

2019 Seminar Abstracts:

Approaches to Aphra Behn's *The Rover*: Text, Teaching, and Performance
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This seminar aims to examine Aphra Behn's best-known play, *The Rover*, from a range of perspectives, so as to develop new interpretations through the cross-fertilization of methods and contexts. How might we best approach *The Rover* in 2019?

'January-May Relationships in *The Rover*'

Dr. Judith Petterson Clark, Stephens College

Increasing numbers of professors who have taught Aphra Behn's *The Rover* primarily in undergraduate English Literary Traditions or "survey" courses find themselves teaching in programs designed for lifelong learners. A class of learners who must be over fifty-five offers many opportunities for re-viewing works previously shared only with undergraduates, of which being more attentive to representations of older characters is only one. Despite the fact that *The Rover* has no old men in the cast, the play responds to interpretations informed by versions of the January/May marriage in Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale," "The Miller's Tale," and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." The first two tales are wonderful illustrations of the variables in the January/May marriage to which characters in *The Rover* refer. The Wife of Bath is most helpful in giving a woman's view and in reminding us that all those young Mays will grow older. What then? The Wife tells a tale of a loathly old hag who marries a young handsome faithful knight and becomes young, beautiful, and faithful herself. It is hard not to read the tale as wish fulfillment for the teller. Angellica Bianca is also a survivor of a January/May relationship. But with the appearance of Willmore she begins to display characteristics associated with January figures. She professes love, expects an exclusive relationship, gives money to Willmore based on that expectation, becomes wildly jealous of young Hellena. The Women's Playhouse Trust understood the performance implications. In their 1995 film, Angellica Bianca, played by Maya Krishna Rao, is clearly older than Hellena. She speaks deliberately; she controls her seductive movements and her space, while a driven Hellena pedals around on a bicycle, leaning over her handlebars, chasing after Willmore. Realizing that Angellica Bianca is no longer a young woman, by the standards of her society, deepens our understanding of her problematic behavior in Act V.

'Imagining Public Spaces in *The Rover*'

Taylor Corse, Arizona State University

This paper explores the ways in which Behn makes spaces, in particular public spaces, meaningful. Half of the scenes (six out of twelve) in *The Rover* take place out of doors on the public streets and thoroughfares of Naples. A very important scene (4.2) unfolds on the Molo, the huge jetty where ships dock, passengers embark or disembark, cargo gets loaded and unloaded. I investigate the Molo as a liminal space conjoining land and sea, citizens and sailors. To help visualize this setting, I will refer to some 17th century images of the streets, piazzas, and port of Naples. This paper combines literary and art history methods along with approaches to teaching *The Rover* to undergraduates.

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Before the plague of 1656, Naples had a population of roughly 400,000 inhabitants, making it one of the largest cities in Europe at the time. When the diarist John Evelyn visited there in 1645, he remarked that “the building of the city is for the size the most magnificent of any in Europe, the streets exceedingly large [and] well-paved.” The busy (and sometimes confusing) stage action of *The Rover* is possible and credible precisely because Naples enjoyed a reputation for commodious public spaces. I will illustrate this visual aspect of Naples by examining seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings Filippo Napoletano, Johannes Lingelbach, Angelo Costa, Antonio Joli, Garspar Butler, and other artists.

'Discoveries, Beds, and the Gendering of Theatrical Space in *The Rover*'

Mr. Alexander Paulsson-Lash, Columbia University

More than any other playwright in the seventeenth century, Behn was obsessed with staging discoveries of bedchambers and similar intimate spaces. In this paper, I suggest that she was thereby exploring and responding to the gendered dynamics at play when beds were brought on to the seventeenth-century stage. The very possibility that a woman would appear discovered in her bed would typically signal a threat of violence, as is the case in the generic forbear of *The Rover*, Samuel Tuke's 1663 *The Adventures of Five Hours*, and this threatened violence would easily serve to recall the century's most famous onstage bed, that which appears at the end of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604).

Behn proves especially interested, throughout *The Rover*, in how women can encounter the threat of male violence both in the open space of the street and in the hidden space of the bedchamber. Not only does she adapt, from her source play (Thomas Killigrew's *Thomaso*), an attempted gang-rape inside a male character's chambers, she also adds a new attempted rape, this time by her titular hero Willmore, who stumbles into the innocent Florinda on the street outside her garden gate. Scholars have located a titillating fascination with the actress's body in attempted rapes like these, but Behn also forecloses that titillation by the fact that neither of these scenes involve Florinda discovered in her bed. In this paper, I argue that Behn responds to the inherent violence that so often accompanies the discovery of women, instead using these stage technologies both to humiliate men and to show her female characters taking control of the theatrical space.

'A History of Trauma: Teaching Aphra Behn's *The Rover* in the #MeToo Era'

Dr. Shawn Moore, Florida Southwestern State College

Teaching Aphra Behn's *The Rover* in an undergraduate survey course is complicated. Devoting enough time to historicizing the political and cultural shifts along with the changes in dramatic productions following the Restoration, while also spending enough time analyzing the text, is a delicate and demanding task. Teaching *The Rover* in the #MeToo era complicates this process even further, but it's a necessary complication for helping students understand the complex

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relationships between calls for social change and justice and the reactionary rhetoric and violence enacted on women's bodies during times of social and cultural unrest. Pedagogically, the #MeToo movement provides an essential framework for discussing and interrogating the trauma of sexual assault in the play while also foregrounding historical and contemporary discussions of what women's empowerment looks like in marginalized communities on personal and institutional levels. Students are quick to make connections between Florinda's plight, Angelica's misfortune, and Hellen's fate all at the hand of the rake/fuccboi Willmore. Students see the women as a community brought together through shared trauma. Their focus on Willmore and the association between the rake character and the modern incarnation of a fuccboi—a man who does stupid shit to get a specific reaction while also wearing particularly flamboyant clothes—yields fascinating discussions of classifications and types in the play. In particular, we discuss the blurring of boundaries between a fuccboi and a sexual predator and whether Behn is interrogating the same lines through Willmore. Finally, because academia has been slow to have its own #MeToo moment, these conversations also open up space to discuss histories of sexual exclusion, harassment, and violence within the field.

'Blurred Lines and Lifelines: Teaching *The Rover* in the #MeToo Era'

Dr. Vanessa Rapatz, Ball State University

In a recent Vox article, Tara Isabella Burton points to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* as "one of the most relevant plays ever written about sexual harassment and abuse against women, and the stakes for women who speak up about it."¹ Shakespeare's play is an essential example as we consider what literature has to teach us about the history of rape culture and attempts to silence harassment survivors. I would add several early-modern texts to this syllabus, including Aphra Behn's *The Rover* because it highlights the historical pervasiveness of toxic masculinity and rape culture. The dynamic between Angelo and Isabella in *Measure for Measure* provides a chilling example of the stakes for women who are preyed upon by powerful men. Focusing on the Weisnteins and Cosbys of the world, however, sets us up to pigeonhole such men as exceptions to the rule. Behn's play is saturated with a "bro" culture that summons up adages such as "boys will be boys" and promotes the rants of what we would now term "incels." Characters including the eponymous rover slough off thwarted rape attempts by suggesting that they read the signs of virtue wrong, not being able to distinguish a woman of "quality" from an errant harlot. Such responses anticipate the male hysteria in the wake of the #metoo movement about false accusations and unwritten rules that, they claim, render consent illegible. As stand-up comic Hannah Gadsby has recently admonished, the problem with this response is that men draw lines of demarcation based on context—locker room talk, interactions with women family members, "drunk and frattting" times—and all of the line-drawers believe they are "good men."² She calls for women to control the lines; and this is where I think we can complicate the way we present Behn's play in our classrooms and in our research. This is also a play about women attempting to draw their own lines, lines that I would like to frame with Sara Ahmed's conception of lifelines,³ lines that at once reinforce and offer a escape from patriarchal dictums. *The Rover*, then, with its strong women characters offers a complex landscape to explore the

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dynamics of toxic masculinity in conversation with women's subversion of patriarchal and misogynist dictums.

1 Tara Isabella Burton, "What a lesser-known Shakespeare play can teach us about Harvey Weinstein," vox.com, November 15, 2017.

<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/15/16644938/shakespeare-measure-for-measure-weinstein-sexual-harassment-play-theater>

2 Hannah Gadsby, "Opening Remarks," *Hollywood Reporter*'s Women in Entertainment Gala, December 5, 2018

3 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

"Both of one humour": excess passion in *The Rover*

Dr. Rachel Willie, Liverpool John Moores University

Behn's indebtedness to past authors has long been recognized. Discussion of the relationship between *The Rover* and *Thomason* has shaped and informed much scholarship on the play. Analyses of Behn's representation of the courtesan and the virtuous woman – perhaps especially in terms of subjectivity, rape and patriarchy – has also unearthed the complexity of the drama. However, full appreciation of the role of heat and the humours as drivers of the plot remains neglected. The ending of the play flirts with the *topos* of revenge as Blunt embarks upon an unfulfilled vendetta against all women in vengeance for being gulled by Lucetta. Such thematic use of revenge for comic purposes points to – and lampoons – the tenets of Jacobean revenge tragedy. In addition to this, it underscores the perils of extreme emotion. This is further emphasized by the way in which the play consistently returns to and indexes the humours.

As Katherine Rowe's essay on cognition and the passions in William Davenant's adaptation of *Macbeth* illustrates, Cartesian dualism disconnected mind from body, re-orientating the relationship between body, mind and the passions. Yet humoral theory continued to influence both medicine and characterization on the Restoration stage. This paper will assess how Behn revives and reinvents the comedy of humours, a form that was briefly popular in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and elaborated upon by Ben Jonson. In his brief definition of the genre, J. A. Cuddon notes that Shadwell revived humours comedy with *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) and *Bury Fair* (1689). However, in *The Rover*, Behn follows Jonson in predicated the plot upon humoral characterization without ever directly addressing or analyzing the four humours in any systemic way. What emerges is the rich dialogue between early Stuart drama, the Restoration stage and how the body and emotions were understood.