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The Libertine, the Gypsy, and the Lump: Gender Inversions in Wilmot's "The Imperfect Enjoyment" and Behn's *The Rover*

In both John Wilmot's "The Imperfect Enjoyment" and Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, the male and female stereotypes of the Restoration period are called into question and even inverted. Both writers challenge the concept of the will, both in terms of its spiritual and sexual connotations. The politics of sexual desire materialize as an important theme against the setting of a culture in which the masculine will is correlated with authority and freedom and the female will with reliance and restraint. Both Wilmot and Behn provide unexpected depth for their characters, which plays against the accepted social constructs of the era. Just as Wilmot's poem highlights the allure of a strong, autonomous female lover, within Behn's *The Rover*, the women directly, as well as remotely, control the action. In this paper, I argue that the traits of intelligence and wit are valued highly by both writers and are epitomized by their female protagonists; this not only empowers but also obliges these women to be largely answerable for their own happiness and fate.

These valued characteristics of intelligence and wit provide both Corinna in "The Imperfect Enjoyment" and Hellena in *The Rover* with the tools for empowerment, but Corinna is ultimately not compensated sexually for her display of autonomy throughout the poem. The two lovers are "equally inspired with eager fire" (line 3) and the first half of the poem is dominated by action verbs that revolve around Corinna: she "clips" (line 6), "sucks" (line 6), "plays" (line 7), "conveys" (line 8), and "guides" (line 13). Wilmot's engaged lover is the epitome of potent sexual will, as every part of her, including her "arms, legs, lips" (line 5), is "melting through kindness, [and] flaming in desire" (line 4). Despite Wilmot commending his

lover for her active role during their foreplay, he is unable to satisfy her, as she asks, “[i]s there then no more?” (line 22). This verbal challenge from Corinna sparks Wilmot to display his own agency and power in a rhetorical, as opposed to physical, fashion—therefore compensating for his sexual failures. Even though Wilmot calls himself a “trembling, confused, despairing, limber, dry, / A wishing, weak, unmoving lump” (line 35/6), he achieves a pseudo-sexual performance by referring to all the “oyster[s], cinder[s], beggar[s], common whore[s]” (line 50) that he had previously bedded. Wilmot disparagingly describes his other sexual encounters, referring to himself as a “common fucking post” (line 63) and to his lovers as “hogs on gates [who] rub themselves and grunt” (line 65). Wilmot’s inventive insults and belittlements (which absolutely revolve around his own self-disgust) eventually lead to a display of his verbal wit, granting him a plane on which he can express his verbal efficacy as a replacement for his sexual disappointment. This verbal dexterity lends him leeway to substitute his deficient sexual will for a satisfactory rhetorical one.

The Rover values verbal and cerebral potency over the search of monetary wealth, just as Wilmot in “The Imperfect Enjoyment” prefers the independent Corinna to lewd automatons who bring “vice, disease, and scandal” (line 52). Perhaps due to the court of Charles II being constantly associated with monetary trouble, Behn’s play aligns the idea of money with stupidity and irrelevance, while intellect and wit are secured as pertinent qualities, such as innate nobility and understanding. Behn aligns the prized, intrinsic quality of wit with the inherited virtue of aristocracy. Just as the Englishmen in *The Rover* are temporarily reduced to refugees and exiles so too was Charles II reduced to a fugitive during the reign of Oliver Cromwell. The setting of the play, which takes place in the interregnum between the reigns of Charles I and Charles II, emphasizes this period of degeneration. Just as *The Rover*’s displaced Englishmen preserve their wit and intellect during their displacement, Charles II retained his innate noble qualities during his exile.

The cast of players in *The Rover* embodies Behn's evaluation of intellect and wit. Corinna's agency and sexual empowerment in "The Imperfect Enjoyment" is similar to Hellena's intellect and her unabashed forwardness in *The Rover*. She is one of Behn's most lively and spontaneous heroines, determinedly snaring the man she desires: Willmore (Sullivan, 341). Hellena is dedicated involuntarily to a convent, but despite this potentially forced renouncement of her sexuality she insists, in the first scene of the play, that she is fit for love and has resolved to capitalize on her mind and body. Hellena is very witty, and it is her verbal capability that attracts Willmore to her. She and Florinda disguise themselves as "gipsies" (2.1) and attend the Naples Carnival in hopes of satisfying a "youthful itch" (1.1). Hellena's disguise is an unattractive one. Its ugliness legitimizes the flirting that takes place between her and Willmore; Hellena's wit, voice, and humour make her attractive, not her beauty. This concept of wit trumping physical attractiveness is embodied in the opening scene of the play when Florinda points out that it is an insult to her "beauty, birth and fortune, and more to [her] soul" (1.1) insisting that she marry Don Vincentio. As wit and intellect are essentially derivatives of the soul (or at least more so than transitory qualities), the audience is informed immediately that *The Rover* values these elemental characteristics over "beauty, birth and fortune" (1.1).

Just as Hellena and Corinna epitomize the charm of feminine strength and intellect, Willmore's wit embodies his abundance of verbal energy. The name "Willmore" is meant to recall John Wilmot, who at the time of production was having an affair with the woman who was playing Hellena, Elizabeth Barry (Sullivan 335). It is an appetitive name, one that plays on both his strong sexual inclinations as well as his wittiness. Willmore is the comic hero of the play and is celebrated as such, despite unjustly being reduced to poverty and homelessness. He is praised throughout the play, and yet he is also a potential harasser and rapist on several occasions. This brings about the question of whether *The Rover* emphasizes one's manner over their actions, for "the sheer comicality of rakes like Willmore overshadows their moral transgres-

sions” (Olivier 56). Despite this shady side of Willmore’s character, he is without a doubt *The Rover*’s verbal engine, alongside Hellena. The two are even aligned before meeting one another through the repeated use of the adjective “mad” that is used to describe them both. This epithet is strongly associated with their characters, suggesting improvisation, excessiveness, and spontaneity.

While both Behn and Wilmot adorn their protagonists with the charismatic traits of intellect and wit, the stereotypical concept of women and their sexuality in the seventeenth century was not as liberal as the two writers convey in their respective works. Despite the pursuit of pleasure seeming to supersede all moral goals (epitomized in libertinism and King Charles’s promiscuity), only men were recognized as unrestricted sexual beings. This masculine-dominated reaction to the “pious reservation of Puritanism” (Lemaster 123) was an emphasis on physical pleasure as a pursuit and a power reserved for men, while the women were expected to remain docile and virginal. In “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” Wilmot illustrates the standardized promiscuous male libertine, but undermines his physical competence, which, in turn, subverts the legitimacy of the male ideal by making him impotent. By parodying the indomitable male as an essentially powerless figure, Wilmot provides an argument against traditional male conceptions and assumptions (Lemaster 123). This argument is strengthened by the lack of stamina that the narrator experiences within the poem: the poem portrays its male lover by having him enjoy and idealize the exorbitant delights of libertinism until, when his “dead cinder warms no more” (line 33), he is reduced to the image of a penis which embodies a degraded, animalistic mimicry of man. While the sexual will of the male is debased in “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” Wilmot promotes the female’s sexuality by defying convention. Corinna is observed as desiring, autonomous, powerful and, most importantly, not as simply an extension or tool of her male lover.

Behn was writing *The Rover* in the same cultural climate as Wilmot, in which the masculine will was associated with influence and privilege, and the female will with dependence and restraint.

The movement of the play, however, centres on the conflict between male and female wills; this conflict is intensified by Behn's inversion of typified social values and gender conventions, just as "The Imperfect Enjoyment" is satirized by Wilmot's disregard for traditional male impressions. While these gender conventions do exist in Behn's play, they serve to create barriers that the characters (primarily the women) must break down in order to fulfill their desires, as opposed to the societal values to which the characters must eventually succumb. Hellena is unwillingly promised to a nunnery, which initiates the association of confinement with sexual denial and the forced will—this connection is one that appears as a continuous strain in Behn's work. In spite of these cultural impediments, Hellena resists the stifling expectations for women in the Restoration period by demonstrating her unabashed forwardness and sexual frankness in her pursuit of Willmore. The Naples Carnival is the first instance that the audience sees Hellena's sexual candor and wit during her incognito banter with Willmore. The carnival itself portrays an inversion of reality, for the women, dressed as gypsies, are associated with the future, vagrancy, and a mixture of beauty and ugliness. Hellena's disguise heightens her allegiance to "dear disobedience" (1.1) and "mischief" (1.1), as opposed to the typical feminine traits of modesty and suppression of the will.

While tension in both "The Imperfect Enjoyment" and *The Rover* is magnified by the inversion of gender ideals, the outcomes of these respective works differ considerably. "The Imperfect Enjoyment" results in an unsatisfied union between the narrator and his lover, as his failing is attributed to her strong sense of sexual agency and power. It is not his disgust or ambivalence to her strength that causes this sense of dissatisfaction—on the contrary, it is his genuine attraction to (and respect for) her boldness that induces his ultimate physical impotence. This jarring disharmony between love and lust that takes place in "The Imperfect Enjoyment" aligns itself with the majority of Wilmot's poems, within which it is suggested that neither romance nor libertinism can eradicate human disappointment (Sanchez 441). The narrator only

partly redeems his (inevitable) sexual failure by displaying verbal potency, but the true redemption is featured in the final two lines of the poem, in which Wilmot wishes that “ten thousand abler pricks” (line 71) will “do the wronged Corinna right” (line 72). So while Corinna ends up being sexually unsatisfied in spite of her sexual agency, she not only restores her sexual cravings but also hurts Wilmot’s pride by eventually taking three lovers in front of him in his following satire “A Ramble in St. James’s Park.”

In *The Rover*, unlike in “The Imperfect Enjoyment,” the opposing values between Hellena and Willmore result in a stabilized, complementary relationship. Hellena, who possesses a strong sex drive, is being required by her father to redirect any sexual will to the love of God. She is seeking liberation from a situation so utterly opposed to Willmore’s (who enjoys complete sexual freedom) that it can only be calculatingly symbolic. While Willmore enjoys sexual independence, he is only half a psyche: his freedom and liberation lead him everywhere, including a near-rape scene with Florinda. To be a complete and stabilized character he needs the steadying presence of Hellena, who also requires the sexual liberation found in Willmore (Sullivan 343). The final compromise of the play is equally brought about by female will and male concession, as Willmore “can be won only by Hellena, whose freshness, wit, and beauty allay his fears of bondage” (Link 49). Symmetrically, Hellena can be won only by Willmore, whose total emancipation from the limitations of sexual decorum promise freedom of self-expression in a culture of sexual boundaries. Just as “mad” connects Hellena and Willmore together before they meet, the two players’ “inconstancy” ironically permits them to “be bound to constancy” (1.2) to one another. While Angellica condemns inconstancy as “the sin of all mankind” (2.1), Hellena wins over Willmore by professing herself “the gay, the kind, and the inconstant” (3.1)—if she were to ever “catch a fit of foolish constancy” (3.1), she would be “undone” (3.1). These parallel values heighten the lovers’ connection as they announce themselves as “Robert the Constant” (5.1) (signifying his newfound love and fidelity) and “Hellena the Inconstant” (5.1) (indicating her own devotion to wit and intellect).

Despite the discrepancy that lies between the fate of Corinna and Hellena, both women are empowered by their intellect and wit, and are, perhaps most importantly, respected for it by their author-creators and fellow characters. Despite Corinna leaving “The Imperfect Enjoyment” unsatisfied, she still portrays a strong spiritual and sexual will, one that stuns Wilmot out of his own sexual potency. The final compromise that takes place at the end of Behn’s play observes the gypsy (Hellena) and *the rover* (Willmore) finding solace and balance within each other—the inversion of gender roles that occurs within *The Rover* results in this mutually beneficial relationship.

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