

**CHALLENGING GENDER HIERARCHY THROUGH HUMOUR
IN APHRA BEHN'S *THE ROVER I & II*.***

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This paper deals with the way Aphra Behn challenges gender hierarchy through humour in two of her best-known comedies, *The Rover I & II*. Twentieth-century criticism has extensively argued that gender is not biological but cultural. Women are not considered inferior beings who must remain subordinated to men, at least, in western culture. However, as early as the seventeenth-century, Behn was challenging gender hierarchy through her comedies and her personal experience. She was a woman who was able to write comedies to be performed and, through these comedies, she dared to expose her ideas publicly, in spite of accusations of prostitution. Moreover, through humour, Behn's female characters become superior to male ones in laughter-raising situations.

Keywords: *comedy, gender, humour, Aphra Behn.*

Este artigo trata sobre o desafío á xerarquía de xénero a través do humor en dúas das comedias máis coñecidas de Aphra Behn, *The Rover I e II*. No século XX, a crítica defendeu que o xénero non é biolóxico mais si cultural. As mulleres xa non se consideran seres inferiores que deben permanecer subordinadas aos homes, polo menos, na cultura occidental. Nembargantes, no século XVII, Behn xa desafiaba a xerarquía de xénero a través das súas comedias e da súa experiencia persoal. Tratábase dunha muller que podía escribir comedias para seren representadas e, nelas, atrevíase a expor as súas ideas publicamente, a pesar das acusacións de prostitución. Ademais, a través do humor, as personaxes femininas de Behn vólvense superiores ás masculinas nas

situacións cómicas.

Palabras chave: *comedia, xénero, humor, Aphra Behn.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“What a Pox art thou afraid of a Woman—[?]” (3.1.22) is the question the innocent Blunt, one of the characters in *The Rover II* (1681), asks his friend Fetherfool. As the question suggests, it is assumed that a man should not be frightened by a woman, whom the patriarchal society of the time deemed his inferior. However, despite what it may seem, the meaning of this question is largely clarified in Behn’s comedies. Patriarchy justifies women’s subordination due to their supposed mental and physical inferiority. Nevertheless, in her comedies, Behn introduces strong female characters in order to prove that a patriarchal society such as the one in the seventeenth century has the wrong idea about women. Behn’s female characters manage to turn the gender hierarchy which comes from women’s subordination upside down through humour, the most powerful weapon female characters use. So, in Behn’s comedies, men are ridiculed by women and, therefore, the privileges the patriarchal society in the seventeenth century granted men are challenged. Precisely because of that, Blunt and his friend are actually afraid of women.

During the twentieth century, many critics and scientists showed that gender is a cultural and, therefore, changeable concept. This changeability becomes such an important feature with respect to gender identities that it helps to transform the ideas about women which have been maintained since the beginning of Western culture. Yet, as early as the seventeenth century Behn challenged gender hierarchy not only in her comedies but also through her labour as a female playwright whose plays were performed publicly. Behn “emerged as the first British woman to make a living as a creative writer” (Hughes 2004: 29) in a period when women’s public speaking was forbidden (cf. Mourón Figueroa 1998: 120) and, therefore, as Lowenthal (2001: 397) points out, she was also “the first woman to endure some of the harshest criticism ever levelled against a writer – *because she was a woman*”. Meira Serras (2000: 263) indicates that

(...) all over the seventeenth century, some women contributed to the reshaping of the female identity. By means of literary and debating skills, they drew attention to their intellectual richness, in spite of their obvious lack of preparation in many fields.

Behn was one of these women. In her own works, she shows how difficult it was for her to write plays to be performed. In many of her first prologues or epilogues, Behn concealed her authorship of plays through the employment of masculine pronouns because the ideas displayed in them would be unacceptable if they were known to come from a woman. Then, she resolved to complain about misogyny, one of the trends in her society (cf. Altaba-Artal 1999: 67). In the preface to *The Lucky Chance* (1686), Behn (1996: 215) deals with the reception of her plays and notices that “Right or Wrong they must be Criminal because a Woman’s; condemning them without having the Christian Charity, to examine whether it be guilty or not, with reading, comparing, or thinking” and she “appeal[s] to all unbyast Judges of Sense, if they had not said that Person had made as many good Comedies, as any one Man that has writ in our Age; but a Devil on’t the Woman damns the Poet” (1996: 217). In the epistle to *The Dutch Lover* (1673), Behn (1996: 162) reports that “they were to expect a woful Play, God damn him, for it was a womans” but, on the contrary, “a woman may well hope to reach their greatest hights”. So, this epistle must be considered a vindication of the rights of women in the field of writing.

Apart from her direct references to women’s unjust situation in her prologues and epilogues, Behn also fought against women’s subordination in patriarchal society through the plots of her comedies: she either makes her male characters ridiculous or makes her female characters ridicule the male ones in order to challenge gender hierarchy, which totters when either the characters themselves or the audience and the readers laugh at the male characters.

Laughter is the essence of comedy and humour. Since the beginning of Western civilisation, many have tried to define humour yet, although they have achieved some important definitions, no one has been able to explain the whole phenomenon. In spite of this

absence of a completely satisfactory definition, I would like to make reference to the three theories relevant scholars have developed to explain laughter-raising situations: the incongruity theory, the superiority theory and the relief theory. In my opinion, the incongruity theory is the most useful for my analysis because the vast majority of comic situations in Behn's comedies depend on this. According to incongruity theory, humour is produced by the experience of an incongruity between what is expected and what actually happens. Among the scholars who have developed this theory, the most relevant are Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard or Koestler. In the nineteenth century Schopenhauer (1957: 271) asserted that "the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a conception and the real object thought under it, thus between the abstract and the concrete object of perception". With reference to the incongruity theory, Koestler (1994: 682) alleges that

the "bisociation" of a situation or idea with two mutually incompatible contexts in a person's mind and the resulting abrupt transfer of his train of thought from one context to another put a sudden end to his "tense expectations"; the accumulated emotion, deprived of its object, is left hanging in the air and is discharged in laughter.

Apart from the incongruity theory, the other two theories of humour will also be present in this analysis of the humorous situations in Behn's comedies. Until the eighteenth century, the superiority theory, mainly represented by Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian and Hobbes, had dominated the philosophical tradition. For Hobbes (1994: 54-55), "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly". The relief theory emerges in the nineteenth century in the work of Herbert Spencer, although it is better known thanks to Sigmund Freud's work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). In this work, Freud pointed out that the energy relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economises upon energy which would be used to contain and repress psychic activity (cf. Critchley 2002: 2-3). Although a comic situation may usually be explained by one of these theories,

sometimes two or even the three of them are necessary to give an unabridged explanation.

My goal is to analyse the way in which the male characters in Behn's *The Rover I* and *II* are ridiculed and the effect this has within the patriarchal society these comedies represent. I have chosen these texts because of their popularity. *The Rover I* was presented at Dorset Garden Theatre in 1677 for the first time and, from then on, "it was continuously acted until the turn of the century and became part of the repertoire until 1798" (cf. Altaba-Artal 1999: 74-77). Although *The Rover II* (1681) is considered inferior to the first part, it is also remarkable. According to Tomlinson (2002: 328), "[t]he fact that Behn wrote a sequel to her most popular comedy *The Rover, or The Banished Cavaliers* (1677) indicates the extent to which she was guided by the barometer of audience opinion". So, my aim is to study how a female playwright challenges gender hierarchy through humour in two of her best-known plays. Behn mocks her male characters, above all, by means of mistaken identities, whereas her female characters do so by means of deception, witticisms and the grotesque. Because of this mockery, women place themselves in a position of superiority, at least momentarily. I will show the different ways in which Behn and her female characters sneer at male characters and I will illustrate them through the analysis of the most relevant situations in *The Rover I* and *II*.

2. MISTAKEN IDENTITIES

In Behn's comedies, there are always a large number of disguises and night scenes in darkness and, particularly in *The Rover I* and *II*, these two features cause many cases of mistaken identity. The author is responsible for these situations in which the male characters fail to identify the women who they are talking to. Behn took such great advantage of the new spatial and visual possibilities of the Restoration theatre that she wrote her three-dimensional comedies thanks to the visual opportunities the stage offered during the Restoration. The new spatial and visual possibilities Restoration stages offered together with disguises and night scenes in darkness helped to enhance the plots, as we will see through the analysis of *The Rover I* and

II. Through the introduction of disguises and night scenes in darkness, Behn makes her male characters ridiculous and their authority is questioned. So, disguises and night scenes in darkness are frequently a plot device and a source of comic confusion.

In *The Rover I*, a boy tells Willmore that a lady would like to talk to him and, as the libertine he is, Willmore asks the boy to “[c]onduct her in, I dare not quit my Post” (5.1.186). Willmore longs to talk to Hellena because he has found out that she is “worth Two Hundred Thousand Crowns!” (4.1.271) and, therefore, he guesses: “This can be none but my pretty Gipsie—” (5.1.189) because the woman who wants to talk to him is in a masquing habit and a vizard. So, Willmore tells the supposed Hellena: “Oh, I see you can follow as well as fly— Come, confess thy self the most malicious Devil in Nature, you think you have done my bus’ness with *Angellica*—”. Having heard her own name, Angellica, who is the woman in front of Willmore, orders him to “[s]tand off” (5.1.192) and draws a pistol which she holds to Willmore’s breast. Behn shows this woman drawing a pistol against Willmore, who has previously offended her, in order to effect a sense of gender reversal. In fact, while Angellica is holding the pistol, she shows courage and determination. According to Pearson (1988: 158), in patriarchal society male sexuality is often “an instrument of power” and, therefore, in her comedies Behn “allows women to compete for this by allowing them to share the phallic power of swords, daggers and pistols”.¹ Willmore realises that the woman opposite him is not Hellena: “Hah, ’tis not she, who art thou? and what’s thy business?” (5.1.193). As Willmore does not recognise her, Angellica is forced to take off the vizard she is wearing while she says: “Behold this face!— so lost to thy remembrance, / And then call all thy sins about thy Soul, / And let’em dye with thee” (5.1.198-200). Willmore is really frightened because he fears that Angellica will kill him: “Hold, dear Virago! hold thy hand a little, / I am not now at leasure to be kill’d— hold and hear me— / —Death, I think she’s in earnest (*Aside*)” (5.1.210-212). As fear of a woman is not the expected attitude in a man, Willmore is ridiculed and the supposedly feeble woman becomes superior to him in this scene.

In *The Rover II*, Beaumont is also derided when he mistakes La Nuچه for Ariadne. He is sure that the woman he has met is Ariadne

because of her jewels, which override and determine the perception of the body in *The Rover II* (Hughes 2001: 129): “Hah—a Woman! and by these Jewels—should be Ariadne” (4.1.27). As he is going to marry her, he thinks that she will get embarrassed if he holds her and scolds her for being out at night. So, he does it: “—Oh, ’tis in vain thou fly’st, thy Infamy will stay behind thee still” (4.1.29). La Nuche realises Beaumont’s mistake but, as she was trying to make Willmore jealous, she plays the part of Ariadne for Beaumont. Thus, he goes on talking to his supposed wife-to-be: “by Heaven, I scorn to marry thee, unless thou cou’dst convince me thou wer’t honest—a Whore!—Death how it cools my Blood—” (4.1.53-55). The woman listening to him is La Nuche, a real prostitute Beaumont has met before. So, La Nuche, who is getting very shocked while she is listening to him, asks him: “is a Whore—a thing so much despis’d?” (4.1.58). At that moment, Beaumont finds out that the person he is talking to is La Nuche and, consequently, he is shocked too. It must have been a very embarrassing situation for a man who is in love with this prostitute. Through the whole meeting, La Nuche dominates the situation and, therefore, she plays the part of a man in a patriarchal society. In both situations, the women who threaten gender hierarchy are, surprisingly, prostitutes. Among women, patriarchy despises them more than anyone else and, therefore, this fact makes Willmore’s and Beaumont’s ridiculous position much more outstanding.

3. DECEIT

Until now, we have been analysing comic situations in which the ridicule of male characters is the result of their own behaviour but, in Behn’s *The Rover I* and *II*, there are also situations in which the female characters mock men. In my opinion, these situations are the funniest because women become dominant over men and they are completely conscious of that. Moreover, the mockery of male characters is more significant because it is not due to their own behaviour but because of the greater intellectual ability of women. In fact, Castelvetro (1984: 214) claims that “[d]eceptions, as when a person is made to say, do, or suffer what he would not say, do, or suffer unless he were deceived” are “a source of very great pleasure to us and move us to laughter”. One of the four kinds of deceptions Castelvetro

takes into account is the most prominent in Behn's comedies: "Some [...] are deceived by the machinations of men [...]", although in these comedies *women*, not men, are responsible for the machinations. According to Lowenthal (2001: 403-404), Behn's heroines are the best dissemblers and, for that purpose, they don disguises, which do not have to be physical. In this theatrical world of illusion, if women make use of disguises, that is, if they represent themselves to the world through a creative act, it "produces power because it cultivates a desire, a fact Behn not only recognises but exploits". In *The Rover I and II*, Behn exploits female self-representation and disguises in order to deceive men. It is also necessary to highlight that whereas "male honesty depended upon more than just sex, (...) female reputation rested solely on sexual chastity" (Foyster 1999: 77). So, deceit does not have the same consequences with respect to women's reputation as with men's.

In *The Rover I*, Lucetta manages to deceive Blunt in order to get his clothes and jewelry. Blunt falls in love with Lucetta when he meets her for the first time: she was passing by Blunt and gazed on him.² Then, he even wants to leave England for this woman: "How have I laught at the Colonel, when he sigh'd for Love! but now the little Archer has reveng'd him! and by this one Dart, I can guess at all his joys, which then I took for Fancies, meer Dreams and Fables" (2.1.34-37), although he does not know her name: "Her name? No, 'sheartlikins what care I for Names.—She's fair! young! brisk and kind! even to ravishment! and what a Pox care I for knowing her by any other Title". (2.1.43-45). So, Lucetta invites him to her house and, obviously, Blunt accepts. He believes that Lucetta is also in love with him and she starts to think about their life together: "Egad I'll shew her Husband a *Spanish* trick; send him out of the World and Marry her: she's damnably in Love with me, and will ne're mind Settlements, and so there's that saved" (3.2.12-15). He is not as rational as the ideal man in a patriarchal society because he does not realise that everything forms part of a trick. Moreover, the humour of this situation comes from the anxiety Blunt shows: "I had but some fine things to say to her, such as Lovers use,—I was a Fool not to learn of *Fred.* a little by heart before I came" (3.2.4-6). In spite of this wonderful situation, after Blunt takes off all his clothes and jewels, the bed descends and, while he is groping about to find it, he asks: "—Whe—whe—where am I

got? what not yet?—where are you sweetest?—ah, the Rogue's silent now—a pretty Love-trick this—how she'l laugh at me anon!—you need not, my dear Rogue! you need not!—I'm all on fire already—come, come, now call me in pity” (3.2.48-51). At the end, Blunt realises that he has been deceived: “what a Dog was I to believe in Woman? (3.2.90-91). Obviously, Lucetta laughs at him: “Now, Sir, had I been Coy, we had mist of this Booty” (3.2.58) but, due to Lucetta's duping of Blunt, his friends also subject him to collective derision. In fact, Belvile, one of his friends, enjoys seeing Blunt reduced to poverty:

[H]e yet ne'er knew the want of money, and 'twill be a great jest to see how simply he will look without it; for my part I'll lend him none, and the rogue knows not how to put on a borrowing face, and ask first; I'll let him see how good 'tis to play our parts whilst I play his (4.1.544-547).

By laughing at Blunt because of his masculine failure, his friends assert their masculine superiority. They need to distinguish between winners and losers in the contest for honor, which shows the internal instability of early modern patriarchy (cf. Pacheco 2002: 209). Although they seem to forget that the origin of Blunt's humiliation is a woman, she manages to do what they have never dared to do and, therefore, that woman should be at the top of their pecking order.

In *The Rover II*, there is a similar comic situation when Ariadne is wearing men's clothes.³ Ariadne manages to deceive Willmore and he thinks that she is really a boy. His only aim is La Nuche and, therefore, at the beginning, he does not take Ariadne into account. However, when she touches his sword, Willmore reacts: “go home, and do not walk the Streets so much: that tempting face of thine will debauch the grave men of business, and make the Magistrates Lust after wickedness” (3.1. 387-389). As she did not expect this reaction from Willmore, Ariadne tries to attract Willmore's attention and she is resolved to draw the sword. However, Willmore stops her, believing the person opposite him is a young boy: “Keep in your Sword, for fear it cut your Fingers, Child” (3.1.391). In spite of what is expected, Ariadne answers sagaciously: “So 'twill your Throat, Sir—here's Company coming that will part us, and I'le venture to Draw” (3.1.392-

393). So, Ariadne proves to be a brave woman who achieves her aims because, at the end, Willmore gives her an appointment at night in the Piazza: "I have an assignation with a Woman, that once dispatch'd, I will not fail ye, Sir" (3.1.415-416). Willmore arranges an appointment but he does not know that he is going to meet a woman who is dressed up as a man. So, it is obvious that Ariadne has managed to deceive him and, therefore, the woman proves to be more intelligent than Willmore, although in the seventeenth-century men were supposed to be the only rational beings. Both Lucetta and Ariadne deceive Blunt and Willmore respectively, which illustrates extensively the superiority of women over men in those particular situations.

4. WITTICISMS

As Altaba-Artal (1999: 77) indicates, *The Rover I* and *II*'s "outstanding value is their language". I think that the witty repartee is one of the most relevant procedures used in order to challenge gender hierarchy because the female characters manage to mock the male ones by making a masterly and ingenious use of speech. As the male characters are conscious of their mockery but are not able to fight back against women, their mockery is even greater. The introduction of actresses in the Restoration stage helped Behn to improve comedy. Tomlinson (2002: 329) points out that "Behn's particular innovation in her comedies was to amplify and elaborate sexual tension between men and women as a source of theatrical pleasure". In my opinion, the witty repartee is a way of creating sexual tension between male and female characters, above all, when women are subverting the masculine pecking order through the mockery of men.

In *The Rover I*, Willmore suggests having "the pleasure of working that great Miracle of making a Maid a Mother, if you durst venture; 'tis upse Gipsie that, and if I miss, I'll lose my Labour" (5.1.427-429) but Hellena does not want a baby: "And if you do not lose, what shall I get? a cradle full of noise and mischief, with a pack of repentance at my back? can you teach me to weave Inle to pass my time with? 'tis upse Gipsie that too" (5.1.430-432). As Anderson (2002: 80) emphasizes, "Hellena is hardly the first character on the Restoration stage to mention the consequences of sexual intercourse,

but her response does the work of comic truth-telling” because of the audience or the readers’ release after following the joke of a sexually aware young woman. In order to persuade Hellena, Willmore tells her that “I can teach thee to Weave a true loves knot better” (5.1.433) and Hellena answers sagaciously: “So can my dog” (5.1.434). Then, Willmore asks Hellena “one kiss and I am thine” (5.1.437) but Hellena thinks that

[o]ne kiss! how like my Page he speaks; I am resolv’d you shall have none, for asking such a sneaking sum,—he that will be satisfied with one kiss, will never dye of that longing; good Friend, single kiss, is all your talking come to this?—a kiss, a caudle! farewell Captain, single kiss (5.1.438-442).

Hellena does not want to follow Willmore’s projects and she wittily tells him so. First, she degrades Willmore by comparing him to a dog and, then, she tells him that his goal is insignificant. Obviously, Hellena’s attitude does not correspond to the ideal of femininity typical of contemporary patriarchal society. She may be chaste but she is not exactly modest.

In *The Rover II*, there is another comic situation in which two women reject the men who wanted to marry them in order to get their vast fortunes. Fetherfool and Blunt choose Giant and Dwarf as wives before having met them. They neither love these women nor do they have any respect for them. So, when Fetherfool sees Giant for the first time, he tells Blunt: “Ah *Ned*, my Monster as big as the Whore of *Babylon*—Oh I’m in a cold sweat—” (3.1.14-15). Fetherfool identifies Giant with a woman who is described in the Bible, specifically, in the Book of Revelations. Among her features, the most relevant are her seven heads and her ten horns. On the one hand, her seven heads are a symbol of a wise mind and, on the other hand, her ten horns make reference to power, to the royal power that ten kings have not yet received but are going to receive, together with the beast. As wisdom and power are not part of the definition of women in the seventeenth-century, through his comparison, Fetherfool shows that Giant is not a woman but a monster. However, Blunt, who has not seen Giant yet, doesn’t believe in Fetherfool’s perception. He thinks that

men are superior beings and, therefore, he asks Fetherfool: “What a Pox art thou afraid of a Woman—[?]” (3.1.22). However, Fetherfool is so frightened that he considers Giant “a She *Gargantua*” (3.1.23-24) because of the largeness of her body, which is transgressive and, therefore, frightening (cf. Russo 1994: 60). Obviously, in this situation, men make themselves ridiculous because of their fear of these two women. However, this is not the end of this humorous situation because, then, Fetherfool and Blunt meet Giant and Dwarf. In spite of his aversion to Giant, Fetherfool asks her: “—Madam,—has your Greatness any mind to marry—” (3.1.65-66). Then, Giant asks him: “What if I have?” (3.1.67) and Fetherfool boasts about his generosity: “Whe then, Madam, without enchanted Sword or Buckler, I am your Man” (3.1.68-69). However, Giant, who thinks that Fetherfool is not a suitable man to marry, answers: “My Man! my Mouse. I’le marry none whose Person and Courage shall not bear some proportion to mine” (3.1.70-71). So, through her witty remark, Giant makes Fetherfool ridiculous because of the incongruity between what he thought might happen and what really happened at the end. I would like to highlight this woman’s agency when she is rejecting Fetherfool and also after having opposed his preconceived plan in order to get her money. In both cases, women break down men’s preconceived plans about their own lives, although they live in a period when men are supposed to control women’s lives.

5. THE GROTESQUE

The grotesque is a very useful literary device that Behn uses to challenge gender hierarchy. On the one hand, through grotesque descriptions her female characters highlight the most contemptible features of their male counterparts. Curiously enough, the men who are described so grotesquely are often old suitors whom the young heroines are expected to marry. Thus the grotesque is used by Behn’s heroines to voice their contempt towards unwanted prospective spouses, as part of the author’s recurrent critique of arranged marriage in her drama. So, by despising and debasing male figures, gender hierarchy becomes destabilised. On the other hand, there are also female characters grotesquely described in Behn’s comedies. This is interesting too, because “women and their bodies, certain bodies, in

certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive–dangerous” (Russo 1994: 60). So, if men are afraid of female bodies, this fear empowers women, and this leads to a sense of gender reversal.

In *The Rover I*, Pedro encourages Florinda to consider rich old Don Vincentio as a suitable husband, although she is really in love with a young Englishman called Belvile. However, as Florinda is not brave enough to say so to her brother, Hellena sets out to prove that Don Vincentio is not the best option for a young woman like Florinda to marry. First, Hellena indicates that Don Vincentio “may perhaps encrease her Baggs, but not her Family” (1.1.83), making reference to his manifest sexual disability. Then, Hellena describes the place where her sister Florinda would have to live after her marriage. Although Pedro thinks that Don Vincentio’s house is the most wonderful place, where Florinda “may walk and gather Flowers” (1.1.93), Hellena’s perception is very different:

When by Moon Light? For I am sure she dares not encounter with the heat of the Sun, that were a task only for *Don Vincentio* and his Indian breeding, who loves it in the Dog dayes. — and if these be her daily diversitements, what are those of the Night, to lye in a wide Moth-eaten Bed Chamber, with furniture in Fashion in the Reign of King *Sancho* the First; The Bed, that which his Fore-fathers liv’d and dy’d in (1.1.94-99).

Finally, Hellena specifies what Florinda would find every night when she had to go to bed:

[T]he Gyant stretches it self; yawns and sighs a Belch or two, loud as a Musket, throws himself into Bed, and expects you in his foul sheets, and e’re you can get yourself undrest, call’s you with a snore or Two—and are not these fine Blessings to a young Lady? (1.1.107-111).

Obviously, through this grotesque description, Hellena is laughing at Don Vincentio, who thus loses the hegemonic position

patriarchal society grants him because he is an old man. Moreover, Hellena points out that marrying Don Vincentio “would be worse than Adultery with another Man. I had rather see her in the *Hostel de Dieu*, to wast her Youth there in Vowes, and be a hand-Maid to Lazers and Cripples, than lose it in such a Marriage” (1.1.118-121). Her preference shows that she deems Don Vincentio the most horrible man in the world. According to Aughterson (2003: 13), “[t]he energy of [Hellena’s] account (which is both witty and horrific) dominates the scene and her brother inverting the norm of hierarchical gendered relations”.

In *The Rover II*, Fetherfool makes reference to Giant and Dwarf in the following way:

[T]wo Monsters arriv’d from *Mexico*, Jews of vast fortunes, with an old Jew Uncle their Guardian; they are worth a hundred thousand pounds a piece, — Marcy upon’s, whe’tis a sum able to purchase all *Flanders* again from his most Christian Majesty (1.1.169-173).

Fetherfool starts calling them “Monsters” and, then, makes reference to the vast fortune each “piece”, that is, each woman, is going to receive. So, he identifies a woman and a piece of something, a word often used to name objects. However, Fetherfool is not the only one who describes these women in a grotesque way because Beaumont explains that he admires Fetherfool and Blunt, who want to marry these women, “one of them is so Little, and so deform’d, ’tis thought she is no capable of Marriage” (1.1.184-185) and “the other is so huge an overgrown Gyant, no man dares venture on her” (1.1.185-186). Through the whole comedy, they are never called by their own names, the other characters call them “the Dwarf” and “the Giant” and Beaumont even uses denominations such as “the Elephant and the Mouse” (1.1.193). Their size is always present when they are named and, therefore, they are objectified or animalised. The worst part comes when the four characters meet because Fetherfool remarks:

My heart begins to fail me plaguily — would I could see’em a little at a distance before they come slap dash upon a man, — hah! — Mercy upon us! —

what's yonder! — Ah *Ned*, my Monster as big as the Whore of *Babylon* — Oh I'me in a cold sweet —

Blunt pulls him to peep, and both do so.

— Oh *Lord!* she's as Tall as the St. *Christopher* in *Notre dam* at *Paris*, and the little one looks like the Christ upon his Shoulders — I shall ne're be able to stand the first brunt (3.1.11-17).

Fetherfool emphasises how tall Giant is when he says she is as tall as one of the sculptures in *Notre Dame* and Blunt makes a connection between Dwarf and the “Christo” who is on the shoulders of the abovementioned sculpture.

Fetherfool is obviously afraid of Giant and, in order to justify his fear, he asserts that Giant's body is “[n]ot of a Woman, *Ned*, but of a She *Gargantua*. I am a *Hercules* in Petticoats” (3.1.22-23). So, Fetherfool is making a connection between Giant and the giant in the work by Rabelais which Bakhtin (1984) has analysed so extensively. He sees himself as ridiculous as Hercules dancing in women's clothes at Omphale's command.⁴ After seeing Dwarf, Blunt points out: “I'de rather mine were a *Centaure* than a Woman” (3.1.24-25) which insists on the dehumanisation of that extraordinary woman. Despite the difference between the grotesque descriptions in the two parts of *The Rover*, in both cases, the mockery of male characters means challenging the masculine pecking order.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Seventeenth-century culture measures manliness to a large extent by power over women (cf. Pacheco 2002: 207). So, if men are not able to control women's lives, their manliness will be at risk. Through the analysis of all the situations I have analysed before, it is possible to realise that the masculine pecking order was challenged by women as early as the seventeenth century. In the plays I have just analysed, women are generally empowered: on the one hand, the female author manages to have these two plays performed and published when it was supposed that women were not expected to do so, since they would thus make their ideas, perceptions or sensations

public; on the other hand, most of her female characters face up to men who try to impose the patriarchal order. Behn and her heroines' ability consists in turning gender hierarchy upside down. To achieve their goal, they use a very powerful weapon: humour. They laugh at the male characters and, what is more important, they make the public or the readers laugh at them because they manage to ridicule them through the introduction of mistaken identities, deceit, witticisms, or the grotesque. In one way or another, the male characters in *The Rover I* and *II* become the butt in all the humorous situations. These two plays reached great popularity at the end of the seventeenth century and, therefore, a lot of people attended their performances and read their printed versions. So, the concept of gender Behn displays in her comedies became a real danger to that seventeenth-century society. Having challenged the gender hierarchy in a patriarchal society, it is understandable that Behn's works were silenced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the exceptional freedom typical of the seventeenth century no longer existed.

NOTES

- ¹ Apart from pistols, Behn also allows her women to draw swords and daggers. For example, in *The Amorous Prince* (1671), Ismena draws a poniard and runs at Antonio, who steps back in order to avoid Ismena's weapon (4.1.) and, in *The Dutch Lover* (1673), Hippolyta draws a dagger in order to kill Antonio (3.3.). In both cases, the men get frightened when the women acquire the phallic power, creating a sense of gender reversal.
- ² According to Hughes (2001: 87), "Lucetta's sizing up of the foolish Blunt is an expression of female power. (...) The male gaze is not, however, primarily an expression of power, for it is frequently at images, or at absent or departing forms, and its main function is to split the socially perceived self from the personal self". So, from the beginning, Lucetta challenges the masculine pecking order through her gaze but, on the contrary, Blunt misreads Lucetta's goals, which proves that the idea of women men have is frequently false.
- ³ As Kavenik (1991: 180-181) points out, the girl dressed as a boy derives from the Plautine and Italian Renaissance comedy and

it was very popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. However, during the Restoration period, the introduction of actresses in the Restoration stage enhances the popularity of the “breeches part”, whose aims have always been the following: “First, the disguised heroine seeks her husband or lover; second, she serves this man unrecognised; third, she acts as love messenger to a rival mistress; and fourth, some lady who believes that the disguised person really is a man becomes the victim of a mistaken wooing”. In this scene, Ariadne endeavours to seek Willmore and, moreover, she manages to deceive La Nuche, who thinks that Ariadne is really a man, and therefore Ariadne gains access to Willmore.

- ⁴ This is a reference to Hercules' infatuation with Omphale, Queen of Lidia, which made him perform several laughable actions. This episode seems to have fascinated many writers and artists of the Early Modern period as a comic inversion of gender roles. In *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), Philip Sidney explains that the picture of Hercules dressed in women's clothes dancing to Omphale's orders can produce both delight and laughter, being a beautiful representation of a scornful situation (Sidney 2002: 112).

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