
The Rover by Aphra Behn: Carnival And Masquerade

CRITICISM



Summary



The Fight between Carnival and Lent (1559), by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525–1569).



- It shows some of the traditions which sit beneath the surface of *Twelfth Night*, suppressed, but arguably giving it energy.
- **Goodbye to meat**
- This painting was made in the Netherlands a few years before [Shakespeare's](#) birth.
- In the middle, there is a fat, carousing character on a barrel we could mistake for Sir Toby Belch. Symbolically, the inn is on the left side, and the church on the right.
- These respectively represent the opposing, balanced forces of Carnival and Lent, part of the traditions of the Christian church.
- In Lent, worshippers abstain from consuming certain foods and behaviours for a 40-day period as both a test and demonstration of their religious devotion.
- It is intended to be a time of reflection.
- Carnival, however, literally means 'goodbye to meat', and involves raucous celebration and social disorder before the beginning of Lent.



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The Carnavalesque



church and state
-little control-



- **Carnavalesque:**

- The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin has argued that Carnival can also be considered a literary or linguistic mode, in which inversion of normal hierarchies, celebration of the body and of the popular, may be used as a way of criticising the status quo.
- The Rover, in particular, Carnival is central to setting, plot and theme, whilst in the other plays disguise is formalised as an essential part of both plot and structure.
- Behn uses Carnival's modes (such as inversion, cross-dressing, disguise, grotesquerie, and darkness) in order both to celebrate aberrant behaviour and identity and to show how women are often punished more for such aberrance than men.



- Carnival comes from the Latin **carnem levare** which means "to put away flesh," and meat is not eaten during Lent.
- Carnivals were generally held before Lent, known as The Feast of Fools.
- People give things up for 40 days, so before that why not indulge a little...or a lot.
- A time where authority of Church and State were temporarily inverted and had no control over the lives of the public.
- A time where set rules and beliefs were ridiculed
- People could be who and say what they wanted
- A peasant dresses as a King



"Bakhtin's carnival, surely the most productive concept in this book, is not only not an impediment to revolutionary change, it is revolution itself. Carnival must not be confused with mere holiday or, least of all, with self-serving festivals fostered by governments, secular or theocratic. The sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church or state, but from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival."

(Michael Holquist, "Prologue," *Rabelais and His World*, xviii) Passages taken from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1984).

http://radicalanthropologygroup.org/sites/default/files/pdf/class_text_103.pdf

-Bakhtin considers there to be four categories of the "carnivalistic sense of the world":
-Free and familiar interaction between people
-Eccentric behavior
-Carnivalistic misalliances
-Sacreligious



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- W.H. Auden, a 20th century poet, comments on the social upheaval arguing, “During Carnival, all social distinctions are suspended, even that of sex. Young men dress up as girls, young girls as boys. The escape from social personality is symbolized by the wearing of masks.” (Auden, W.H. Introduction. *The Star Thrower*. Loren Eiseley. New York: Times Books, 1978. 15-24. Print.)
- Masks, symbolizing disorder, are present within *The Rover* and allude to the time of Carnival.
- In Act II, Scene I Willmore asks Belvile “**But why thus disguised and muzzled?**” (174). Belvile responds, “**Because whatever extravagances we commit in these faces, our own may not be obliged to answer them**” (174; II.I.).



identity
-shifting and fluid-

Duality

reality



image

- social division
- patriarchal laws
- hierarchical background

- desires, impulses
- eccentric behavior
- human nature revealed

breaking boundaries



Crossing Boundaries:

- The act of escaping: Freedom
- The existence of boundaries: limitations.
- The carnival setting is also the cause of mistaken identities.



Carnival and the Play:

- The play is set in Naples at Carnival time.
- The wearing of masks allows a freedom from normal constraints, there is often in the play a mistake made in the identities, circumstances can (and do) occur which could never otherwise happen, it allows for a fast pace to be maintained which keeps the spectators involved, and ultimately, “confusion captures the spirit of the carnival.”
- During carnival times, the class barriers gets shaken.
- The tradition of wearing mask is necessary to protect the identity of the rich and it provides opportunities to act out in a manner far removed from their habitual one.



Key questions

How is the tension between Lent and Carnival embodied in the character of Hellena?

How does the play use religious language?

How is disguise deployed as a dramatic device and what relevance does it have to the play's plot?

How does the character of Blunt represent the darker side of the play's carnival spirit?





Disguise is integral to the liberating elements of the carnival.

Belvile's quote from Act 2, Scene 1, line 2: 'Because whatever extravagances we commit in these faces, our own may not be obliged to answer 'em.'

Hellena's two main disguises, as a gypsy and as a boy.



Act 1, Scene 2 – Hellena’s disguise as the gypsy. How does Hellena change her language here? How does she reveal her true identity behind the disguise? Is she in disguise at all?

Act 4, Scene 2, lines 221 onwards – Hellena’s disguise as a boy. What, if anything, does this add to the plot and why?

As part of this investigation, students should identify the point in this scene when Willmore sees through the disguise.



Carnival hell – the trap to catch a fool:

Bakhtin's observation that 'carnival hell' included a 'trap to catch fools' (Rabelais and His World, p. 395) is a prompt for this.

Blunt has clearly been born into privilege, and still has money. This suggests that Blunt is a Roundhead, who was allowed to keep his money during Cromwell's Protectorate.

Act 3, Scene 2 – look at Behn's use of visual humour as Blunt is gulled





Recommended reading (short articles):

1. The Rover: an introduction by Elaine Hobby
2. An introduction to Restoration comedy by Diane Maybank

The Rover and Twelfth Night:

The activities here can all invite comparisons with Shakespeare's use of the carnivalesque in Twelfth Night.

1. Good starting points are:
 - o Festivity, dressing up and misrule in Twelfth Night by Michael Dobson
2. Shakespeare's festive comedy: A Midsummer Night's Dream and Twelfth Night by Francois Laroque
3. A Queer reading of Twelfth Night by Miranda Fay Thomas

