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Carnavalesque Revelry and Social Subversion in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*: A Study of Gender, Power, and Liberation

ABSTRACT: *The Rover*, Aphra Behn's most acclaimed play, challenges conventional categorization and confounds genre expectations. Behn deliberately selected a carnival backdrop for *The Rover*, deviating from the setting of the source play, *Thomaso* or *The Wanderer* which was based on the personal experiences and fantasies of playwright Thomas Killigrew during his exile in the Interregnum period, with its setting in Madrid during the Spanish Inquisition. In contrast, *The Rover* unleashes its cavaliers during the festive chaos of Naples during the carnival. According to Bakhtin, the medieval and Renaissance carnival customs symbolized "the temporary suspension of all hierarchical structures, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," creating a genuine festivity of time, a celebration of change, renewal, and a Utopian realm of boundless potential. In *The Rover*, which draws inspiration from both folk traditions and decadent carnival trends, elements embodying both Utopian and nightmarish qualities emerge. These elements work to challenge and undermine the affected and posturing culture of the English drawing room, shedding a brighter light on the disparities within Restoration society, particularly within the male aristocratic sphere. The play's heroines, Hellena and Florinda, enthusiastically embrace the rejuvenating carnival spirit, embodying what Bakhtin terms as a "characteristic logic" of turning things inside out. These women are already accustomed to a particular kind of masquerade, which involves conforming to society's expectations of their roles as women. However, the determination of these female protagonists to pursue love over material gain represents the new social dynamics unfolding in *The Rover*. The conspicuous disruptions caused by the renowned courtesan Angelica Bianca from Spain, along with the utopian challenge to patriarchal authority, lay bare the discordant aspects of Restoration culture, such as the transactional nature of marriage and aristocratic libertinism. Finally, the play delves into and partially resolves the conflicts and paradoxes it presents, immersing itself in the joyous laughter of the people. This laughter is also aimed at those who laugh, as it serves as a reminder that everyone, like the carnival, must undergo a transformation and renewal after experiencing their own demise.

KEYWORDS: carnival, aristocratic, love, disruption, libertinism