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Final Paper

Gender roles, homosocial desires and sexuality, hypocrisy, and sociopolitical clashes are

as much a part of the selected plays as the daily news. Yesterday's issues are today's issues. If

social media posts about the lockdown, upcoming election, masks, and police violence are any

indication, most people feel that today's issues are new and unique to the 21st century. Though

each play's exact circumstances are unique, they prove that turmoil, change, and strife are part

of the human experience and it is possible to not only make it through those tough times but to

express one's feelings effectively without intentionally offending others. Of all the selected

readings no play mirrors the problems of modern life more than Aphra Behn's *The Rover*. Two

specific themes in *The Rover* are of special interest—the idea of the masquerade or masks of

the play becoming the mask of online anonymity, and cultural identity crises.

The Mask

The mask as both a concept and a literal tool in *The Rover* is an analog for the use of

social media and the Internet as a digital mask in the 21st century. *The Rover* takes place in the

city of Naples, which at the time was home to a diverse blend of people and ideologies. Taylor

Corse says that "For one thing, Naples was a Spanish possession…it was also a cosmopolitan

center that attracted travelers and residents from all over Europe, including Turks and Jews"

(Corse 42). This mixing of personal and cultural identities parallels the mixing of identities and

ideologies the Internet and social media allow. In effect, the Internet is for modern audiences what Naples is to the people of *The Rover*—a location where almost every culture and idea is mixed and the inevitable conflicts that follow*.*

In the play, masks serve as a method of changing identity and allowing characters to either cover up their true feelings or express them more readily as will be shown below. Without a mask, the characters risk being stuck in a single role (such as nun) with no outlet for passions or desires. The Internet brings people from every culture and background together under a single anonymous digital mask allowing them to be whomever they want without consideration for culture or location, and in many cases without concern for the consequences. Social media and the Internet are simultaneously a single global *place* where, like Naples, all people and ideas mix, and also *place-less,* in that the Internet does not exist in a location or have its nationality—it erases (or masks) those identities.

Characters in *The Rover* are all too eager to use masks to defy expectations (such as Willmore, Helena, and Angelica). Taylor Corse says of the play that "Underneath the rampant festivity of *The Rover,* lies the cultural memory of regicide, mob rule, and the sheer unpredictability of human affairs" (48). That unpredictability is shown as characters begin to defy expectations through masks and lies. This is seen early on when Hellena discusses love with her sister Florinda and dreams of enjoying the carnival. Hellena, who is destined for a life as a nun, wistfully says about Florinda's planned marriage "Now you have provided yourself of a man, you take no care for poor me. Prithee, tell me, what dost thou see about me that is unfit for love?" (1.1.47-49). Shortly after she continues by saying to Don Pedro "And are not those better than any Don Vincentio has brought from the Indies," (1.1.99-100). Don Pedro replies

"Why, how now! Has your nunnery breeding taught you to understand the value of hearts and eyes" (1.1.101-102). What choice does she have to express or entertain her desires without a mask? Based on Pedro's reply, it's clear that he and everyone else expect her to conform to the identity of a nun.

Hellena is destined for a life as a nun but yearns for excitement beyond her destined role. And it is through the mask that she can accomplish her desires. Hellena says to Callis early in the play "Yes, Callis, that of a nun; and till then I'll be indebted a world of prayers to you if you'll let me now see what I never did, the divertissements of a carnival" (1.1.201-204). Callis replies "What, go in masquerade? 'Twill be a fine farewell to the world, I take it. Pray, what would you do there?" (1.1.205-207). A mask allows Hellena to overthrow the chains of destiny and create a new persona as she pleases. Connecting the scene to modern times, Hellena is creating an anonymous username to be who she wants through social media. Whether roleplaying as a character in an online game or using social media under a digital pseudonym, the actions are the same.

Relationships begin and end as a result of false identities. Willmore and Hellena share a relationship that is founded on dual identity, as do other individuals. Masks and mistaken identities lead to theft of belongings as well. In Act 3, Scene 3 Lucetta and Blunt are in a bedroom and Blunt begins undressing. As Blunt begins undressing Lucetta says "Should you be false or cruel now!" (3.3.7). Blunt replies "False! 'Sheartlikins, what dost thou take me for? A Jew? An insensible heathen? A pox of thy old jealous husband; and he were dead, egad, sweet soul, it should be none of my fault if I did not marry thee," (3.3.8-12). Lucetta is all too aware of her literal and figurative mask. Shortly after their mention of being "false", Lucetta tricks Blunt

and drops him down a trap door for Philippo and Sancho to join Lucetta in pillaging Blunt's

belongings. "But come, let's see what we have got by this," (3.3.40-41). A false identity allows

individuals to act in ways they couldn't without the mask. But this brings up an interesting

consideration—does the mask allow an individual to express who they are or is the mask itself a

new identity? To put it another way, does the mask become the real person? If an individual

will only act a certain way—to act on impulses and desires that are suppressed during 'daily'

life—while wearing a mask, is the mask itself the true character? Conversely, does the mask

allow an individual the opportunity to act *against* their true nature, as opposed to expressing

the hidden truth of their nature? Does the mask itself become a character or individual

separate from the person wearing it? The mask itself will assume a different identity from its

wearer (would this be a false identity because it's not the wearer's identity or would it be a true

identity since it does indeed exist?) and engage in different behavior. These questions don't

have definite and generalized answers; they must each be answered by an individual as they

reconsider their online behavior, which is what viewing or reading the play would ask of its

audience.

The masquerade and various identities of each character are no different than online

usernames and identities found in social media and the Internet. Where a nun could secretly be

a love-craving manipulator, a bored and unfulfilled 30-something living in a basement can

secretly be a hero or villain online relates to the modern usage of the Internet and social media.

Trolling forums and message boards are incredibly common. Trolling is a deliberate attempt to

annoy, bother, irritate, or fight someone online. Online usernames and personae are masks

hiding the individual behind the keyboard. The mask of the anonymous username allows

individuals to both hurt and heal others. It's also common for individuals to only show the best parts of their life on social media such as Facebook and Instagram, leading others to believe the individual leads a perfect life. After watching Hellena, Lucetta, and the rest of the cast live multiple lives and lies they too would begin to question their own digital lives.

Location

The time in which *The Rover* takes place saw an interesting mixture and change of leadership in England and abroad. England was amid the Restoration, Spain, France, and Italy were each expanding and redefining their political influence, and long-held traditions of each culture were clashing with new visitors and leaders, especially in Naples, which itself was "both Spanish and Italian" (43) according to the Corse essay. It further states that "Spanish influence goes beyond matters of social rank and hierarchy" (43). In Act 2 Belvile and the other English are engaged in a fight with the Spanish. Belvile, after the Spanish flee, says to the group "Come, let's begone whilst we're safe, and remember these are Spaniards, a sort of people that know how to revenge an affront" (2.1.287-290). Xenophobia and bigotry in *The Rover* are no different than anti-Chinese, Russian, or Korean sentiment, or even anti-immigrant feelings common in America today. Modern audiences would find comfort in seeing that social and political discontent are not new like social media and the news suggest.

Dueling and violence were a common part of Restoration-era Naples. Quoting Benedetto Croce, Corse says "In 1673 the Neapolitan nobles, who were no less famous than the French for the frequency of their dueling,...made a solemn and publicly registered promise to give up 'group duels,' which the participation of relatives and friends made into small-scale

battles" (43). For emphasis Corse adds "The city squares would be drenched in the blood of ten, twenty or thirty combatants." Can anyone witness the scenes of violence and the cultural bigotry in *The Rover* and *not* see the riots and protests spreading through America and the world at large?

Most of the modern world is very much shifting towards extreme political correctness and a focus on social justice to the exclusion of all else. It's what is commonly known as "Snowflake Culture", where everyone is just waiting to find something to be upset or offended by. Some media franchises are being revised to have LGBT characters (such as Thelma in Scooby-Doo) or being criticized for whitewashing or revising their characters to eliminate minorities to appease the masses or avoid fan backlash. For example, Wanda from the Marvel comics is half Jewish and half Romani. However, the modern Marvel movies erased that heritage and had her join Hydra, effectively a Nazi group, and erased her comic heritage to make her whiter and more like the films' intended audience in America. Unlike Marvel movies and other modern media, *The Rover* is anything but politically correct and isn't afraid to see conflicts between English and Spanish peoples represented realistically (drenched in the blood of combatants). Reading or viewing the play can remind today's audiences that it is possible to discuss a serious topic without taking it too seriously, as Behn does regarding Naples. As Taylor Corse mentions, "Her play is also softened and suffused by the retrospective glow of political nostalgia" (Corse 48). It's a reminder that a bit of time can blunt the sharp edges of bigotry and violence. That's not to say that issues should be ignored, but rather a reminder that the suggestion to "sleep on it" applies to more than just marital issues.

Despite how politically charged the themes are, she skillfully crafts a tale that can be enjoyed. Looking back at Blunt and Lucetta's discussion in Act 3, Blunt replies "False! 'Sheartlikins, what dost thou take me for? A Jew? An insensible heathen? A pox of thy old jealous husband; and he were dead, egad, sweet soul, it should be none of my fault if I did not marry thee," (3.3.8-12). Blunt uses racial and politically charged language that would be sure to offend modern audiences. But shortly after, Lucetta sends him away on a trapdoor so she and her friends can rob him in what becomes a hilarious moment. To use a colloquialism, modern audiences would see the play and realize they can and must take a "chill pill". Sometimes it is okay to show the absurd and taboo and discuss them with humor.

Conclusion

Political strife, racial issues, and immigration problems as seen in Naples around the Restoration and today in America and the world at large are not problems to ignore. When riots and protests become commonplace and government leaders debate how to handle immigration, and all of that during a pandemic, fear and unrest are natural. But *The Rover,* as with all the other plays selected for the class, reminds audiences that those issues are not new, that the people of the Restoration era made it through their troubles, and they can too. It reminds them to watch their behavior online and reconsider what the digital mask means. To walk up to a stranger and tell them they are fat and to further belittle them is unthinkable for most. Yet shaming is all too common online thanks to the anonymity the Internet provides. *The Rover* reminds audiences to be careful with their masks. The anonymous persona might be false, but the consequences are very real.

The play does not undermine the feelings or issues of the day or ignore the problems (such as violence in the streets as mentioned earlier in the Corse article) but instead offers audiences relief and understanding. Relief comes through knowing what might happen today has happened in a similar guise during the Restoration and beyond and that the world survived its issues in the past and will do so in the future. And what better message could there be than one of hope during uncertain times? That is exactly what *The Rover* should be on everyone's must-watch/read list.

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