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Teaching Willmore

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Abstract

Teaching Aphra Behn's *The Rover* for nearly four decades, I have witnessed a considerable shift in students' attitudes toward the play, especially toward Willmore. More positive about his character in the 1970s and 1980s, they have had a much more negative assessment since then. The only available video version, the Women's Theatre Trust production, compounds my pedagogical problem through filming techniques and choice of actor; emphasizing male violence against women, its interpretation parallels feminist criticism of the 1990s. Asking students to examine theater history may lead them to see that Behn does not completely match this ideological paradigm. The original casting featured William Smith as Willmore, and learning about his performances in the company at Dorset Garden may help students recognize that the character was conceived to emphasize his comic dimension as a flawed, desirable partner for Hellena. Understanding Behn's comedy within the collaborative enterprise of Restoration theater may complicate their views of Willmore.

Keywords

libertinine, comedy, casting, performance, male violence

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Cover Page Footnote

This essay originated as a paper presented at the 39th Annual Meeting of the Southeastern American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Charleston, SC, March 1, 2013. Thanks to Misty G. Anderson, who chaired "Restoration: The 'Other' Eighteenth Century," and those present for a lively discussion, especially Elizabeth Kraft for her later suggestions. Even more thanks are due to my students of four decades, who have explored *The Rover* with me.

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?" (125). In this ending is the beginning of my pedagogical tale. In recent years I've used this moment as part of the prompt for an examination essay, asking students whether they agree with the voices crying: "A captain! A captain!" While it is "a clear case" to Hellena, it is not, alas, for most of my undergraduates. In their responses in Spring, Summer, and Fall 2012, many asserted that she should marry to avoid the nunnery, for which she is so clearly unsuited. A few suggested that she should, nevertheless, enter the order, but almost none argued that marrying Willmore is a smart idea.

I've been teaching *The Rover* for nearly four decades, for it was available at the outset of my career in the Regents Restoration Drama Series. I typically juxtapose Behn's play with other representations of libertines, including poems by the Earl of Rochester and another sex comedy, either Sir George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* or William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. In class discussion and writing assignments, I invite students to contrast Willmore with one of the other stage libertines, generally expecting that they will find him more comical and appealing than the more calculating Dorimant or Horner. However, my students' attitudes toward *The Rover*, and especially toward Willmore, have changed from the 1970s and 1980s, when they were much more positive about his character, to a much more negative assessment in the last two decades. These English majors, who are sometimes second majors or minors in Women's and Gender Studies, take positions that Aphra Behn could not have foreseen in 1677. Admittedly, I have compounded the problem through my practice of including, when possible, scenes from recorded performances of plays. The only available version of *The Rover* is the 1994 Women's Playhouse Trust production for the Open University and the BBC, which largely presents Willmore as an undesirable brute through its staging, its filming techniques, and the actor portraying him.

In considering ways to respond to and perhaps modify this interpretive trend in my classes, I propose asking students to examine theater history. The original casting of the play at the Duke's Theatre in Dorset Garden featured William Smith as Willmore, a popular role he reprised in the sequel Behn wrote several years later. Exploring Smith's performances in this company may at least complicate students' responses by suggesting 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. "Shady and amorous as she was," in Virginia Woolf's famous estimate (71), Behn does not completely match the ideological paradigm into which she and her most famous comedy have sometimes been placed.

Willmore in the 1990s

The Women's Playhouse Trust production, directed by Jules Wright, with Lizbeth Goodman as dramaturge, sets the play in an unnamed post-colonial country. Its casting, altered to "multi-racial," reveals, in Goodman's description, "white men as the colonizers, black women and black

men interacting with each other (as colonizers and colonized), all thrown into relief by the casting of an Indian woman as Angellica” (Owens and Goodman 178). She adds that the production was intended to be “politically challenging,” especially in contrast to the only other major British production, that of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1986, which she deems “lighthearted”; this instead would be “a version that would show the more serious side of the play – the power politics of the story” (Owens and Goodman 178). Describing her approach to directing, Wright states: “My task . . . is to uncover a text’s coherence, what I think the writer’s point of view is – but obviously that has to do with who *I* am, *my* perspective, which is feminist . . .” Willing to turn “a classic text inside out,” she declares, “If you’re going to deal with misogyny then you want the men in the cast to take on the violence . . . Sometimes you have to display a brutality in order to confront the audience with such behaviour” (qtd. in Schafer 35, 36-37). Of this emphasis on male violence, she adds, “I’ve seen other reviews of other productions of the play, and I don’t think anyone noticed that there were rapes in it before” (qtd. in Owens and Goodman 178).

Given Wright’s perspective, it is hardly surprising that all male characters in this production are portrayed as misogynistic. Belvile, whose name is pronounced “bel-vīle” to stress his resemblance, is no better than his fellow “Banished Cavaliers” and hardly worthy of Florinda’s love. Florinda’s assaults by Willmore in Act 3 and Blunt in Act 4 and the potential gang rape in Act 5 are staged brutally. Commenting on visual images of Willmore’s “attempted rape,” Goodman describes one shot conveying “Florinda thrown onto the ground violently” and locating “our gaze . . . above, distant and voyeuristic.” A change in camera angle “positions us with Florinda; we see from her point of view – the towering body and menacing face of her attacker” (Owens and Goodman 185). Multi-racial casting adds another negative dimension not even implicit in Behn’s text: a white actor looming over a diminutive actress of color. In addition, Willmore, as portrayed by Andy Serkis, is not a pleasant figure. Now known to students for later film work as the malicious Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Serkis elicits such unsavory aspects of Willmore that he cannot plausibly attract the witty, cross-dressing virgin Hellena or the beautiful courtesan Angellica Bianca. Predictably, the main problem London reviewers found with this production was “the seeming lack of recognition that the play was supposed to be a *comedy*” (Owens and Goodman 173). One concluded, “the comic spirit is in short supply” (qtd. in Copeland 176). The most effective comedy in this production occurs in the second half of Act 4, Scene 2, when Willmore, Angellica, and Hellena (in boy’s attire) speak in pairs, exchanging perspectives overheard by the excluded character. Asides by Serkis bring Behn’s humor briefly to the fore.

Wright’s directorial emphasis, of course, parallels academic criticism in the 1990s. For example, three essays in the 1996 collection *Broken Boundaries: Women & Feminism in Restoration Drama*, a volume to which I contributed, assert in various ways that *The Rover* exposes “political phallicism” (Boebel 54). Dagny Boebel interprets Willmore’s “‘actual’ sexual assault” on Florinda as “a reiteration of paternal authority over women and the negation of female desire” (64, 66). Jean I. Marsden describes the “scenes of attempted rape” as “more concerned with the male objectification of women than with the display of women as erotic objects” (194). Peggy Thompson remarks that Willmore’s attempted rape is strikingly similar to Blunt’s “act of vengeful domination” (79). The fullest discussion of this topic is Anita Pacheco’s 1998 essay in *ELH*, “Rape and the Female Subject in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*.” Before Florinda reaches “the

obligatory happy ending,” Pacheco writes, she “faces three attempted rapes that are called not rape, but seduction, retaliation, or ‘ruffling a harlot.’” Such scenes, she argues, “interrogate and problematize different modes of female subjectivity by situating them within a patriarchal dramatic world in which the psychology of rape is endemic” (“Rape” 323). Like Wright’s production, Pacheco’s essay positions all male characters within this paradigm. “Willmore’s perspective” in Act 3, Scene 5, she contends, is “clearly patriarchal”; “‘seduction’ is laid bare as a form of socially sanctioned rape” (“Rape” 328). One distinctive aspect of Pacheco’s essay is her recognition that Behn was writing a comedy, a statement that I want to quote at length:

There is no doubt that this political analysis is partially neutralized by the scene’s comic project, which finds humor in the confusion born of the characters’ opposing perspectives and ensures that it is Willmore . . . who gets the laughs. On this level, the scene is written with Behn’s male spectators in mind, and accommodates the most complacent of responses to Florinda’s predicament. The extent to which the scene’s critique of patriarchy is able to break through the comic smoke-screen depends in large part on its staging. (“Rape” 328)

In acknowledging a possible boundary for her reading, this passage points toward the next section of my paper, for she considers Restoration performance issues and implicitly invokes the model of “producible interpretation,” a useful concept developed by Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume. Pacheco’s feminist assumptions, persuasively stated, also make clear how students in the 1990s and after, whether or not they see the film, would increasingly respond to Willmore as they have. I no longer show my classes the filmed version of the garden gate scene, so that students can reach their own conclusions without being influenced by its images.

Willmore in 1677

Beginning with Janet Todd’s *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (1997), several books have led me to consider more fully the original performances of *The Rover*, which premiered late in the season, on Saturday, 24 March 1677; it was Behn’s sixth play at the Duke’s Theatre. Derek Hughes’s *The Theatre of Aphra Behn* (2001), Misty G. Anderson’s *Female Playwrights and Eighteenth-Century Comedy: Negotiating Marriage on the London Stage* (2002), and Nancy Copeland’s *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre: Women’s Comedy and the Theatre* (2004) complement and interpret the kind of information students might find in *The London Stage 1660-1800* or *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*. With their emphasis on performance and staging, these monographs allow a frustrated professor to direct students toward interpretations of Willmore that may be somewhat more plausibly “producible” and somewhat less ideologically predictable. As Anderson points out, Behn had to “fit” her plot “within the parameters of genre and the theatrical market”: “stage comedies demand public laughter” (4, 5).

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 being the greatest Restoration actor, performed Belville. 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,” who in comedies, “generally took one of the two male leads” (Hughes 200). Only twelve months earlier, during the previous season, Betterton had created the most famous libertine character of the era: Dorimant in *The Man of Mode*. Both Hughes and Todd properly see *The Rover* as a post-*Man of Mode* comedy (Todd 213; Hughes 81). So why, we might ask, didn’t the company seek to build on this success, with Betterton again in the lead? Why, instead, did Smith take the part? What might this casting tell students about the collaborative approach to the character by Behn, Smith, and Betterton, a co-manager as well as an actor?

According to Milhous, while Smith “occasionally took the part of a compromised hero in tragedy . . . his greatest talent was for dashing heroes in comedy, some of them noble and strictly honorable, others sex-mad scamps” (360). She places his Willmore in the latter category. Copeland remarks that Smith’s casting “underlines the combination of attractiveness and ineptness” of a character with a “penchant for mishaps,” and a “tendency . . . to become involved in sometimes humiliating, farcical situations”; this casting, she argues, “qualifies interpretations of Willmore as a dangerous libertine intended to exemplify and critique the type’s viciousness” (27). Unlike the cool plotter Dorimant, who pursues an heiress, while breaking off a liaison with one mistress and seducing another, Willmore has no plans when he comes ashore in Naples. Much more reactive than Dorimant, he meets Hellena because she ventures into Carnival, learns about Angellica because she uses a picture to advertise, and stumbles upon Florinda because she opens a garden gate. Hughes comments on Smith’s role in *The Man of Mode* – Sir Fopling Flutter – as indicative that “he had a lighter touch than Betterton” and so was better able to “portray Willmore’s charm.” Smith, he asserts, was “equally equipped to portray him for what he intermittently is: the play’s chief fool” (84). Playwright and managers evidently wanted to stress physical and performative differences from Etherege’s character Dorimant. Perhaps Willmore’s primary resemblance to the earlier libertine, his capacity for eloquence and wit, came about, Todd suggests, because of the opportunity newly offered by Elizabeth Barry, who permitted Behn to try her hand with “the ‘gay couple,’ including the sympathetic Restoration rake, firmly in the centre” (213). For example, the spirited dialogue in Act 5, about 100 lines culminating in the revelation of the names Robert the Constant and Hellena the Inconstant, completes a series of brief scenes that resembles the more sustained wit of Dorimant and Harriet in *The Man of Mode*.

Willmore also differs from Smith’s Sir Fopling, which Milhous labels “rather out of his métier, a casting that implies a less effeminate character than some later interpretations of that glamorous if ridiculous fop” (361). While Dorimant and Sir Fopling are both men of mode, the latter exaggerates his style as he proudly identifies the Parisian brands of his clothes. Dorimant, on the other hand, has the self-control to declare himself “not so foppishly in love” with Harriet to neglect an assignation with his new mistress, Belinda (Etherege 254). Despite the “considerable range” of both actors, Hughes suggests, Betterton was often cast when greater “ruthlessness” was needed, but Smith was “the preferred actor for light, lively, good-natured parts” (111). We can appreciate the latter’s comic skills better if we compare his roles in these two plays. Just as Sir Fopling cannot resist a new fashion, Willmore cannot turn away from a new woman. In Act 4, Scene 2, for example, after pursuing Hellena, seducing Angellica, and confronting Florinda, he is elated to learn that yet another woman may be attracted to him. Overhearing dialogue between Angellica 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” (87). Hellena has already prepared the audience response when she entered earlier and observed Willmore with Angellica: “My mad captain’s with her . . . for all his swearing. How this unconstant humor makes me love him!” (85). If Willmore is Fopling’s antithesis in fashion, making his first appearance in badly soiled attire, he shares the latter’s humorous obsessiveness. He also shares a tendency to spoil others’ plans, becoming “a marplot rather than a plotter” (Copeland 27). The garden gate scene disrupts Belvile’s rendezvous with Florinda, just as his seduction of Angellica interrupts the rivalry of two Spaniards, Don Pedro and Don Antonio, for her possession. Smith’s talent for performing ineptitude meshed well with Behn’s character.

From this perspective, then, we might look at Willmore’s assault on Florinda somewhat differently than in feminist film and criticism. Stage directions, beginning with the time, “*the night*,” when Florinda enters “*in an undress*” and “*unlocks the door*” to the garden, open the action into a more public space; this is quickly followed by “*Enter Willmore, drunk*” (65, 66). Not until sixty lines later, immediately before the entrance of Belvile and Frederick, do we read this stage direction: “*She struggles with him*” (68). Copeland interprets the scene as “a comic demonstration of Willmore’s ‘extravagant’ excesses” (25). Susan J. Owen concedes: “There is no doubt that the drunkenness makes the rape scene comic. It may even seem to palliate the libertine’s offence.” While noting that “some of the comedy is at Willmore’s expense,” she adds, “there is also laughter at the floundering Florinda. . . it would be hard for a spectator in the theatre (even a female one) to resist at least a temporary comic collusion with male values” (131). Anderson also points out that “Behn gives her audience hope for a comic resolution to the rape scene in spite of Florinda’s real bodily danger; they know that her virtuous lover Belvile is on his way.” Such knowledge makes what is “darkly comic . . . tolerable but still critically pointed” (82).

Act 3, Scene 5 follows the sequence in which Blunt is tricked by the prostitute Lucetta, then stripped and deposited in the “*common shore . . . all dirty*” (64). In some criticism this juxtaposition leads to assertions that Behn parallels Blunt and Willmore to link their misogyny and violence toward women. However, given the original casting of these parts, these parallel scenes in Act 3 could be interpreted somewhat differently: a foolish Englishman confronting a woman he discovers or comes to believe is a prostitute. Blunt, acted by the comedian Underhill, initially thinks he has charmed Lucetta, but eventually realizes he has been “the Essex calf . . . a dull believing English country fop” (65). Willmore, in darkness and drunkenness, hoping the garden will be a fine place to sleep, follows a similar comic arc. When Florinda resists his words and hands and threatens to cry “murder, rape, or anything,” he asks, “Why at this time of night was your cobweb door set open, dear spider, but to catch flies? . . . Oh, oh, I find what you would be at. Look here, here’s a pistole for you. . . So now, now, she would be wheedling me for more! What, you will not take it then?” (67-68). If Willmore is the “filthy beast” or “senseless swine” Florinda and Belvile accuse him of being (66, 69), he is also an amusing, fumbling character, very much in the dark about his situation.

Ros Ballaster’s recent essay on Behn’s libertine aesthetic suggests that we look again at the figure long considered a possible model for Willmore – John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. The resemblance to Rochester, Ballaster writes, is “confirmed in Behn’s choice of name: Willmore’s name is simply an extension of Wilmot’s – he has ‘more’ will than Wilmot” (167). Her emphasis

on “more” leads me to assert that Behn’s naming indicates the comic exaggeration that constitutes the basis of her character.¹ As scripted by Behn and performed by Smith, Willmore is an over-the-top figure, often ridiculous, occasionally eloquent, if sometimes dangerous. If he never resembles a more idealistic lover like Belvile, neither does he become a woman-hating revenger like Blunt. In addition, even in potentially dire circumstances, he reverts to his comic obsession, always desiring more. For example, in Act 5 he tells Don Pedro, as assembled male characters threaten Florinda, “perhaps the lady will not be imposed upon; she’ll choose her man” (109). While this line may be read as indication of his complicity in the proposed assault, it may be instead an eruption of comic egotism, separating Willmore from the others, making him once more potentially a marplot. Based on his experience with other women in Naples, he hopes to be “her man” too. When he soon asks for and receives Florinda’s pardon, he still cannot keep himself from remarking on her “surprising beauty” (111). In one of his final speeches Willmore declares, “I am of a nation that are of opinion a woman’s honor is not worth guarding when she has a mind to part with it.” Hellena, perhaps voicing Behn’s closing perspective on her character, concurs, “Well said, captain” (125). Looking back at the original production, I suggest that the Willmore of Behn and Smith seems likely to have been comic in conception, perhaps charming and amusing enough to resolve the plot happily in his marriage to the “captain hunting” heroine.

I find myself in a position somewhat analogous to the one Samuel Johnson describes in challenging neoclassical orthodoxies about Shakespeare: “Perhaps what I have here not dogmatically but deliberately written may recall the principles of the drama to a new examination. I am almost frightened at my own temerity and, when I estimate the fame and the strength of those that maintain the contrary opinion, am ready to sink down in reverential silence” (314). As I argue that performance history offers the rationale for a more comic Willmore, I am encouraged by two essays in the 2010 MLA collection *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*. Pacheco, who aims “to help students grasp Behn’s consummate talent as a dramatist,” identifies Willmore as “at once the play’s libertine hero and a bit of a fool” (“Teaching” 365). Laura Rosenthal calls him “a complex and ambivalent portrait,” a character whose “humor [and] charm . . . garner him considerable audience sympathy” (319, 321). I take it as a good sign that these scholars are asking their students to think more about Willmore in performance. Even more recently, Sarah Olivier precedes her analysis of the garden gate scene by asking this question about “an attractive, comedic hero”: “Why does Behn make him both a drunken rapist and an extravagant rake hero?” (60). While Behn may not be “pandering to a male audience” to assure “financial success” (64), as Olivier asserts, she makes the case that staging is central to audience perception of this scene.

Examining *The London Stage* while writing this essay, I discovered a week in 1680 that provides a final insight into the interaction of the playwright and the repertory company with its patron. On Wednesday, 11 February, the Duke’s Company reprised *The Rover* and on Tuesday, 17 February, *The Man of Mode*, both at the Court of Charles II (Van Lennep 282). King and courtiers must have laughed as they compared the comic skills of William Smith as Willmore and Sir Fopling Flutter. The week’s performances may also have encouraged Behn to consider a new vehicle for Smith as Willmore, the more farcical *Second Part of the Rover*, which premiered in the following January. We know that the King’s brother, James, Duke of York, “had praised *The Rover*” and “suggested a sequel,” to which Behn became “receptive” when “recalling her

play while she grieved over Rochester” (Todd 268). For Behn, Smith, and the managers, such praise surely affirmed their collaborative work in shaping this comic character.

Notes

1. After Rochester's death in July 1680, there were several less sympathetic dramatic depictions of him, which more closely resemble Andy Serkis's undesirable characterization: Nemours in Nathaniel Lee's *The Princess of Cleves* (1681), Daredevil in Thomas Otway's *The Atheist* (1683), and Florio in John Crowne's *City Politiques* (1683).

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