedgwickian triangle formed by the interrelationship between subjects and objects of desire. However, the paper also questions whether Behn had ulterior motives in presenting female agency as unsustainable.

Key words-

female agency, objects of desire, masculine, empowerment

Introduction-

Aphra Behn's *The Rover* is largely a celebration of an extraordinarily dominant and ruthless rake, Willmore, although it also shows his dark side. 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. In her works, Aphra Behn examines the possibilities of female agency in a patriarchal world. Aphra Behn became a controversial figure when she began writing for the stage and her writings have been the subject of much conjecture ever since. A woman extremely liberated for her age, Behn examines in her plays and poetry the possibilities of female agency in a male dominated world. Conventional writings tended to portray relationships where the male partner is the subject and the female counterpart the object of his desires. In her plays and poetry, however, Behn gives agency and a more active role to the female figure.

Interestingly, such female agency can be found in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, and a brief look at these two poems is merited since they provide the unusual examples of the female as subject in works by men prior to Behn's time. In *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare inverts the traditional relationship of beloved-on-a-pedestal (female) and languishing-lover (male) to scornful beloved (male) and pursuant lover (female, goddess). He portrays an active and aggressive Venus, a true goddess, chasing a mortal, Adonis, who acts the part of the cold and distant beloved. So active does Shakespeare make Venus that, for most of the poem, it is her voice that is heard. In *Hero and Leander*, Marlowe allows his heroine some degree of agency too. Compared to Venus's reactions to Adonis in *Venus and Adonis*, though, Hero is less overtly aggressive. She is not, however, the regular passive female of Petrarchan poetry, remaining neither cold nor distant during Leander's persuasion speech. She has, in fact, inspired him to speech by taking the initiative and coming "somewhat near him" (*Hero and Leander* I. 180) and startling him by this unexpected movement. Hero encourages Leander's advances while keeping up an appearance of coyness, so that she gains some control over the situation without making Leander feel threatened or emasculated. Marlowe adds a new dimension to Leander's character, however, by combining both the feminine and the masculine in him, which puts him in a position where he can be both active subject and passive object. Female agency in both Shakespeare's and Marlowe's poems, however, is problematic. In *Venus and Adonis*, Venus's active role is so strong and aggressive that it alienates the object of her desire. The male figure seeks only to escape and the chase is thwarted in the end. In the case of *Hero and Leander*, as mentioned earlier, Leander is given a dual role – both masculine and feminine – which complicates the interpretation of his character. So, while the female characters appear stronger and more active, neither Shakespeare nor Marlowe is willing to yield complete power to them. This is where Behn steps in. Behn's women take care of themselves and each other. However, the agency of these women is

achieved through the use of masks, which is examined particularly in this paper as it influences social relationships. The Rover is a case in point.

Analysis-

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, Belville is placed at a disadvantage in his quest to marry Florinda. Don Pedro, Florinda's brother, admits that Belville 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.

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. Hellena, however, falls in love with the Rover, Willmore, who does not believe in marriage, which, perhaps, should have been ideal in that she could be free of the bindings that accompany marriage. But since she has chosen this man herself, Hellena has the opportunity of being able to impose the bindings on the man and so, with wit and intelligence, she makes him finally succumb to her wishes. Hellena, Florinda's sister, is, according to Heidi Hutner (1993), a combination of the virgin & the whore characters of Killigrew's play *Thomaso*, which was the source for Behn's play. In combining these two oppositional characteristics in the "sexually desirous yet virginal Hellena, Behn emphasizes the limited choices available to women of her age: the nunnery where female sexuality lies buried behind the monastery wall, or prostitution, in which female sexuality represents itself for male pleasure" (Hutner, 1993, p. 106).

Compared to Florinda, Hellena is given more agency. Being not only beautiful but intelligent too, Hellena is able to take control of each of the situations in which she finds herself contending with her lover. The use of a mask and a disguise gives Hellena the opportunity to observe, without being subjected to scrutiny herself, the actions of the man she loves. In other words, the gaze, commonly masculine is inverted. Angellica Bianca, who is, by all definitions, a whore, is Hellena's rival and a character who confuses all the norms of masculine society. She has the advantage of being in control of her body. It is she who actively engages the men's interest and names the price. The men have no choice but to pay what she asks. By having Angellica put up her picture and then look at the men looking at it, Behn, as Hutner (1993) notes, employs the "reversed double gaze – watching the men watch her" (p. 107). Angellica purposely submits herself to objectification, with an awareness of how the men will gaze on her. This awareness allows her a measure of control over the male gaze, which "is a means of acquiring subjectivity". Later on, though, Angellica attempts to avenge herself on Willmore. With a gun in her hand, Angellica assumes a masculine role, but she is unable to kill Willmore and is rather disempowered by having Antonio remove the gun from her hand and being led away. Willmore's nonchalant attitude towards her rage, too, serves to undermine her power. The whore Angellica is cast aside at this point to make way for the virgin Hellena. The issue of the success of one woman over another in gaining a man, however, is problematic in the sense that Angellica's failure may be attributed to her immoral life & Hellena's success to her virginity, virtues, & noble birth, factors or standards which have already been set by a masculine society. Once again, thus, the deciding agent becomes men which suggests that female empowerment is temporary. For both Hellena and Angellica, Willmore is the object of desire. Both seek to appropriate his body.

According to Eve Sedgwick (1985), in her interpretation of Rene Girard, this appropriation is a male action and the object of desire is usually a woman. In *The Rover*, the reverse occurs. Hellena and Angellica, two women, seek Willmore, a man. What is interesting about this relationship is that the triangle which this relationship forms does not point in one direction. Willmore subverts the triangle by making both Hellena and Angellica the objects of his desire. After playing on Angellica's emotions, he succeeds in making her betray the first rule of her trade – not to fall in love. Not only that, he symbolically appropriates her body when he tears her picture off the wall and later, cleverly induces her to sleep with him without payment. When she voices her love for him, he rejects

her without ceremony. Willmore also turns the tables on Hellena's subjectivity when he discovers who she really is – an heiress. Another triangle formed within the complex relationships in this play is seen in the assertion of different forms of patriarchal authority over Hellena who is destined for the Church, an institution which substitutes for the parental authority of the home. On the other side, there is Don Pedro, her brother, who also represents patriarchal authority as her guardian at home. Hellena is unwilling to be subjected to either of these authorities but, nevertheless, she must accept, at least for some time, the united forces of the two. Because she must be a nun, she must comply with a certain code of conduct. Within the Church, her actions will be described by religious authority but while she remains outside the Church, Pedro will substitute for that authority. A relationship or connection is thus formed between Pedro and the Church – both masculine – whose object of interest is a woman. Within the framework of the play, there are other triangles to be found. The collective gaze of the men directed towards Angellica's portrait may be considered one of those triangles where the men are interrelated in their desire for one common object. In a similar way, in the potential gang-rape scene, the men are united and the object of desire is Florinda.

Conclusion -

Thus, in *The Rover*, Behn carefully exposes libertine masculinity in such a way as to criticize, not libertinism as an aesthetic, but the contradictions and flaws of the libertine ethos that promotes male superiority and dominance. Aphra Behn's unusual life had given her a perspective that did not apparently allow her to compromise or agree with the conventional norms of society as dictated by males. Being a woman writer who openly declared her commercial attitude towards her writing, she came to be attacked by her male contemporaries. As such, she had always had to defend her position as a writer. Money, thus, was an important consideration in how Behn portrayed her female characters. By ultimately showing, repeatedly, that female agency is unsustainable for the most part, Behn appears to subscribe to the existing social framework so that her own source of income is not threatened. She portrayed female agency and satisfied her own instincts about female empowerment but ensured that the endings of her works were satisfactory to the dominant masculine circle in which she wrote.

References-

- ~Sedgwick, E. K. (1985). *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- ~Hutner, H. (1993). *Revisioning the Female Body: Aphra Behn's The Rover, Parts I and II*. In H. Hutner (Ed.), *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism* (pp. 102-120). Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.
- ~Goodson, E. T. (2010). *Aphra Behn's The Rover: Evaluating Women's Social and Sexual Options*.
- ~Owen Susan J. "Sexual Politics and Party Politics in Behn's Drama, 1678-83." *Aphra Behn Studies*. Ed. Janet Todd. Cambridge University Press, 1996. 15–29.
- ~Behn, A. (1995). *The Rover and Other Plays*. J. Spencer (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press
- ~Pacheco, Anita. "Rape and the Female Subject in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*." *EHL* 65.2 (Summer 1998): 323–345

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.