

CROSS DRESSING AS A LIBERATIVE DISGUISE: THE MOTIF OF THE MASCULINE MASK IN APHRA BEHN'S *THE ROVER OR THE BANISHED CAVALIERS*

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to analyse cross-dressing as a literary motif and how it is synonymous with gender identity due to traditional societal constructs prevailing throughout the ages. Historically female cross-dressing raised fears about women undermining masculine authority and challenging the hierarchical social order. The achievement of Aphra Behn is significant because she designed the beginning ripples of a feminist revolution in the Restoration age which was accustomed to female objectification and stereotypical roles by female characters. Behn's cross dressed character in *The Rover or The Banish'd Cavaliers*(1676) was introduced at a time when heroines were not expected to do more than pose on stage in order to be desired by the male characters in the play and the male spectators. . The paper explores the characters Helena and Florinda in the milieu of Restoration England and how their cross-dressing in response to society's patriarchal constraints transforms them into images of female empowerment. Through these characters, Behn unmask the weaknesses and frivolity of the patriarchal setup .*

Key Words: gender roles, cross-dressing, Restoration, masculine-feminine dichotomy, bisexual womanhood, transvestite masquerade, intellectual independence, transgression.

The concept of gender roles is a social construction which encompasses an array of approaches, attitudes and behaviors that are generally deemed appropriate and acceptable for people based on their sex. Gender roles are by and large centered on perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Though it varies substantially among cultures, most of the characteristics of gendered expectations remain common throughout a range of cultures.

Almost every society and culture from the beginning of human history has expected norms for each gender even with regard to specifics like, the kind of attire, style and colours they are supposed to wear. They have a set of laws, views or even guidelines characterising what type of clothing is appropriate for every sex. Due to the gender role rigidity prevalent throughout the world, people frequently encounter discrimination when deviating from such gender norms. The historical connotation of masculinity with authority and femininity with submission means that a woman dressing in men's clothing and a man dressing in women's clothing evoke diverse and prejudiced responses. Under such conflicted gender dynamics, a man's adoption of female clothing was often considered comical or going down in the gendered social order whereas a woman's adoption of men's clothing always had less of an impact and was meant solely for titillation since women have been traditionally branded as subordinate to men and 'unable to affect serious change' through any particular style of dress.

Cross-dressing is the act of disguising oneself using items of clothing and other accoutrements generally associated with the opposite gender within a particular society. The term 'cross-dressing' refers to an action or a demeanor, without implying or attributing any specific causes or motives for that behavior. Gender disguise has been used to pass off as the opposite sex; however it is not synonymous with being transgender. It has been used for purposes of self-expression, disguise or even comfort throughout history and in modern times. Cross disguise was used to assist in political protests, undercover journalism etc. Historically, there were instances of women having cross-dressed to take up exclusively male-dominated professions like military service. Contrariwise, men have employed gender disguise to escape from mandatory military service. Cross dressing is a recurring motif in literature, movies and theatre as a plot device in storytelling.

To quote Lesley Ferris in his introduction to the book on controversies in cross dressing, from Plato's condemnation of playing the other (a fear that mimetic freedom was formative, men might tend to become the women they imitate on stage) to the Puritanical anti-theatrical tracts of the English Renaissance, the human body has been a site for repression and possession. Theatrical cross-dressing has provided one way of playing with liminality and its multiple possibilities and extending that sense of the possible to the spectator/ reader; a way of play, that while often reinforcing the social mores and status quo, carries with it the possibility for exposing that liminal moment, that threshold of questioning, that slippery sense of a mutable self. (8)

Female characters in literature, which cross-dress as men are frequently portrayed as having done so to attain a higher social or economic position, a phenomenon known as the social progress narrative (Boag). Faking a male identity enabled them to travel anytime anywhere with wellbeing and seek employments which were traditionally accessible exclusively to men. Such female characters are commonly portrayed as chivalrous and heroic. Craft-Fairchild opines that the motif of female-to-male cross-dressing symbolizes women's

discontent with their relegation to the domestic sphere of society. However, the discovery of the characters' assigned sex is often met with disapproval, indicating the endurance of traditional expectations of femininity (174).

Cross-dressing (female to male) in the Renaissance, Elizabethan and Jacobean periods caused controversy based on the assumption that by wearing men's clothing, they disturbed the unofficial rule of the social order. The power of patriarchal structures to contain or recuperate threats to their authority cannot be underestimated. In the earlier periods, starting from Renaissance onwards, there were attacks on women who dressed mannishly because it equated to contravening the codes governing dress and encroaching on the privileges of the advantaged sex.

...cross-dressing, as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike... the subversive or transgressive potential of this practice could be and was recuperated in a number of ways. (Howard 19)

The practice of disciplining women increased during this period, and this led to intensified pressure on women and a strengthening of patriarchal authority in the family and the state. Naturally, this in turn produced resistance and contemplating possibilities of new powers for women. In such a period of social displacement in which the gender system was one of the major sites of angst and unease, female cross-dressing had enormous symbolic significance. It raised fears about women wearing the breeches and challenging the hierarchical social order and undermining masculine authority. It was considered as the psychological apparatus devised by women for trespassing gender boundaries.

Many of Shakespeare's plays use cross-dressed female characters which are definitely complex and rich, but are heavily gender coded and portrayed as stereotypes. Cross dressing in Shakespeare functions chiefly as a means to explore gender roles and illuminate the Elizabethan society in which men enjoy a prominent status based solely on gender, to which women are clearly outsiders.

Writers before and during the Restoration were forthright about man's proper domination of women. Discourses of gender in the Restoration were overwhelmingly hierarchical, with men and women described, respectively, as dominant and subservient, perfect and imperfect, fit for rule and unfit for rule. A female character on stage was a potential device for objectification and confinement to the stereotypical roles that emphasise the cultural prescriptions devised to govern female behavior in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There were assertions of man's lordship over capacities to reason, to control passion, etc. Securing that hierarchy in place was an ongoing struggle; gender clashes were in part played out in the terrain of dress. The issue was of control. A woman who disobeys the accepted conventions governing female dress and behavior were being oblivious of her

assigned place in society. Such women who were thought to cultivate a rapacious aspiration to be beyond male control were sneered at and Aphra Behn was without doubt, a woman who 'disobeyed'.

The achievement of Aphra Behn is significant because she created the beginning ripples of a feminist revolution – “she made woman an unstoppable presence on stage, and created a foundation on which the succeeding generations could build, and upon which they are still building” (Larson 41). Her characters were able to subvert and contravene the long - established restrictions of gender roles and sexuality through the display of a freedom of sexuality onstage and transgressing societal norms through cross-dressing in breeches roles which created a threat to the patriarchal hierarchy.

Behn's cross dressed characters were introduced at a time when heroines were not expected to do more than pose on stage in order to be leered at and desired by both the male characters in the play and the male spectators. The conventional patriarchal impetus of the seventeenth-century sexuality is largely explored in Aphra Behn's *The Rover or The Banish'd Cavaliers* (1676).

Behn uses the motif of cross dressing in this work to encapsulate complicated gender dynamics in the sixteenth century. Roles assigned to each gender were set on stone, and no one could cross over in any circumstance. During those times women were hardly allowed to be a part of the stage even. Behn utilizes this play to display the hypocrisy of the status quo that held people from expressing themselves. The crossed-dressed heroines Florinda and Hellena elicit and challenge the inconsistencies of gender barriers and question stereotypes which were dominant in the society whilst at the same time enjoying their 'male' roles. Disguises donned by these women carry the potential for commentary on the patriarchal society that governed the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration age, for the theater provided a terrain where changing gender definitions could be presented, deplored, and enforced.

Crossdressing plays a significant role in *The Rover* which has its setting during a masquerade carnival. The disguise allows the two sisters the freedom to defy patriarchal authority, in the form of their brother's dictatorial behaviour. Donning fake identities, Florinda and Hellena roam around the city attempting to enjoy the new found freedom while protecting the reputation of their undisguised selves. This is advantageous for Hellena in particular, states Janet Todd: "...in masquerade, Hellena can flirt and make sexual overtures to a man she does not know, since the disguise allows the rare pleasure of seeing rather than simply being seen" (218). Donning a disguise allows Hellena to move and speak more freely and actively pursue Willmore. Among the numerous masks, physical guises and identities that Hellena and Florinda adopt, each take on the breeches part just prior to settling their marriages. By taking on "the habit . . . of one of her pages" (Behn 233), in order to fly to Belville from her brother's house, Florinda is finally able to marry Belville and escape the marriage arranged by her father and brother against her wishes, to satisfy their financial motives. However, this instance of the breeches part is not so significant but is limited to

aiding Florinda in marrying the person she loves. Apparently, it helps in portraying a contrast between Florinda and Hellena. Florinda's cross-dressing is momentary and is used only to aid in setting up marriage to her lover, limiting her well within the traditional power relations of patriarchy. Thus, this instance of transvestism occurs on a smaller scale than that of Hellena, who uses her boyish disguise in a much robust manner, for an active pursuit of her desires.

Hellena uses the mask of male identity to transgress gender boundaries and gain independence and implement her own will. In the words of Haley D. Anderson,

Hellena must maintain a delicate balance between defiance and adherence to social norms in order to avoid the complete condemnation of society. The breeches part helps her in her balancing act, because crossdressing allows Hellena to take on the role of a man thus stepping away from the expectation that a woman be soft, passive, and modest. Thus, she is able to employ a freedom of speech, movement and behavior typically denied women without being condemned for behavior unacceptable in a woman. Navigating outside these boundaries in turn permits Hellena the agency to work independent of patriarchal authority and to negotiate her marriage according to her own needs and wants. Even though she makes the marriage contract in the guise of a man, this is still very much an act of woman's agency, because Willmore is in no doubt of Hellena's femininity at the time of the proviso scene. Here the masculine is used as a tool to gain Hellena the agency necessary to be self-determining as a woman. (16)

The patriarchs of the family in *The Rover* maintain a patronising attitude toward the females and firmly believe that women are meant to be domesticated. Behn attempts to alter the customary linguistic interpretation of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" followed in her contemporary culture through the portrayal of the sisters. Florinda the elder one is "designed for a husband", whereas, Hellena the younger sister is "designed for a nun" (1.1.18, 29). Florinda and Hellena are the victims of the patriarchal system of hierarchy who are intended to be sacrificed at its altar. Pedro declares Hellena's future prospects: "Do not fear the blessing of that choice. You shall be a nun" (Behn 148). He exercises stolidly his supremacy over his sisters, but she derides him instantly and has no intention to offer her life as an attribute or a property of men. Hellena's sarcastic acknowledgement, "Shall I so? You may chance to be mistaken in my way of devotion: – a nun! Yes, I am like to make a fine nun!" (ibid.) belie the fact that Hellena has no intention of entering a convent. Helena dons masquerade because she desires not a particular lover but a wider knowledge. This can be troped as a woman's wish for intellectual independence and access to institutions of knowledge. "Aphra Behn's Hellena seeks knowledge "more than" or beyond the gender script provided for her. She rejects not only her brother's decision to place her in a nunnery, but also the cultural narrative of portion, jointure, and legal dependency in which she is written not as subject but as object of exchange"(Diamond 527).

Hellena dresses up as a page boy, and this guise allows her to be her own agent, to seek Willmore out and thwart his interactions with the courtesan, Angellica Bianca. Her disguise as a page boy translates into the ability to move and speak freely in public. She utilises her masculine role to break off all positive relations between him and Angellica. Masked in breeches, her identity remains concealed as she negotiates her marriage with Willmore. "Hellena's ability to occupy the feminine and the masculine at once (like Cixous's concept of bisexual womanhood) allows her the public agency afforded by the masculine mobility and freedom of voice while avoiding the appearance of being inappropriate, thus protecting her feminine reputation and ability to marry. Cross-dressing gives Hellena the power to leave behind the demure, passivity of the appropriately modest lady and instead make more forthright demands of Willmore for the continuance of their relationship." (Anderson 17) Hellena unflinchingly declares her sexual interest in Willmore: "Faith none, captain: – why, 'twill be the greater charity to take me for thy mistress. I am a lone child, a kind of orphan lover, and why I should die a maid, and in a captain's hands too, I do not understand" (Behn 241). According to the standards of femininity appropriated by the patriarchal society to chaste and modest women, Hellena could never express a desire to lose her virginity and not "die a maid" and certainly could not articulate a desire to do so with a haste to "lose no time" (242). The freedom of voice permitted by Hellena's masculine guise enchants Willmore, but he hesitates to promise marriage to which Hellena outrightly protests, "What shall I get? a cradle full of noise and mischief, with a pack of repentance at my back?" (ibid). The freedom granted from masculine appearance aids her in arranging her marriage according to her own design. If she had restricted herself to the bounds of female gender expectations, and played the role of the softspoken, naïve, upperclass lady, Willmore would have taken advantage of her which is evident from the near rape of the passive Florinda (Behn 201-203). To attain and execute power, Hellena had to cross the boundary of the feminine into the transvestism of the breeches.

Hellena desires to marry on her own terms and sets out to choose and negotiate her own marriage. However, feminine norms of the period thwart the freedom of voice and mobility necessary to achieve this goal. Women were not free to operate in the public sphere as this was assumed to be inappropriate and hazardous. It is indispensable for Hellena to move in this sphere in order to eventually fulfill her goals. Hellena must be able to navigate the streets of Venice and Willmore's presence safely and freely. So Hellena intentionally departs from traditional norms of femininity in order to oppose patriarchal hegemony in form of the control the men in her life exercised over her. The character empowerment in Hellena begins when she removes herself from the authority of her brother. In her path to development, she insists on her own independence and right to make decisions in life. It is the freedom of movement that cross-dressing permits, the voice and behaviour that a masculine mask brings along that enflames in her the desire for self-determination. She develops this gradually through the course of the play until she is finally able to achieve her goal. The act

of crossdressing allows Hellena to transcend the boundaries of femininity in a patriarchal society in order to achieve emancipation. Dressed up as a male, she has the freedom to speak her mind and take action which is denied to her as a woman.

Katherine M Quinsey rightly states that ‘the late seventeenth century is a pivotal period in women’s social history and feminist awareness’ (1). The perceptions about femininity were definitely at the verge of a transition during the Restoration period, with writers like Behn being its forerunners. A heroine like Hellena was some of the few women who could overcome the narrow parameters of what was thought acceptable in a patriarchal society were a stark foil to the female characters depicted in the works of Behn’s contemporaries, which were dramatically misrepresented, stereotyped and demeaned: the typical model of a virtuous but suffering female protagonist. Her women characters on stage “reshaped dramatic form at a time when theater was the most public and debated literary venue,” though not by bringing a “feminine delicacy” or “compassion” as was initially anticipated (Styan 89-126).

The carnival setting plays a significant role in *The Rover*. The carnival setting “serves as a metaphor for Behn’s deconstruction of patriarchal privilege, effecting such chaos through liberative disguise in the form of carnivalesque circumstance” (Quinsey 54). The carnival setting symbolises the inversion of established social manners which is synonymous with the sisters in *The Rover* disguising as men. Furthermore, while masquerading, they become freer and more equal, and since everyone is masked there are no differences between them. According to Mary Flynn, Hellena appears to have the greatest success for a woman within the play and fits the mould of a new genre of heroine. Cross-dressing allows her to be free and to avoid being seen as inappropriate. Flynn opines that ‘Hellena suggests another facet of the Restoration woman’s struggle: an internalized masculine-feminine dichotomy.’ She embodies the Restoration woman’s desire to have the same rights as a man and live in equality and break away from the social oppression of that time. This might be exactly what Behn experienced as a writer. Hellena apparently becomes the author’s mouthpiece.

Even the masquerade has a specific symbolic strategy. “If we incorporate insights from feminist psychoanalytic theory, the virgins’ masquerade takes on added significance, or rather this discourse helps us decode what is already implied—namely, that in an economy in which women are dependent on male keepers and traders, female desire is always already a masquerade, a play of false representations that covers over and simultaneously expresses the lack the woman exhibits—lack of the male organ and, concomitantly, lack of access to phallic privileges—to material and institutional power” (Montrelay 153). Behn’s virgins redesign this custom and yearn to change their plot. Ultimately they emerge as coherent female identities.

The heroines of *The Rover* work towards gaining agency for themselves, and in order to achieve this goal, they often abandon cultural norms of femininity and trespass into the masculine world. Behn lived in a society which perceived and gendered writing as an arena where only males tread. She was the odd one, the woman author who violated the expectations of society’s norms of femininity. In her endeavor as a writer, Behn herself

struggled with negative critique on her work that was grounded in her gender and not in the merit of her writing, but, she was not a woman to be cowed. She suffered much frustration due to the discrimination based on gender and often vented her resentment in her writings.

Behn's writings are "overwhelmingly concerned with questions of gender identity, sexuality, and women's oppression, to a degree and depth not seen in a comparably popular form of entertainment before or since" (Quinsey 1). Behn set a new way of seeing the female gender by making her women characters do things that the audience was not previously accustomed to seeing in real life or on stage. They seem to be on a path towards what female agency entails, revealing in the process that this is not an easily definable or finite concept. The methods women use to obtain it develops over the course of this play, expanding and altering the conceptualization of agency. Behn is the one who set the trend of asking new feminist questions about gender roles.

The breeches part is employed by the author as an escalation in the violation of expected behavior in women. Through disguise, the characters successfully obtain the object of their desire in life and marriage contrary to what the patriarchal structures in the play would dictate to them as appropriate. The breeches part allows these women to stray from the appropriate models of feminine behavior in a socially acceptable way. Cross dressing itself, as well as the masculinity it allows, helps the characters achieve this acceptability. Thus, these heroines are allowed to be outspoken and pursue their desires and goals openly without the threat of social censure – a luxury Behn herself had yearned to enjoy.

In the words of Haley D. Anderson:

For the purpose of the heroines of *The Rover*, "power" takes the form of being able to act independently and exert control in their lives. But this gives, at best, a simplistic picture of what agency can mean for women, since as we will see ...agency varies and can encompass many different versions. French feminist Hélène Cixous offers an interesting interpretation of femininity that can help us understand how the women in this play gain agency. In her essay "The Newly Born Woman," Cixous claims that women have long been cast in a role of passivity and kept there by patriarchal society (Cixous 37-39). She goes on to assert that "newly born" woman is bisexual, encompassing elements both masculine and feminine (41-42). This, she argues, allows woman more freedom of self (44-45). This could account for why the heroines encroach on what society deems masculine as a part of their agencies. While men, according to Cixous, restrict themselves entirely to the masculine, women contain elements of both sexualities....The women in this play ultimately make choices that reinforce the binary concept of male/female sexuality, so in this case the masculine is a tool used by women to gain agency rather than being an inherent part of their own sexuality.(4-5)

As Julie Nash argues in relation to *The Rover*, “Behn introduces women who resist the passive realm to which they would seem to be destined; in doing so, she provides other possibilities for the female spectator and subverts the limited binary opposition of active/male and passive/female”(82).

Unlike the stereotype heroines who faint at the sight of blood and get petrified at the sight of a sword, her heroines dismantle the sex-gender system invariably arguing that masculine privileges are based on custom, not nature, since a woman can successfully assume masculine positions of authority and in most cases in an even better manner than males. Behn's women characters transgress the physical and symbolic boundaries of a woman's domestic containment.

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