

Aphra Behn



The Rover *or, the Spanish Cavaliers*

A Playgoer's Guide

"All women together, ought to let flowers fall upon the grave of Aphra Behn . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds." – Virginia Woolf

The Author

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was one of the first successful female writers in English history. She was born to Bartholomew Johnson and Elizabeth. Her most popular works included *The Rover*, *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, and *Oroonoko*. Aphra Johnson married Johan Behn, who was a merchant of German or Dutch extraction. Little conclusive information is known about their marriage, but it did not last for more than a few years. Some scholars believe that the marriage never existed and Behn made it up purely to gain the status of a widow, which would have been much more beneficial for what she was trying to achieve. She was reportedly bisexual, and held a larger attraction to women than to men, a trait that, coupled with her writings and references of this nature, would eventually make her popular in the writing and artistic communities of the present day. Aphra Behn was also said to have been a spy for Charles II. She was given the code name Astrea under which she published many of her writings.

Aphra Behn is known for being one of the first Englishwomen to earn a livelihood by authorship and is also credited with influencing future female writers and the development of the English novel toward realism. Attributing her success to her "ability to write like a man," she competed professionally with the prominent "wits" of Restoration England, including George Etherege, William Wycherley, John Dryden, and William Congreve. Similar to the literary endeavors of her male contemporaries, Behn's writings catered to the libertine tastes of King Charles II and his supporters, and occasionally excelled as humorous satires recording the political and social events of the era. In an age of libertines, Behn undertook to proclaim and to analyse women's sexual desire, as manifested in her characters and in herself. She has since become a favourite among sexually liberated women, many of bisexual or lesbian orientation, who proclaim her as one of their most positive influences. Virginia Woolf has argued that Behn's total career is more important than any particular work it produced. After a hiatus in the 19th century, when both the writer and the work were dismissed as indecent, Behn's fame has now undergone extraordinary revival. She dominates cultural-studies discourse as both a topic and a set of texts.

Some historical background

Between 1642 and 1649 England experienced a Civil War during which King Charles I fled his home and the throne because the Parliament and English Protestant community did not agree with his ideas, such as combining England, Scotland and Ireland and marrying a Catholic wife. The English majority felt that they would not only lose their rituals and culture, but that their status as a Protestant nation would be compromised. As a result, King Charles I was beheaded. His son Charles II was defeated when he attempted to gain the throne in 1651. After his defeat, Charles II and his followers fled England for the years that followed. In fact, it was not until 1660 that he was invited to return and reassume the throne as King and with his Restoration as King his followers returned to England with him.

The term Cavalier came about because it was the name used by Parliamentarians for a Royalist supporter of King Charles I and II during the English Civil War. Typically, the term "Cavalier" referred to the high-born supporters of King Charles, who were fond of fashionable, extravagant clothing, wit, and flamboyant libertinism. However, the word was coined by the Roundheads (as the Cavaliers, in turn, called the Parliamentarians, because they abjured the elaborate wigs of the Cavaliers), as a pejorative propaganda image of a licentious, hard drinking and frivolous man, who rarely, if ever, thought of God.



Charles II

Aphra Behn was a supporter of Charles II and we see her glorifying the actions and the free spirit of the Cavalier lifestyle in her play – a play that became enormously popular with the King and many other theatergoers during her time and after, so successful that a sequel was called for. She dedicated it to King Charles.

Synopsis

The Rover takes place during Carnival in Italy. The story is built around the two main characters, Hellena and Florinda. Hellena is on her way to become a nun and Florinda has been promised to a rich old merchant. Florinda's father wants her to marry the old merchant, and his daughter Hellena to go to the convent. Both his wishes are based on his need to increase the family fortune. Unfortunately Florinda does not want to marry the old merchant, but rather to marry one of the “banish’d Cavaliers,” Belville. Hellena dreams of falling in love, and their brother Pedro wants Florinda to marry his friend Antonio. Some of the other characters include Willmore, Frederick, and Blunt who are expatriate royalists, impoverished and banished for supporting Charles II. All the male characters encounter and are intrigued by Angellica Bianca, the famous courtesan, who is advertising her services for an extraordinary fee. Angellica vows never to fall in love, but unfortunately gives in to Willmore who eventually betrays her. Meanwhile, Willmore and then Blunt nearly rape Florinda on two different occasions, illustrating how fragile her position as a virtuous woman is. Hellena maintains her safety by her disguise as a gypsy and by her own wit.

This guide was researched by

Members of

English 2223 *The Page and the Stage*

Courtney Cameron, Christopher Campbell, Nick Comeau, Yasmin Ginton, Andrea Hynes, Greg Keezer, Hilja Lindala, Jeremy Peck, Rebecca Rankin, Scott Saulnier, Sally Smith, Alisha Sweezey

and assembled and edited by

Russ Hunt

(Much of the material has been adapted from Wikipedia, E-notes and the “Women in Theatre” blog of Vanessa Klobn)

St. Thomas University English 2223:

The Page and the Stage

visit our Web site, at:

<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22230607/>