

Discovering Literature

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Teachers' Notes

Curriculum subject: English Literature

Key Stage: 5

Author / Text: Aphra Behn, *The Rover*

Theme: Carnival

Rationale

These activities allow students to explore how Aphra Behn uses character types and tropes associated with carnival in *The Rover*. Students can relate this to the play's context of production, and to comic theories relating to the carnivalesque.

The Christian season of Lent was marked by fasting, praying and restraint from sexual intercourse. The days before Lent, known as carnival, were a time of misrule and freedom. Literature in the comic genre often includes elements of the carnivalesque, a literary mode which destabilises or reverses existing structures of power. The main critical theorist who developed ideas of the carnivalesque was Mikhail Bakhtin.

Although performed and published during England's Restoration, *The Rover* is set in the 1650s in Naples, a Catholic state. Naples was conceptually and topographically worlds away from the unremittingly Lenten Puritanical England of Cromwell's Protectorate.

Content

Literary and historical sources from the site:

- [First edition of Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, with 18th-century prompt-book notes](#)
- [Production photographs of *The Rover* \(RSC, 2016\)](#)
- [The Fight Between Carnival and Lent by Pieter Brueghel the Elder \(1559\)](#)
- [Portrait of Aphra Behn by Sir Peter Lely](#)

Recommended reading (short articles):

- [The Rover: an introduction](#) by Elaine Hobby
- [An introduction to Restoration comedy](#) by Diane Maybank

External links:

- [Discussion of *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*](#) by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (YouTube)
- Passages from [Rabelais and His World](#) by Mikhail Bakhtin

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?

Activities

1) Activity 1: Lenten versus carnival

Examine Brueghel's painting [The Fight Between Carnival and Lent](#). Students should familiarise themselves with the painting further by watching the [YouTube lecture](#) either as a starter, or as a flipped learning exercise before the activities themselves.

In groups, explore how the character of Hellena is introduced and developed in Act 1, Scene 1. What about her character embodies a carnival spirit? Make the following headings and find examples to support each one:

- Colloquial and outspoken language
- Disregard for authority figures
- Profane use of religious language and imagery
- Outspoken views on an arranged marriage as a form of immurement.

Explore further: Look for other profane uses of religious language and imagery in the rest of the play, using it to build a picture of how *The Rover* flouts Lenten values.

2) Activity 2: *The Rover* and disguise

Disguise is integral to the liberating elements of the carnival. Discuss 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.' Introduce Bakhtin's observation that 'During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom' (*Rabelais and his World*, p. 7). Lastly, use the [photographs of the RSC's 2016 production](#) of the play to consider costume and staging choices.

In groups examine the overall significance of Hellena's two main disguises, as a gypsy and as a boy. This can be done as a jigsaw activity, with each group taking one disguise and then feeding back to the rest of the class.

- 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.

Explore further:

- [Restoration drama](#) marked a turning point on the English stage as women were now permitted to act, meaning the part of Hellena would have been played by a female actor and not a boy player, as in Shakespeare’s day. Female cross-dressing was still a popular device, however. Discuss the effect that the difference in gender of the actor playing Hellena may have on this. In the context of today’s theatre, where casting is often gender-blind, should it matter?
- Look at the following statement from critic Janet Todd:

Hellena assumes a multiplicity of roles: gypsy fortune-teller, nun, lady, and boy, so escaping the enclosure of a daughter and concern for portions and jointures. At the same time she avoids Angellica’s mistake in raising desire through an image and deflating it with her simpler person, since she keeps it raised through a series of shifting selves (*Aphra Behn, A Secret Life*, p. 223)

With this quotation in mind, discuss to what extent Hellena’s use of disguise connotes freedom in the play.

3) Activity 3. Carnival hell – the trap to catch a fool

This activity uses the character of Blunt to introduce students to the darker and more grotesque side to the carnivalesque. Bakhtin’s observation that ‘carnival hell’ included a ‘trap to catch fools’ (*Rabelais and His World*, p. 395) is a prompt for this.

Discuss what Blunt’s name reveals about his personality and audience expectations of a character with a comic name. Introduce the implications of the fact that 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.

For the main activity, students should divide a page into two columns with the headings ‘Sympathy’ and ‘Lack of sympathy’. They should then chart Blunt’s journey through the play, recording quotes and observations in their table. Use these references from the play as starting points:

- Act 1, Scene 2, line 200 – the use of stage directions to create character
- Act 2, Scene 1 – Blunt’s reaction to meeting Lucetta and the reactions of the other men to him
- Act 3, Scene 2 – look at Behn’s use of visual humour as Blunt is gulled

- Act 3, Scene 4 – Blunt's soliloquy
- Act 4, Scene 5 – Blunt's speech which opens this scene can be compared with his soliloquy.
- Act 4, Scene 5 – look at Blunt's behaviour towards Florinda
- Act 5, Scene 1, lines 530 onwards – how has Blunt become a clown-like figure here?

Once their tables are completed, students should prepare their answers to the following question: Is Blunt punished sufficiently within the play for his actions?

This could be done as a classroom debate, with half the students acting for and half against, or as a mock court case placing Blunt on trial.

Extension activities

- Students may want to read Janet Todd's biography *Aphra Behn, A Secret Life* for themselves and explore further links between disguise and spying.

Extension activities: *The Rover* and *Twelfth Night*

- The activities here can all invite comparisons with Shakespeare's use of the carnivalesque in *Twelfth Night*. Good starting points are:
 - [Festivity, dressing up and misrule in *Twelfth Night*](#) by Michael Dobson
 - [Shakespeare's festive comedy: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*](#) by Francois Laroque
 - [A Queer reading of *Twelfth Night*](#) by Miranda Fay Thomas
- Behn's introduction of the character of Hellena can be contrasted to the introduction of Olivia, seen through Orsino's descriptions in Act 1, Scene 1. What about these descriptions mark Olivia as a Lenten figure, and also subtly undercut the Lenten for its excessive preoccupation with austerity?
- In *Twelfth Night*, the sour steward Malvolio is a Lenten character, with Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Feste as examples of carnivalesque characters. Malvolio is likened at one point to a Puritan. The difference in historical context invites interesting discussion and comparison, as Shakespeare was writing before the Puritan Protectorate.
- Viola in *Twelfth Night* would in Shakespeare's England have been played by a boy player: in the context of production, her disguise as the boy Cesario creates layers of gender ambiguity and homoerotic tension. How does this compare to Hellena's cross-dressing?
- Blunt's role as the carnival clown or fool can be compared to that of Malvolio who is gulled and debased in *Twelfth Night* and also Sir Andrew Aguecheek who is mocked and ultimately rejected by Sir Toby. Look at this rejection in Act 5, Scene 1 and also the way in which Malvolio is debased in Act 4, Scene 2. Similar questions about sympathy and lack of sympathy for the foolish figure can be explored here.