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Interrogating Female Libertinism in Restoration Plays: A Study of Representative Works

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Abstract

Restoration comedy, or the Comedy of Manners, reflects the cultural ethos of the era, particularly in its depiction of gender roles, sexuality, and libertinism. This paper explores the representation of female sexuality in Restoration plays, questioning whether the period's libertine ideals allowed room for a female libertine. Focusing on *She Would if She Could* (1668), *The Man of Mode* (1676), and *The Rover* (1677), the study examines three distinct female characters—Lady Cockwood, Harriet, and Angellica Bianca—each embodying different facets of femininity. The analysis reveals that while some women exhibit wit and agency, they are ultimately constrained by societal expectations, either through marriage or public humiliation. Despite real-life female libertines, the era's libertine culture remained male-dominated. The plays reinforce patriarchal values by marginalizing female autonomy, reflecting a broader failure to challenge gender norms. Restoration drama thus perpetuates a cycle of containment, ensuring women's subordination within a rigid social framework.

Keywords: Restoration, plays, libertine, gender, sexuality.

Introduction

Restoration drama or the Comedy of Manners, deals with serious domestic cultural concerns, at the same time reflecting the ethos of the age. Almost all the plays endeavor to deal with the accepted and appropriate gender roles, matrimony, sexuality, libertinism and so on. In my paper I will be looking at the gender roles and how the sexuality of women is being depicted in the Restoration plays while trying to find an answer to the question whether there was a possibility of a female libertine given the sexual libertinism of the age. The plays of the Restoration period which I will be taking up to build my thesis point will be located from the years 1660 to 1680, roughly corresponding to the twenty years of Charles II's reign. The three plays which I am taking up are Sir George Etherege's *She Would if She Could* (1668), *The Man of Mode* (1676) and Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677). For my paper, I have chosen three very different female characters from the Restoration plays, Lady Cockwood (*She Would if She Could*), the typical older married woman desiring men; Harriet (*The Man of Mode*) a young,

virtuous sophisticated lady of quality with a large fortune and Angellica Bianca (*The Rover*) who falls at the other end of the spectrum as a 'whore' but beautiful and desirable.

Discussion

During the Restoration era, the doctrine of Hobbes held significant sway among the libertines of the period, offering a framework for interpreting human behavior. Figures like Rochester took liberties in re-interpreting Hobbesian ideas to align with their own beliefs, selectively emphasizing aspects that resonated with their worldview while disregarding others. Rochester and his cohorts embraced Hobbes' skepticism, his penchant for critique and satire, and his propensity for questioning established norms and institutions, all the while discarding his final conclusions (Warren 27). While Hobbes portrayed the state of nature as an unbearable condition necessitating escape through self-preservation, libertine poets and playwrights of the Restoration period portrayed it as the norm of society, a pragmatic depiction of their surroundings. Libertinism emerged as a philosophy of youth, a rebellion against traditional values, where virtues associated with middle age such as discretion, prudence, and responsibility were dismissed as qualities only suitable for the aged or the incapable. Warren observes that whereas Hobbes contested false authority, libertines considered all authority illegitimate, viewing state, church, and family as institutions exploiting humanity's fear of freedom (36). Throughout Charles II's reign, libertines were recognized as sexual adventurers and radical challengers of social, political, and moral conventions. While I have provided an overview of Libertinism's general tenets influenced by Hobbesian philosophy and the prevalent male libertine archetype in Restoration society, my paper's primary focus lies on exploring the concept of the female libertine, or more precisely, the 'potential' for female libertinism.

The typical libertine is characterized as a sexual adventurer, radical questioner of political, moral and social values. How do these characteristics tend to change when there is a change of gender? The term 'libertine' is 'rarely applied to women' according to the Oxford English Dictionary. So on the onset itself we are faced with the problem of the image of a libertine as a male construct and the embedding of the libertine values to an exclusively male domain. It is into this predominantly male domain the 'female libertine' has intruded upon. How the construct of 'libertine' changes when there is a change in gender has to be analyzed before going any further. 'Libertine' has generally not been applied to the female gender because a 'female libertine' is more generally termed a "whore" by patriarchal society. Even though the acts of libertinism are the same by both the genders but when indulged in the same activities by women it is considered derogatory and unfit. But yet the possibility that there had been female libertines cannot be denied. Charles II's courts had many female libertines, most of whom were also his mistresses. These female libertines gained wealth and position but were generally seen with disdain and relegated to the position of whores. What is good enough for the men were definitely not good enough for the women. Women were seen as irrational creatures of passion and madness whose unbridled desires had to be curbed and kept under control for the smooth functioning of society. Depictions of female sexuality were sometimes used to celebrate womanhood and gender difference, but more often were used to criticize women, equating their physical lewd desires

with threatening female autonomy. The female body was seen as inferior and corrupt. Kathryn J. Ready says,

> The female body remained the focus of arguments regarding women's "natural" inferiority. Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) went as far as to deduce women's intellectual inferiority from the supposedly more sensitive nerve fibres in the female brain. The definition of women in terms of their bodies also encouraged men to treat them as objects whose sexuality it was necessary to regulate. Eighteenth-century conduct manuals continued to define women primarily in relation to their bodies, focusing on how women might transform themselves into objects of male desire (Ready 45).

The female libertine thus is a subversive figure. The potentiality of the threat of this subversive figure to disrupt the social order was dimly perceived and feared by the writers and men of the age. The portrayals of the female libertines in the play conceal the patriarchal anxiety of the age to contain and limit this subversive, disruptive force. And by under playing and making the character of the female libertine comical or absurd, they try to render the threat of the female libertine harmless and contemptible. This would be dealt and discussed in detail as I take up the texts of the plays for analysis.

George Etherege's title of the play itself *She Would if She Could* is very suggestive of sexual undertones as well as sexual potentiality or licentiousness and suggesting a crude, cynical reductive view of woman as lustful by nature. It almost rings across like a misogynistic warning that she *would* do it if she *could.* The stress here being on the word *would.* The use of a pronoun in the title instead of a proper noun subtly indicates that 'she' could be everywoman, given the chance. Yet the title conveys a kind of impotency and failure as well. Possibly the thwarting of the uncontrolled female sexual freedom by the male. The protagonist, Lady Cockwood is not physically or emotionally satisfied by her husband. The very fact that she is a 'wife' is enough to create aversion in Sir Oliver. Lady Cockwood tries to find pleasure in the company of Mr. Freeman, pursuing him relentlessly in the first half of the play. To think that Lady Cockwood is the only female libertine in the play is wrong. Ariana and Gatty try to find what pleasures they can without compromising their reputations. Ariana and Gatty frequently question 'those privileges which custom has allowed' men and not women. Lady Cockwood is depicted as pathetic and disdainable in her relentless pursuit of Mr. Freeman, who thinks of her with contempt. Anxieties over female sexuality encouraged writers of the time to play out hostile emotions and anxieties felt about women on the female form, using women's bodies as sites on which they could re-build their sexual authority by subordinating women as sexual objects. This rings true in the case of Dorimant of *The Man of Mode* for whom woman including Mrs. Loveit and Bellinda are only sexual conquests. Lady Cockwood's realization that she is made a fool by Mr.Freeman makes her venture into the masculine domain of sexual intrigue and power manipulation. She tries to thwart Mr. Freeman's and Mr. Courtall's courtship with Gatty and Ariana. Her behavior becomes a threat that must be destroyed and made an example of so that no woman follows that way. The play shows Lady Cockwood getting into more trouble and Mr. Freeman rescuing the situation thus earning Lady Cockwood's gratitude. Again the female is made to be obliged to the superior male who by his wit and presence of mind saves the situation. Also giving out a warning that women are stupid and idiotic when dealing with these things and

will only end up in making themselves a fool. In a clearly gender-determined dramatic convention, the sexual bravado and amorous guile of rake-heroes become sexual rapaciousness and hypocrisy in women as is shown in Lady Cockwood's case.

Harriet of Etherege's *The Man of Mode* is a more sophisticated libertine. Though sexually 'pure', Harriet's libertinism is concerned less with sexual promiscuity and can be seen embodying those subversive functions and nature of the female libertine that questions and symbolically topples the existing social order. Harriet interrogates the basis of the male libertine's premises of power which is paradoxically invested in that same aristocratic privilege that libertines often rebelled against. Despite her country upbringing, at which she scoffs, Harriet understands the patriarchal nature of libertinism and seeks to upset it, producing a nervous reaction in Dorimant, who becomes both attracted to and fearful of Harriet's challenge to his identity. Harriet is often portrayed as being "wild" but her exercise of wit demonstrates that she controls her body and her mind, which provides a striking contrast to Mrs. Loveit's loss of control. Early in the play, Etherege associates Mrs. Loveit with mental and emotional turmoil that emerges in physical manifestations of excessive desire. Her love has grown "diseased" as a "torture of a ling'ring and consumptive passion". Mrs Loveit, somewhat in the line of Lady Cockwood, is that typical pathetic female libertine so often portrayed and ridiculed in the plays. Harriet embodies in herself the other characteristics of the libertine, like free-thinking, a disregard for moral restraints and a utter lack of respects for religion. Harriet uses irreligious language in her witty encounters with Dorimant that often always borders on blasphemy. She embodies in her, the libertine disregard and contempt for all authoritative figures beginning with her mother. Etherege depicts Harriet as a character who traverses on that thin blurry line between virtue and vice. Given her desire to play tricks and deceive, Harriet seems entirely unlike the virtuous young lady, yet she must create and sustain an illusion of propriety, which becomes perhaps her most elaborate mask. The "real" Harriet constantly changes her masks, which become signs of her subversion in the play. Her performances appear ambiguously treated by Etherege, who might critique and even reject the pretentious Sir Fopling, the overly passionate Mrs. Loveit, or even the god-like perceptions of Dorimant, but he cannot, finally, find a place for Harriet. Etherege leaves the meaning of Harriet's character and its purposes unresolved, and her libertinism represents a socially unstable force that threatens masculine authority in a way that Etherege appears unable either to denounce or endorse.

The third and very different female libertine I would be exploring and analyzing in my paper would be Angellica Bianca of *The Rover*. Angellica is different from both Lady Cockwood and Harriet in the sense that she falls at the other opposite from these two ladies. Lady Cockwood and Harriet falls under the so called category of the virtuous ladies whereas Angellica is a courtesan or a "whore". Why I have included or rather chosen Angellica over the other hordes of possible Restoration libertine heroines, is the ambiguity of her character and the singularly extraordinary changes that Angellica has undergone through the course of the play. That is, from an absolute mastery of her heart and body to exploding into violence against the lover who rejects and scorns her love. There is something redeeming, something which transcends the common baseness and achieves the realm of subtlety in Angellica's character. In *The Rover* the line between virgins and courtesans is blurred from the beginning and the meaninglessness of this distinction becomes even more pronounced when Angellica begins to

talk and act like the play's romantic heroine. Critics have sometimes suggested that Hellena is Angellica's alter ego in this play and there is certainly evidence to support this view (Copeland 16). Angellica competes directly with Hellena for Willmore's love in the play and, in her first scene with the cavalier, the courtesan takes up the critique of mercenary marriages that Hellena began in the first act. At one point too, Willmore confuses the two women; when the masked Angellica arrives to shoot him in the last act, he runs up and begins to flirt with her, under the mistaken impression that she is his 'pretty Gipsie'. In the high seriousness with which she pursues her lover throughout this play, however, Angellica is even closer to the romantic Florinda and Behn reinforces this connection by giving the courtesan the language and actions of a heroine in a heroic drama or tragedy. Angellica's downfall begins the moment 'she falls in love with' Willmore. She is acting against the libertine ethos of unconstancy by her 'falling in love' and thus the constancy of, attachment and emotions with Willmore. The perfect control which Angellica displayed over her sexuality is shattered with her emotional involvement. Angellica Bianca, also problematizes and presents that while a rakish hero can still be rewarded by matrimonial and material prospects, for the woman there is no rewards but only condemnation. Once her honour is lost, it is lost forever. Nothing can redeem it. Even as Angellica's change in character has redeemed her as a person it also has exposed to her that there is no second chance for her, being a woman.

The Restoration Comedy with all its frivolity and licentiousness in a deeper level proves to be far less tolerant of female deviancy in sexual and moral codes than is shown. The female sexual errant undergoes some of the most scathing satire found in the plays. Even good-natured, but morally lax women, Bellinda of *The Man of Mode (1676)*, for example, and Mrs Fainall of William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), reap the promise of dreary, strained futures at the end of their plays (Gill 67). Intelligent, sexually versed women comfortably inhabit the masculine domains and so transgress cultural categories, calling gender and sexual boundaries into question in the process. Their dual natures as secretly fallen women, equally at home in respectable and iniquitous surroundings, provoke severe dramatic remedies. Restoration comedies of manners domesticate these cunning ladies by unmasking them, by showing them to be merely women and therefore vulnerable to public shame and scorn (Gill 34). Even while rewarding rakes and libertines, the Restoration comedy is highly critical of women taking these same freedoms. The plays either represent the desire is females as ludicrous and laughable as in the case of Lady Cockwood who looks like a ridiculous figure even to the very man she is in love with. By making the woman who transgress look like a fool and a figure of derision to everyone around her, the playwrights are putting forth a precautionary warning to the female audience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of Restoration comedies reveals a stark portrayal of gender dynamics, wherein masculinity is associated with linguistic and sexual dominance, while femininity is linked to vulnerability and containment within prescribed roles. Characters like Harriet, who venture into traditionally masculine spheres, are ultimately relegated to conventional feminine roles through matrimonial alliances, their "wildness" contained. Conversely, women like Angellica Bianca, for whom redemption is unattainable, face public

exposure and humiliation, their private lives laid bare for entertainment. The denouement of these plays often sees the fall of one female character and the rise of another, perpetuating a cycle of degradation and renewal. Despite the presence of real-life female libertines like Nell Gwyn and others, the libertine ethos of the Restoration period remained predominantly male-centric. Women who defied societal norms were swiftly reined in, reaffirming their subordinate status and quashing challenges to masculine authority. While Restoration comedies offer glimpses of women's agency and wit, they ultimately underscore the era's entrenched patriarchal values, reflecting a persistent failure to address gender identity concerns conclusively. The portrayal of women as morally debased and morally deficient within these narratives underscores the pervasive bias against female autonomy, relegating them to secondary roles and perpetuating societal norms of male dominance.

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