

***The Libertine Hero in British Revivals of Restoration Comedy,  
1986-2019***

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### Abstract

This thesis offers an analysis of revivals of Restoration comedies featuring libertine heroes staged by subsidised, repertory theatre companies in England between the years 1986 to 2019. Using seven productions as examples, I examine the evolution of interpretations of the libertine hero over time, considering a range of directorial approaches. My study particularly focuses on directors' use of three devices: adaptation, revival, and modernisation. These terms overlap throughout my study, and they are respectively defined as a creative reinterpretation of an existing work, a process wherein a classic play is reanimated and staged in such a way that it feels compelling to audiences, and the practice of altering aspects of a classic play to reflect contemporary details of the period in which the production is performed. The productions in my study include John Barton's 1986 Royal Shakespeare Company revival of Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677), Loveday Ingram's 2016 Royal Shakespeare Company adaptation of *The Rover*, Max Stafford-Clark's 1994 Royal Court revival of George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), which was paired with the premiere of Stephen Jeffreys's history play *The Libertine*, Stafford-Clark's 1993 Royal Shakespeare Company revival of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), Jonathan Munby's 2018 Chichester Festival Theatre production of *The Country Wife*, and Philip Breen's 2019 Royal Shakespeare Company revival of John Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife* (1697). Like the range of productions covered in my thesis, my research spans a range of sources, including scholarly criticism on the libertine hero figure, filmed archival recordings of certain productions considered in this thesis, production photographs, production prompt books, play texts, and critics' reviews of the productions. With my detailed study of these sources, I have reconstructed the specifics of the various performance interpretations. Throughout these productions, I have traced an evolution of directorial approaches to the figure of the libertine hero, from romanticisation to a willingness to engage with and condemn his potential for sexual violence and cruelty.



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**Abbreviations:** Throughout this thesis, the Royal Shakespeare Company is abbreviated to RSC.

**Author's Declaration:**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

***The Libertine Hero in British Revivals of Restoration Comedy, 1986-2019***

The world of Restoration comedy has grown more remote during my theatregoing lifetime. As a teenager with little more experience of the theatre than what I'd seen at the Manchester Library Theatre, nothing was more alive to me than a man in a full-bottomed wig or a woman with a fan. Restoration comedy was rarely off the stages of the repertory theatres, guaranteed to pull the crowds. *The First Churchills* was big on television, Charles II was as familiar as Elizabeth I, the contrived syntax of Etherege and William Wycherley was as easy as Oscar Wilde, and the only thing funnier than a fop was a cuckold. [. . .] Even by 1986, when I was an associate director of the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, the plays seemed to have grown stranger, the streets of Restoration London less ordinary, the rules of Restoration theatre no longer part of shared theatrical experience.

– Nicholas Hytner, *Balancing Acts*

In his vivid memoir of his directorship of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner raises a familiar story about the uneven appearance of Restoration comedies on the English stage.<sup>1</sup> Restoration plays have experienced a decline in popularity over the past several decades, a fact which has not gone unobserved by theatre critics. In 2007 Michael Billington, reviewing David Lan's revival of Thomas Otway's comedy *The Soldier's Fortune* (1680), mused, 'Is Restoration Comedy as a genre slowly slipping away from us?'<sup>2</sup> A decade later, Sarah Crompton, in her article praising Josie Rourke's Restoration comedy revivals, in which she

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Hytner, *Balancing Acts: Behind the Scenes at London's National Theatre* (Vintage Digital, 2017), Kindle edition, 182.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Soldier's Fortune,' *The Guardian*, February 23, 2007, accessed January 24, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/feb/23/theatre1>.

recalls the 2012 *The Recruiting Officer* and anticipates the 2018 *The Way of the World*, reflected:

When I was first going to the theatre, these plays formed a mainstay of the repertory. But they have fallen out of favour, got stuck in a time warp of bewigged fops and farthingaled ladies. The theatrical conventions of the time turned characters into stock grotesques in a way that now tends to obscure the human truthfulness that lies beneath. Yet if you put them into modern dress, the societal conventions on which their plots hinge seem anachronistic. They are tricky to pull off.<sup>3</sup>

Here she conveys the double-sided dilemma with which directors of Restoration comedies must grapple: the Scylla of period trappings and mannerisms pitched to an excessive, affected level with heavy emphasis on these comedies' bawdy humour and carnal couplings both matrimonial and illicit, and the Charybdis of modern settings against which these plays' topical references can seem dated. Most crucially, these plays can read as anachronistic when staged in modern dress given the fact that they rely heavily on Restoration conventions towards gender and sexuality, now largely foreign to contemporary audiences. Various productions examined in this thesis reflect aspects of this double-sided issue. The focus of my study is how directors of recent productions of these comedies have used the techniques of modernisation, adaptation, and revival in their work.

Despite the challenges presented by Restoration comedies, Sarah Crompton goes on to emphasise the potential of these plays: 'I have friends who still go misty eyed as they recall Maggie Smith's performance as the heroine Millamant, her delivery full of double entendres and delicious humour but also informed by the sadness of a clever woman giving up her

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Crompton, 'Josie Rourke is putting the comedy back into Restoration comedy,' *WhatsOnStage*, September 28, 2017, accessed January 25, 2026, [https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/josie-rourke-is-putting-the-comedy-back-into-restoration-comedy\\_44748/](https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/josie-rourke-is-putting-the-comedy-back-into-restoration-comedy_44748/).

liberty by giving herself and her fortune in marriage'.<sup>4</sup> Recollecting her own memories of Congreve's comedy, she notes:

But the difficulties posed by the play are revealed by the fact that it has not had a major production in London since 1995 when Phyllida Lloyd staged a radically updated version at the National Theatre to what can be kindly described as mixed reviews. I saw it, yet all I remember are DayGlo costumes, and the famous wooing scene between Fiona Shaw's Millamant and Roger Allam's Mirabel [sic] being rather funny. [. . .].<sup>5</sup>

The convolutedness of Congreve's plots and counterplots, she notes, can be an impediment to audiences' identification with the characters: 'When it's hard to follow, it becomes harder to care'.<sup>6</sup> Then she comes to the crux of the matter: 'Perhaps too, however, because modern actors perform Restoration comedies so rarely, they have lost the knack of finding their way into its heart. They concentrate on the surface, without ever penetrating to the emotions beneath'.<sup>7</sup> Crompton identifies numerous barriers to the re-staging of Restoration plays and yet, as this thesis will show, directors continue to be drawn to this period's complex meditation on masculinity, sexuality, and gender roles.

The epigraph to this chapter from Nicholas Hytner indicates a similar concern to Crompton's: that of a 'strangeness' surrounding these comedies. His recollections are roughly contemporaneous to Crompton's, as indicated by his mention of Wycherley, likely the 1977 made-for-television *Play of the Week* adaptation of *The Country Wife*, starring Anthony Andrews as Horner and Helen Mirren as Margery. This production bears the distinction of being the only screen adaptation of a Restoration comedy to date. By 1986, the world of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



Restoration comedy had become foreign terrain. Poignantly, Hytner describes the plays as ‘hav[ing] grown stranger’. Distant though they may have been due to their societal conventions and topical references, now the connection had been further eroded by time, severing ‘the shared theatrical experience’ between actors and audience members.<sup>8</sup> In fact, this phenomenon could be termed a partial cultural amnesia – while flickers of Restoration comedy memories might have remained, the embers had grown considerably colder.

Crompton and Hytner both touch upon the challenges associated with performing Restoration comedies today. There is a cultural complexity surrounding these works, and when staging them, directors must take into account their origins from a certain point in English history and ascertain how to approach them in a way that makes them relevant and appealing to contemporary audiences without dressing them in modern clothes or evoking the idea which David Francis Taylor has aptly termed ‘Restoration-ness’.<sup>9</sup> Taylor explains this as the effect of watching a ‘neurotic party host [who] feels the need constantly to tell us just what a good time we must be having’ by letting no humorous jest or sexual innuendo go un-emphasised, often to excess.<sup>10</sup> As Crompton and Hytner point out, Restoration comedy had cultural currency earlier in the twentieth century but as we will see, it had faded over time. This thesis studies how a selection of Restoration comedies have complicated this trend and produced robust stagings with a combination of approaches to modernisation, adaptation, and revival.

## Restoration Comedy Onstage

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<sup>8</sup> Hytner, *Balancing Acts*, 182.

<sup>9</sup> David Francis Taylor, ‘Not Love, Actually: Congreve’s Love for Love at the Swan Theatre,’ *BSECS*, December 5, 2015, accessed January 26, 2026, <https://www.bsecs.org.uk/criticks-reviews/not-love-actually-congreves-love-for-love-at-the-swan-theatre/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

According to Arthur H. Scouten and Robert D. Hume, the records of Restoration comedy revivals produced in the eighteenth century reveal ‘a simple and consistent [system]: considerable popularity in the 1720s, 1730s, and early 1740s; followed by a falling-off which is more or less rapid depending on how offensive a particular play or author is to the stiffening moral standards of the mid-eighteenth century; followed by outright chopping or rewriting in the 1760s and 1770s’.<sup>11</sup> This decline in the eighteenth century reflects changing attitudes to the sexual content of many Restoration comedies and the particular difficulties posed by the libertine hero.

By the early twentieth century, however, Restoration comedies were being staged. From 1900-1930, Restoration comedy revivals made their gradual return to the stage, produced by private theatrical societies (The Mermaid Society, the Incorporated Stage Society, the Phoenix Society, and the Renaissance Society) which were not under the auspices of the Lord Chamberlain. Consequently, they bypassed ‘his office’s often arbitrary censorship’.<sup>12</sup> This ‘cultural reinvestment in [. . .] and reinterpretation of’ the comedies arose from ‘an interest in conserving and cherishing what was at the time called the English national culture’.<sup>13</sup> As Deborah Kaplan summarises:

Between 1880 and 1930 the concern was manifested in the establishment of, for example, the National Trust; permanent sites for the National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery of Modern Art (the Tate); disciplines in English literature and history at Oxford and Cambridge Universities; a system of state education with vernacular language and literature at the center of the curriculum; the Dictionary of National

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<sup>11</sup> Arthur H. Scouten and Robert D. Hume, “‘Restoration Comedy’ and Its Audiences, 1660-1776,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 10 (1980): 68.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Kaplan, ‘Representing the Nation: Restoration Comedies on the Early Twentieth-Century London Stage,’ *Theatre Survey* 36, no. 2 (1995): 39.

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, ‘Representing the Nation’, 38.

Biography; the New (later Oxford) English Dictionary; and, if not a national theater, detailed plans and passionate advocacy for one. Productions of Restoration comedies, along with Restoration tragedies and some long-ignored medieval and Elizabethan plays, were offered in this period as illustrious examples of the nation's literary and theatrical inheritance.<sup>14</sup>

Two discernible interpretation styles may be traced in these revivals. In the early decades of the twentieth century, productions were semi-private, characterised by a marked forthrightness, cold-bloodedness, and scintillating repartee, and intended for refined, intellectual audiences. These productions thereby associated Restoration comedy with elitism. By contrast, subsequent productions were staged commercially and aimed at more general audiences. These were distinguished by a geniality and comparative smoothness to their forebears, and pitched to a wider, more egalitarian idea of a national culture.

The result was a juxtaposition of theory and practice. The former took inspiration from the seminal research of Montague Summers especially, who ‘served as consultant for most of the Restoration comedies given by the Stage and was one of the five members of the Executive Committee who ran the Phoenix Society’.<sup>15</sup> The latter entailed the fusion of supposedly historically accurate ‘theatrical conventions’ per Summers’s advice with a ‘broad, affected playing style [. . .] based more on actual, present as well as past, upper-class manners than on comic Restoration acting,’ since ‘[the actors] either rejected or, more likely, were unaware of the highly codified gestures and facial and vocal expressions of Restoration acting’.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there was a range of audience responses. While ‘highbrow’ critics enthused about the plays’ ‘passionate and cruel vitality’ and ‘verbal style [. . .] their wit and sparkle, their

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 41.

polished craftsmanship, and their occasional ascents to heights of poetic beauty,’ other self-aware critics deployed this line of praise to avoid being accused of enjoying the bawdy humour, citing the texts’ ‘cleverness [. . .] the wit, the pleasantry, the polish, the raciness’ which, according to them, elevated the comedies from tales of sexual sordidness to ‘exquisite and precious piece[s] of philandering’.<sup>17</sup> Kaplan’s observation that ‘[s]uch denials, however, when too emphatically offered, could create a completely bloodless Restoration, reduced to personifications’ foreshadows Crompton’s concern about more recent revivals which sometimes rely on stereotypes rather than realistic characterisations.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the vestiges of Regency disapproval lingered. Even though some comedies were staged with bowdlerisations, there were a ‘substantial number of critics who heartily disliked the productions’.<sup>19</sup> For them, ““Restoration” still primarily meant dangerous immorality,’ and although ‘[t]hey sometimes acknowledged the verbal pleasures of the comedies [. . .] fine language could not offset salaciousness’.<sup>20</sup> Kaplan cites a critic reviewing a 1919 revival of *The Provoked Wife* (1697), who observed that despite the fact that it contained ‘one or two extremely clever snatches of dialogue, the play as a whole is disgusting,’ while another reviewer wrote of The Phoenix Society’s revival of *The Country Wife* in 1924 that ‘It is exceedingly clever and amusing, and the wit is delightfully fresh and spontaneous...but so much of it is almost brutally offensive’.<sup>21</sup> In the end, however, the negative comments disappeared. As the drama societies died out in the mid-1920s and the plays were offered to the general public, ‘theater companies and critics turned the comedies from a “disgrace” into a source of national pride’.<sup>22</sup> Various notable twentieth-century

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 57.

revivals prior to 1986 (Barton's watershed year) included Tyrone Guthrie's 1934 Old Vic revival of Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695), Anthony Quayle's 1947 Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith revival of Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), a 1957 Birmingham Repertory Theatre revival of Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), and William Gaskill's 1963 National Theatre/Old Vic revival of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), among others.<sup>23</sup>

### Restoration Comedy in Recent History

The concerns expressed by Billington, Crompton, and Hytner are well-warranted, given recent data on twenty-first century revivals. The performance annals of the National Theatre and the RSC, both of which (as David Roberts identifies) are noteworthy for their 'consistency of output' of Restoration comedy productions, indicate that since the start of the century, the National has only staged three revivals: in 2001, Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696) directed by Trevor Nunn; in 2007, Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676) directed by Nicholas Hytner; and in 2015, Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707) directed by Simon Godwin. The RSC has staged five: in 2001, Wycherley's *Love in a Wood* (1671) directed by Tim Supple; in 2015, Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695) directed by Selina Cadell; in 2016, Behn's *The Rover* (1677) directed by Loveday Ingram; in 2018, Mary Pix's *The Beau Defeated* (1700) staged under the title of *The Fantastic Follies of Mrs Rich* and directed by Jo Davies; and in 2019, Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife* (1697), which to date was the last Restoration comedy production at a subsidised, repertory theatre.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as of the time of writing, it appears that the most recent Restoration comedy revival in the UK was the Warwick-based youth theatre Playbox Theatre's Spring 2025 production of *The Country Wife* (1675). These

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<sup>23</sup> J.L. Styan, *Restoration Comedy in Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 253, 256, 254, 255.

<sup>24</sup> David Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy: The Royal Shakespeare Company, 1967-2019* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 22. Note: many of these theatres produce original works as well, but for the purpose of this thesis I focus on repertory work.

lists show that Restoration revivals seem to be experiencing a ‘falling-off’ trajectory along the lines of what occurred in the eighteenth century, according to Scouten and Hume’s analysis.

One potential reason for this is that the worldviews represented in these comedies sometimes do not reflect today’s current attitudes towards sexuality and gender. In a 2024 article for *The Stage*, Amanda Parker examined RADA’s decision to stop teaching students Restoration comedy:

Chock-full of distinctly pre #MeToo plot lines and reflecting Britain’s deeply imperialist roots, Restoration comedies demand performers and directors swerve the many potholes of modern-day misunderstanding to bring the brilliance of its drama to life. The same could be said for Shakespeare – but there’s less reticence to address the icks you’ll find in almost all of his plays.<sup>25</sup>

The sexual politics of Restoration comedies can pose a marked conundrum, ‘in particular,’ as David Roberts remarks, ‘the masculinity of the libertine hero is likely to be defined as “toxic”’.<sup>26</sup> In a post-#MeToo world, the libertine hero poses complex cultural problems for Restoration revivals. Indeed, this figure is innately linked with Restoration comedy, as the libertine hero arises within the genre with no clear prototype evident in earlier Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies. It is in Restoration comedies that we must reckon with his raw, original, and uninhibited force.

This thesis offers a critical study of revivals of Restoration comedies that feature notable libertine heroes, staged by noteworthy theatre companies in England between the years 1986 to 2019: John Barton’s 1986 RSC revival of Aphra Behn’s *The Rover* (1677); Loveday Ingram’s 2016 RSC production of *The Rover*; Max Stafford-Clark’s 1994 Royal Court production of George Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (1676); Stafford-Clark’s 1993 RSC

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<sup>25</sup> Amanda Parker, ‘RADA plans to stop Restoration comedy teaching – why? And what does it mean?’, *The Stage*, July 9, 2024, accessed January 27, 2026, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/rada-plans-to-stop-restoration-comedy-teaching--why-and-what-does-it-mean>.

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy*, 19.

revival of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Jonathan Munby's 2018 Chichester Festival Theatre revival of the same play (1675); and Phillip Breen's 2019 RSC revival of John Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife* (1697).

My reasons for selecting these specific productions are as follows: first, the bulk of my research is drawn from the RSC due to their rich history of Restoration comedy revivals, as well as the availability of physical archival resources (particularly filmed production footage). Given that my research is focused on portrayals of libertine heroes in these plays as seen in live performances, the existence of audio-visual recordings of the productions has offered a comprehensive archive for analysis. My second reason is that I am interested in examining how various directors producing these plays have used the techniques of modernisation, revival, and adaptation in these productions, and in studying how the complex figure of the libertine hero has been interpreted for contemporary audiences. Consequently, the RSC's wide range of Restoration comedy revivals has proved invaluable to my study. Moreover, the Chichester Festival Theatre's 2018 production of *The Country Wife* provides a balance to most productions considered in this thesis. Among other things, this was a modern-dress production (most productions in this thesis involved an adaptation of seventeenth-century dress) and the modern setting provided a compelling new lens through which to view the libertine hero as a recognisable twenty-first century man. Likewise, the Chichester Festival Theatre, as a regional theatre (in contrast to the RSC's status as an institution), is an example of how non-metropolitan festivals contribute to revivals. The Chichester Festival Theatre has a history as a hub for new works as well as a launchpad for revivals of plays which frequently transfer elsewhere. Given this context, the 2018 *The Country Wife* may be viewed as an instance of a Restoration comedy vividly reimagined for today.

Throughout this study, I will pursue two lines of inquiry. Firstly, I examine the importance of the libertine hero in Restoration comedy revivals following 1986, the year of Barton's

staging of *The Rover*. Barton's groundbreaking revival of *The Rover* positioned Willmore as central to the staging, as we will see in Chapter One, making libertine masculinity a key concern. Over the decades, there was an evolution in portrayals of the libertine hero; each production considered in this thesis provides a specific example of how this figure has been interpreted to reflect contemporary attitudes towards his sexuality. In brief: the 1980s (exemplified by Barton's production) offers Willmore's exploits as a boisterous romp, the 1990s (as considered in my analyses of Stafford-Clark's 1993 *The Country Wife* and 1994 *The Man of Mode*) offers markedly cynical, debauched portraits of Horner and Dorimant, and in the 2010s a range of approaches is evident, depending on the play in question. For instance, Ingram's 2016 *Rover* is an intensely 'sexed-up', carnivalesque romantic comedy with a comedic-yet-alluring Willmore. Munby's 2018 *The Country Wife* is a study of male toxicity in our present day, focusing on Horner as a deeply jaded sex addict, and Breen's 2019 *The Provoked Wife* addresses twenty-first century concerns surrounding domestic violence, all the more strikingly for being played in period costume. Together these revivals show the changing fortunes of the libertine hero, which on a wider scale reflects the shifts in directorial approaches to Restoration comedies over time. This study offers an examination of how revivals of these comedies critique the plays based on contemporaneous societal values.

Secondly, I will consider Restoration comedy's enduring potential for audience entertainment and engagement. A telling instance of this is the fact that in an audio recording of a pre-performance interview with Munby in the run of the 2018 *Country Wife*, audience members can be heard laughing at various points, indicating a strong response to the comedy. The novelty of these plays as rarely produced works forms much of their appeal. Productions which lean heavily into the comedy seem to have greater reception, a trend which presumably finds its origins in Barton's revival, and suggests that playgoers crave diversion, escapism, and intellectual stimulation. Within revivals, adaptation, and modernisation facilitate the



potential for audience engagement. Through tactics ranging from period aesthetics coupled with meaningful line deliveries to modern dress costuming, they reframe these works, making them relevant to present-day mores.

### Key Terms

The term ‘Restoration comedy’ is somewhat ambiguous. Scholars, as David Roberts observes, have debated whether the designation should be applied solely to comedies written between 1660 and 1700, to comedies penned from 1660-1714 (when the last Stuart ruler, Queen Anne, died), or to those written during the exact period from when Charles II restored the monarchy in 1660 to 1688, the year his brother James II abdicated.<sup>27</sup>

Scholars have acknowledged the generic changes which characterise these works over the mid-to-late seventeenth century. Robert Hume, for instance, traces these changes in comedies from intrigue and city comedies in the 1660s, to plays characterised by their emphases on sex and farcical elements in the 1670s, and then to a more sympathetic approach to the characters and their follies which arose in the 1680s. This sympathetic style took root further in the 1690s, finally culminating in the distinctly early-eighteenth century comedic styles of intrigue comedy wherein intrigue was ‘an end in itself,’ not a means to illicit ends as in previous decades and moral comedy which ended with the reformation of flawed characters.<sup>28</sup> Laura Brown, by contrast, links the evolution of the genre to the relationship between ‘literature [including works of theatre] and society,’ arguing that ‘dramatic social satire’ early on in the century eventually gives rise to works of theatre marked by ‘moral action,’ which develops concurrently (and to a greater degree) in early-eighteenth century novels.<sup>29</sup> Brian Corman’s

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>28</sup> Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 474.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Brown, *English Dramatic Form, 1660-1760: An Essay in Generic History* (Yale University Press, 1981), xv, xvi.

analysis is predicated on a consideration of these comedies over ‘three cross-sections, each of five year periods’ from 1660-1710; these periods are 1670-1675, 1690-1695, and 1705-1710, and he examines six comedies from each, to address the diversity of the genre.<sup>30</sup> In addition, J. Douglas Canfield draws distinctions between three varieties of comedy based on how they engage with the Stuart-era ideology about the English aristocracy’s right to rule based on their superiority and breeding. For Canfield, these categories are ‘social’ comedies, which reinforce this ideology, ‘subversive’ comedies, which undermine it, and ‘comical satire,’ divided into the subcategories of ‘corrective’ (involving some ‘standard of judgment’) and absurdist (subverting ‘any certain standard’ of judgement).<sup>31</sup> Aparna Gollapudi, meanwhile, examines the history surrounding ‘reform comedies’, which she defines as follows:

Reform comedy is plotted around the reclamation of flawed individuals—philandering husbands, spendthrift wives, inveterate gamblers. Erring protagonists are brought on the stage to first parade their folly and amuse the audience. Then, most often, a well-meaning spouse, friend, or lover creates circumstances — through stratagem or sage advice—that force the flawed character to realize the evil consequences and immorality of his or her conduct, thus catalyzing remorse and eventual reform.<sup>32</sup>

Although my study of Restoration comedies concludes prior to the prominence of this category (which, Gollapudi asserts, premiered in 1696 with Colley Cibber’s *Love’s Last Shift*), a case can be made that Vanbrugh’s 1697 *The Provoked Wife* anticipates the shift towards reform, as the play implies that the rakish Constant renounces his suit of Lady Brute at its conclusion. As this range of perspectives shows, scholars have come to differentiate between different types and periods of Restoration comedies. The various plays examined in

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<sup>30</sup> Brian Corman, *Genre and Generic Change in English Comedy 1660-1710* (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>31</sup> J. Douglas Canfield, *Tricksters & Estates: On the Ideology of Restoration Comedy* (University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 1-2, 2, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Aparna Gollapudi, *Moral Reform in Comedy and Culture, 1696-1747* (Ashgate, 2011), 1.

this study encompass a variety of genres of Restoration comedy. Likewise, the range of these revivals is reflected in the range of thematic approaches to these works and their libertine heroes; each production draws out distinctive aspects within the play texts.

Most plays considered here (*The Rover*, *The Man of Mode*, and *The Country Wife*) can be classed as ‘libertine comedies,’ that is, comedies which (as Deborah Payne Fisk explains) were marked by ‘a set of attitudes: scepticism about received knowledge; defiance against social sanctions and institutions; and a professed commitment to a life of hedonism’.<sup>33</sup> While Fisk includes 1670s comedies in her ‘Chronology of Libertine Plays,’ for the purposes of my analysis I extend the term to *The Provoked Wife*, since the characters of Sir John Brute, Constant, and Heartfree all to various extents exhibit aspects of scepticism, defiance, and pursuit of hedonism.<sup>34</sup> As I address in Chapter Five, the libertine figure of 1697 in *The Provoked Wife* is different to those in 1670s comedies, which reflects stylistic changes on the Restoration stage. Between the 1670s and 1690s, Restoration plays show the evolving nature of stage comedy, with even more changes to come in the early eighteenth century. By the 1690s, as Chapter Five addresses, we see a change in the form and tone of comedy, indicating how comedy is a historically evolving form. These changes suggest the role of the stage in cultural critique regarding comedy and libertinism. In short, the Restoration stage is a developing conversation, and one that does not stand still. Similarly, the changes in depictions of the libertine hero are tethered to generic changes in Restoration comedy. Within each of these plays, the libertine appears in a distinct form, particular to the tone of the work.

Over time, the term ‘libertine’ itself has changed, evolving from a cultural idea of a free man to a man whose moral behaviour (especially regarding the treatment of women) is markedly sexual and exploitative. Since its first recorded usage in Wycliffe’s Bible circa 1384, the word ‘libertine’ has carried connotations of freedom, both in a corporeal and a

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<sup>33</sup> Deborah Payne Fisk, ‘Introduction,’ in *Four Restoration Libertine Plays* (Oxford University Press, 2005), xix.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, liv.

metaphysical sense. Philemon Holland's gloss of the term in his 1601 translation of Pliny's *The Historie of the World* exemplifies the former of these two definitions. Holland states that 'Libertines' are 'slaves newly enfranchised (sic),' that is, freedmen who have received bodily liberty.<sup>35</sup> The alternative, more abstract definition of the term meant one who was a dissenter in matters of faith. This specific sense of the word arose in the mid-sixteenth century, and was originally applied to members of a particular religious sect, and aligned, in prejudicial ways, with 'infidels, Turkes, Iewes,' and 'Anabaptists'.<sup>36</sup> By the early 1600s, the term 'libertine' gained a broader meaning, signifying any person who appeared 'loose in religion, one that thinks he may do what he listeth,' as Robert Cawdrey wrote in 1604.<sup>37</sup> The religious laxity of libertines, as noted by Peter Bulkley in 1646, stemmed from their prioritisation of private faith over exterior indications of faith: 'I have faith, saith one, and though I have no works, yet my faith will save me'.<sup>38</sup> This laxity applied equally to sins of the flesh, as well as those of the spirit; a contemporary definition of 'libertine' was offered by Gabriel Harvey who in 1593 summed up persons who displayed a propensity towards carnal vice as '[t]he whole brood of venereous Libertines, that knowe no reason, but appetite, no Lawe but Luste'.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to note that these individuals were primarily men and granted the masculine prerogative to roam where they pleased. Such privilege was a practical product of the contemporary worldview that men were secondary in status only to God Himself, and women were of secondary importance to men. As one religious tract put it:

Man, the Lord created after his own Image; in the Image of God created he him, Male and Female created he them: so that Man among other Endowments in Nature, bore Gods image in Sovereignty [sic], being Lord of the Earth and Sea; chief Ruler under

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<sup>35</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Michael Proffitt (Oxford University Press, 2025), under 'libertine.'

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Harvey, *Pierces Supererogation Or A New Prayse of the Old Asse* (London: 1593), 45.

God over all the plenty therein; so that Man of all earthly Creatures, was made in subjection to God only; and hereupon Man is called the Glory of God.<sup>40</sup>

Women, though considered vital for ‘comfort and procreation,’ were ‘made in subjection to Man, her earthly Lord and Husband; and hereupon is Woman called the Glory of a Man’.<sup>41</sup>

Although some Restoration comedies feature libidinous and/or sexually experienced women (examples of the former and latter being, respectively, Lady Fidget in *The Country Wife* and Angellica Bianca in *The Rover*) who are sometimes categorised by scholars under the term of ‘female libertines,’ I argue that this designation is a misnomer. However ‘female libertines’ may attempt to imitate their male counterparts (engaging in extramarital sex, getting drunk, and singing lewd songs, as do Fidget, Mrs Squeamish, and Dainty Fidget), these women lack complete agency as subjects — that is, the physical ‘liberty’ — to ramble at their ease which is afforded to Horner and Willmore. Social expectations compel them to at least the appearance of virtue if not the genuine article.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, because women were considered men’s property, and the earliest definition of ‘libertine’ likewise referred to an individual freed from slavery, their societally assumed status as domestic goods precluded them from actual libertinage.

Lastly, the term ‘romp’ is of great significance to my study, as it often appears in reviews of Restoration comedy productions. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘romp’ entered common usage around 1678 and was defined as ‘[a] person who romps, *esp.* a lively, playful girl or young woman. Now archaic’.<sup>43</sup> Thereafter its meaning evolved – from circa 1713 onwards, it meant ‘[a] spell of rough, energetic play; a lively frolic; (now frequently) spec. a spell of sexual activity, *esp.* an illicit or transient one (colloquial)’.<sup>44</sup> In the

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Wall, *Spiritual armour to defend the head from the superfluity of naughtiness* (London: 1688), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See Peter Holland, *The Ornament of Action: Text and Performance in Restoration Comedy*; also, Laura Linker, *Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730*.

<sup>43</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Michael Proffitt (Oxford University Press, 2025), under ‘romp.’

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

context of the arts, the term takes its third definition, which emerged around 1895: '[a] lively, fast-paced, and usually frivolous play, film, or other entertainment'.<sup>45</sup> The term's sexual connotations are also applicable within the context of Restoration theatre productions, as is the term 'frivolous,' defined from circa 1563 onwards as '[c]haracterized by lack of seriousness, sense, or reverence; given to trifling, silly'.<sup>46</sup> In essence, 'romp' is a shorthand often used by critics to indicate a particular approach to Restoration drama and the wider sphere of historical drama in general, characterised by boisterousness, an emphasis on heterosexual couplings both licit and illicit, earthy, often bawdy humour, and an overall levity, usually involving lavish period sets and costumes. In this thesis, I will examine how various Restoration comedy productions negotiate this persistent category.

### **The Libertine Hero in Criticism**

Despite the uneven history of Restoration productions, literary and theatre scholars have generated a vibrant body of work on Restoration comedy.<sup>47</sup> The libertine (both in leading and supporting roles) features prominently throughout the Restoration comedy genre. In his survey 'Restoration Comedy 1671-1682 Character types,' Juan A. Prieto-Pablos notes 105 libertines (to whom he refers by the interchangeable term 'gallants') in plays produced between 1660-1670, and 180 libertines in plays produced between 1670-1682, adding up to 285 libertines in total.<sup>48</sup> Additional libertines (particularly heroes) populate the comedies of the 1690s and early 1700s, including Loveless and Worthy in Vanbrugh's 1696 *The Relapse*, Mirabell in William Congreve's 1700 *The Way of the World*, and Archer and Aimwell in George Farquhar's 1707 *The Beaux' Stratagem*. Given his prevalence, the libertine hero

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Michael Proffitt (Oxford University Press, 2025), under 'frivolous.'

<sup>47</sup> See Rose A. Zimbardo, *A Mirror to Nature: Transformations in Drama and Aesthetics, 1660-1732*; Michael Cordner, 'Marriage Comedy after the 1688 Revolution: Southerne to Vanbrugh'; Pat Gill, *Interpreting Ladies: Women, Wit and Morality in the Restoration Comedy of Manners*; Jeremy W. Webster, 'In and Out of the Bed-chamber: Staging Libertine Desire in Restoration Comedy'; David Gelineau, 'Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer*: The Whorehouse of Language.'

<sup>48</sup> Juan A. Prieto-Pablos, 'Restoration Comedy 1671-1682 Character types,' in *Restoration Comedy 1671-1682: A Catalogue*, ed. María José Mora (Teneo Press, 2019), 53.

(sometimes referred to by other interchangeable classifying epithets including ‘rake’ and ‘rake-hero’) has been analysed at length by various scholars, including Warren Chernaik, as well as Erin Mackie, Harold Weber, Anne Hermanson, Jeremy W. Webster, and Christopher Tilmouth. My interpretation of the libertine hero is shaped by their insights into the political, philosophical, and gender implications of this complex theatrical and cultural figure.

Tilmouth, for instance, outlines the libertine’s intertwined political and social stances. Specifically, he notes how the ‘mood of cynicism amongst Royalists of the early 1660s’ in the wake of the Restoration, due both to general discontent at their lack of compensation for loyalty to the Crown and to in-fighting among the Royalists themselves, gave rise to Restoration libertinism. For Tilmouth, this was born from ‘a conviction that the best sort of governance is a lack of governance,’ grounded in the Royalists’ dissatisfaction with their current government’s failure to fully reimburse them for their fidelity ‘and that man is, *and ought to be*, driven by an idea of self-interest identified with the riotous pursuit of pleasures’.<sup>49</sup> As we will see in this thesis, this profound self-absorption is particularly evident in the character of Horner.

Meanwhile, Anne Hermanson examines the libertine’s ‘underlying skepticism about the existence of moral absolutes,’ particularly regarding ‘the nature of God [. . .] and ‘God’s relationship with humankind’.<sup>50</sup> This was rooted in the libertine’s scepticism, born of what were in fact selective interpretations (misreadings) of seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ book *Leviathan*, as well as the works of the Epicureans as seen in translations of the ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius’ didactic poem *De rerum natura* (On

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<sup>49</sup> Christopher Tilmouth, *Passion’s Triumph over Reason: A History of the Moral Imagination from Spenser to Rochester* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 290, 288-90, 258.

<sup>50</sup> Anne Hermanson, ‘Forsaken Justice: Thomas Shadwell’s *The Libertine* and the Earl of Rochester’s *Lucina’s Rape Or the Tragedy of Vallentinian*,’ *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 33, no. 1 (2009), 3.

the Nature of Things).<sup>51</sup> Warren Chernaik notes how Hobbes and Epicureanism were intertwined:

The Hobbesian system [. . .] does not allow any dimension beyond “this life,” any possibility of eventual forgiveness and repose. Epicureanism, equally atheist and materialist in its basic assumptions, is nevertheless consolatory and ethically normative, concerned with ways of freeing man from the pangs of desire, in order to achieve on earth the kind of inner peace frequently associated with transcendent beatitude.<sup>52</sup>

My approach to the libertine hero is shaped by Chernaik’s emphasis on how for the Restoration libertines, transcendent beatitude was synonymous with earthly pleasures, usually those concerning sexual appetites, and this Hobbesian viewpoint often allowed them to evade agency and moral responsibility. Fisk similarly notes that ‘Rochester and others appropriated from Hobbes his philosophical scepticism and tendency to question traditional morality while rejecting other strands of his thought that were less compatible with a fashionable libertinism’.<sup>53</sup> A key factor of this remodelled Hobbesian ideology was rejection of authority, though there was a distinction, as Chernaik notes: ‘Where Hobbes and Lucretius challenged false, illegitimate authority, the libertines assumed that *all* authority was illegitimate: the state, the church, the family were institutions equally parasitic on man’s fear of freedom’.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, real-life libertine lifestyles (and the careers of their fictional brethren) were marked by a rejection of authority and of personal agency, following the laws of nature, which was likewise tied to their dogged pursuit of hedonism. Tilmouth’s commentary on how Restoration libertines espoused the belief ‘that man is, and ought to be, driven by an idea of self-interest identified with the riotous pursuit of pleasures’ finds echoes in lines from

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<sup>51</sup> Hermanson, ‘Forsaken Justice,’ 4-6; Warren Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>52</sup> Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Fisk, ‘Introduction,’ xvi.

<sup>54</sup> Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, 25.



Restoration libertine heroes absorbed with following their own inclinations; one such instance is Dorimant's nonchalant remark to his cast-off mistress Mrs Loveit: 'We are not masters of our own affections, our inclinations daily alter; now we love pleasure, and anon we shall dote on business; human frailty will have it so, and who can help it?'<sup>55</sup>

Jeremy W. Webster examines the libertinism of members of the Merry Gang, also known as the Court Wits. These were fourteen men who, throughout Charles II's reign, were in his inner circle and enjoyed his protection, friendship, and patronage. They included such figures as George Villiers, (the Duke of Buckingham and cousin to Barbara Palmer, the King's mistress), Charles Sackville (Lord Buckhurst and the Earl of Dorset), John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, and playwrights including Wycherley and Etherege. Citing their real-life escapades as well as those of their fictional leading male characters, Webster makes the case that:

[L]ibertinism was a series of performances [and that it] was performed in at least three ways: the libertines were actors who captivated spectators with their scandalous behavior, the libertines were playwrights who embodied their own reputations in their libertine protagonists, and, through their activities and plays, the libertines were themselves texts to be analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, libertine comedies may be viewed as self-referential entities.

Webster's emphasis on scandal is explored more fully by Harold Weber, who asserts that 'the Restoration rake-hero's most distinctive, and therefore most important, characteristic is his sexuality'.<sup>57</sup> Weber seeks, however, to complicate the libertine's sexuality, explaining that 'the rake is too complex and enigmatic a figure to be reduced to a sexual machine [. . .] [y]et

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<sup>55</sup> George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, in *The Plays of Sir George Etherege*, ed. Michael Corder (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 249.

<sup>56</sup> Jeremy W. Webster, *Performing Libertinism in Charles II's Court: Politics, Drama, Sexuality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

<sup>57</sup> Harold Weber, *The Restoration Rake-Hero: Transformations in Sexual Understanding in Seventeenth-Century England* (University of Michigan, 1986), 3.

[. . .] the rake most compellingly expresses these complexities through his overwhelming desire for sexual pleasure, transforming the world's great stage into a playground for his amours'.<sup>58</sup> Weber's argument provides a useful point of reference by which to examine the portrayals of the various libertines in the productions highlighted in this thesis. Specifically, Weber raises the question of how the actors' interpretations of the libertine affect the narratives of their respective plays, depending on if the actor in question leans into the role's complexities (as seen in the 2018 Chichester Festival Theatre's *The Country Wife*), or simply plays into the libidinousness (as evinced in the 2016 RSC *The Rover*). Similarly, Erin Mackie explores the libertine's approach to gender, observing:

Because of its exploitation of sexual discourses and the erotics of politics at the Restoration court, and because of its inheritance of the aristocratic heroic ethos of competitive martial prowess, the brand of criminality associated with the rake is heavily invested in masculinity. With his every frolic, the rake sets in contest his prowess, his potency, and, by implication, the potency and authority of the elite order of masculinity on which his personal prestige ultimately depends. In extravagant fashion, then, the rake's masculinity asserts criminality as a status privilege.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, libertines can get away with any exploit they please, no matter how dire the result, merely because they are wealthy, and, in the case of the Merry Gang, protected by royal patronage. The fictional stage counterparts reflect the licences afforded their real-life models. Mackie's insights into libertine masculinity hold importance for my approach to examining Restoration comedy revivals since certain figures (like Sir John Brute) exhibit a noted degree of criminality in their behaviour.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Erin Mackie, 'Boys Will Be Boys: Masculinity, Criminality, and the Restoration Rake,' *The Eighteenth Century* 46, no. 2 (2005), 132.

When the terms ‘libertine’ and ‘libertine hero’ occur in this thesis, it must be understood that I use them in the sense of the central male personage in these comedies, around whom the main plots revolve. Moreover, in this study I will examine two distinct subheadings of libertines, namely rakes and rovers. These terms (and others, including the term ‘gallant’) were effectively used interchangeably during the early modern era (circa 1500-1700), as well as in the early-eighteenth century, as descriptors for men inclined to amorousness. ‘Rake’ is a 1693 abbreviation of the circa 1560 term ‘rakehell,’ itself derived from the 1542 transitive phrase ‘to rake (out) hell: (usually in the context of describing a person as villainous or immoral) to search through hell’. One early use of this term in context occurs in John Mackenzie’s 1690 publication *A narrative of the siege of London-Derry*, when he writes of ‘[t]hese Rake-hells (who were the very scum of the Countrey)’.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, the epithet of ‘rover’ carried the double tarnish of its associations with thievery and sexual rapacity. As it emerged in the English lexicon circa 1393, it initially signified a pirate (Edward Hall in 1548 complains of how ‘[t]he kynges subjectes [sic] . . . were grievously spoyled [sic] and robbed on the sea, by Frenchemen [sic], Scottes [sic], and other rouers [sic]’) and, from circa the early 1600s onwards, a lecher (in 1638 John Ford describes a man as ‘none of your hot rovers, Who ruffle at first dash, and so disfigure Your Dresses’).<sup>61</sup>

Despite the fundamental interrelatedness of these terms, I differentiate in this thesis between these two types for the sake of clarity, as there are key distinctions in the two notable subcategories of libertines portrayed on the Restoration stage. For instance, Warren Chernaik describes rakehells (which he abbreviates to ‘rakes’) and rovers, as respectively, ‘one aggressive and exploitative and the other happy-go-lucky, accepting whatever pleasures the moment may bring,’ citing Horner (in *The Country Wife*) and Dorimant (in *The Man of Mode*)

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<sup>60</sup> John Mackenzie, *A narrative of the siege of London-Derry* (London: 1690), 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Michael Proffitt (Oxford University Press, 2025), under ‘rover,’; *ibid.*

as examples of the former, and Willmore (in *The Rover*) as an example of the latter.<sup>62</sup> To these characters I add the libertine lead in Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife*, Sir John Brute, who is unique in this study as an instance of a man who is a libertine post-marriage rather than before his nuptials. As we will see, Brute (tellingly named by Vanbrugh) exemplifies the libertine as a domestic tyrant, stripping away the exterior glamour exhibited by earlier dramatic libertines to reveal the extremes of the figure's potential for cruelty and sexual abuse.

Having defined the central figure in my study, that of the 'libertine hero,' I now turn to examine other key terms, namely 'revival,' 'adaptation,' and 'modernisation'. For 'revival,' I follow the definition of Gilli Bush-Bailey and Jacky Bratton, and draw on their insights into how the embodied nature of revival depends on the actors' and director's work:

The term 'revival' has long-established roots in the context of theatre practice. It is used to indicate the new realisation of an old – normally a classic – text, and carries the implication that director and cast bring their contemporary world into fruitful dialogue with the author's work from an earlier time. Inherent to that practice is an understanding that, at some level, there is a self-consciousness about the contemporaneous nature of the performers and audience. [. . .] Whereas reconstruction ignores the present in seeking to rebuild from the past, 'revival' acknowledges the present and works to reawaken that which can be brought into use again. Revival seeks to connect with the past through present consciousness.<sup>63</sup>

My approach to revival is informed by their emphasis on how the act of reviving a play involves a conscious engagement with the text on the part of the present-day practitioners to interpret the past and bring it alive via a contemporary lens. This concept of revival as an

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<sup>62</sup> Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> Jim Davis et al., 'Researching Theatre History and Historiography,' in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 107.

active practice is relevant to my study since each the productions I examine ‘work to reawaken’ the play texts in distinct ways, emphasising different aspects of the libertine hero. The libertine hero in these revivals does not merely replicate the past; rather, he facilitates the engagement of the past with the present.

Revival, adaptation, and modernisation overlap at various points throughout my study. For instance, Barton’s *Rover* is in theory a ‘revival,’ given that Behn’s play had been staged previously. It is in addition properly classified as an adaptation, given Barton’s various alterations to the text. Modernisation (updating the text, costuming, etc.) in a classic work of theatre to reflect that of the present day, also appears in various forms in my study. While Ingram’s 2016 adaptation of the *Rover* involved instances of simplified language and interpolated comic lines for the sake of audience accessibility and amusement, Munby’s 2018 *The Country Wife* was staged in modern dress (largely with Wycherley’s original text intact), to illuminate what Munby believed to be the text’s relevance for our own age. Like ‘revival,’ ‘modernisation’ depends on an audience’s familiarity with previous stagings, and in addition their familiarity with the text itself. While such familiarity is common with Shakespeare, for example, given the frequency with which his plays are revived and his established status in the literary canon as an author whose works are regularly taught in schools and universities, the comparative infrequency with which Restoration comedies are revived means that audiences cannot always be depended on to recall the play text or prior productions, and therefore each production can be regarded as a distinct entity unto itself.<sup>64</sup>

‘Adaptation’ itself is a layered term. According to Linda Hutcheon, it is defined as both ‘a product and a process of creation and reception’.<sup>65</sup> Specifically, it may be defined as ‘a formal

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<sup>64</sup> For the purposes of my analysis, I have chosen to consider each production as a discrete unit unless clear parallels are indicated (for instance, certain aspects of Ingram’s production of *The Rover* which suggest homages to Barton’s version). Moreover, while some older audience members who attended Ingram’s version may have seen Barton’s version and consequently had a pre-existing knowledge of the play, it is impossible to verify this familiarity.

<sup>65</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2013), xvi.

entity or product,’ that is, ‘[a]n acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works,’ and as ‘a process of creation,’ that is, ‘[a] creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging’. In another related sense it entails ‘[a]n extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work’ in which ‘adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as *adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation’.<sup>66</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the first two definitions of ‘acknowledged transposition’ and ‘appropriation/salvaging,’ since, given the range of Restoration comedy productions considered and most audiences’ unfamiliarity with the original plays, one cannot make the case for their definitive perception of palimpsests.

Finally, the lens through which I will examine these productions will be that of adaptation theory, which argues that the ‘[t]ransposition [of a work] to another medium, or even moving within the same one, always means change or, in the language of the new media, “reformatting”’.<sup>67</sup> In that vein, all the productions in this thesis may be considered adaptations to some degree. Each revival reframes (i.e. essentially reformats) the libertine hero and the play itself for a contemporary audience via different directorial tactics, which vary, covering everything from altered texts to updated or relocated settings to interpolated songs and dances. In fact, given the range of interpretations covered in these productions, the only markedly consistent detail is the directorial propensity for altering the works in some way, for the sake of audience accessibility and entertainment appeal. As Catherine Love remarks, there is currently an ongoing ‘popular critical discourse surrounding productions variously labelled as versions’, ‘adaptations’, or ‘radical’ revivals, which are celebrated by some for reimagining

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 16.

classic plays and bringing them to new audiences, while others fret that they are defying the intentions of their long-dead authors.’<sup>68</sup> Moreover, she observes:

[Directorial] interventions in classic plays [have prompted some critics] [. . .] to question the relationship that such productions have to their canonical texts. Less pejoratively, various scholars have sought to analyse what it is that such productions are doing and how these approaches differ from (for want of a better phrase) more conventional treatments of the classics.<sup>69</sup>

Although there is certainly a case to be made against ‘dumbed-down’ Restoration comedy productions, given the current absence of these plays from our stages I have chosen to examine what these earlier directors emphasised in their versions.<sup>70</sup> In the productions, we see directors changing the source texts to reinvent them for contemporary audiences as valid, compelling entertainment.

### **Methodologies and Approaches**

My approach is shaped by Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume’s *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays, 1675-1707*. In this seminal work, Milhous and Hume define ‘producible interpretation’ as ‘a critical reading that a director could communicate to an audience in performance,’ and offer readings (in essence, concepts for performance choices) for a range of dramatic works from the Restoration period including such noted titles as Wycherley’s 1675 *The Country-Wife*, Thomas Otway’s 1682 *Venice Preserv’d*, and George Farquhar’s 1707 *The Beaux’ Stratagem*.<sup>71</sup> Building on their insights into production concepts, my thesis investigates staging in practice, through the examination of various staged performances. My

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<sup>68</sup> Catherine Love, *Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre* (Taylor & Francis, 2023), 87.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas De Jongh, ‘Review of *The Man of Mode*,’ *Theatre Record* 27, no. 3 (2007), 133.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays, 1675-1707* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 3.

discussions are shaped by Milhous and Hume's insights into producible interpretations and apply them to the produced interpretations from the 1980s to the 2010s. To date, the most recent pertinent scholarship concerning Restoration comedy revivals includes J.L. Styan's *Restoration Comedy in Performance*. Styan offers a study of the style of performance of Restoration comedy in its own time, based on inferences drawn from written sources including memoirs and letters, knowledge of the actors and actresses for whom these roles were written, and on etiquette books of the period. In addition, he references early twentieth century productions. The two appendices are particularly revealing; Appendix A lists a range of twentieth century Restoration comedy revivals prior to 1986 and in Appendix B the comedies are ranked by their popularity (post-1900, *The Country Wife* was evidently a favourite).<sup>72</sup> In addition, Jessica Munns's research on John Barton's 1986 staging of *The Rover* succinctly elucidates the ways in which certain aspects of Barton's revival (specifically his changes to the characters, the play text, and the setting) might in fact be seen as contradicting and indeed at times undermining of Behn's play.<sup>73</sup> I also draw on Nancy Copeland's analysis of the changes made by Barton to Behn's text, taking into account both the positive criticism the production received and remarks from critics like Munns, who noted elements of the staging which were to its detriment.<sup>74</sup> Building on Munns's and Copeland's Behn-centric commentaries, I offer a reappraisal of Barton's *Rover*, examining its influence on subsequent Restoration comedy productions (especially Ingram's *Rover*) as well as its importance within the broader history of these revivals throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

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<sup>72</sup> Styan, *Restoration Comedy in Performance*, 252-257, 258.

<sup>73</sup> Jessica Munns, 'Barton and Behn's *The Rover*: Or, The Text Transpos'd,' *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research* 3, no. 2 (1988), 11-22.

<sup>74</sup> Nancy Copeland, *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre: Women's Comedy and the Theatre* (Ashgate, 2004), 167-174.



Significantly, there has never been an extended study of the libertine hero in recent Restoration comedy revivals. All these productions, except for Barton's, have never been analysed in detail, and Barton's version (though it has received some attention) has never been considered in a comparative study alongside subsequent Restoration comedy revivals, particularly Ingram's which is in some respects its spiritual successor. My thesis thus builds on recent scholarship concerning Restoration comedy revivals, including Barbara Kachur's examination of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1993 revival of *The Country Wife*; S.S. Gammapila's study of 'key productions of Restoration drama in London over the last 50 years,' especially Behn's; Nicole Elizabeth Stodard's research on notable female-led American revivals of Behn's *The Rover*, and David Roberts' comprehensive study addressing the Royal Shakespeare Company's history of staging Restoration comedies, specifically how the company has 'managed' to 'help' these plays, so 'infused with time-bound cultural references to their seventeenth-century English origins, to 'speak in different ways to modern audiences'.<sup>75</sup> As evinced by this list, the field of what might be termed 'Restoration comedy revival studies' is a developing one. At present though, it is stalled by a lack of productions to analyse. Though Milhous and Hume made the following remarks in 1985, they nevertheless still serve as a salient reminder:

[P]erformance analysis should seek to identify and explain meaning and impact [. . .]

Few "literary" analyses of playtexts refer even in passing to production history, or treat the actuality of performance as a way of getting at a higher truth than the dead words of the script on a page. What we need is analysis attentive equally to the script and its realization.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Barbara Kachur, *Etherege and Wycherley* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 195-200; S.S. Gammanpila, "'Its Only Test is in Performance': Aphra Behn and the Modern London Stage," *Women's Writing* 23, no. 3 (2016), 299; Nicole Elizabeth Stodard, 'Aphra Behn on the Contemporary Stage: Behn's Feminist Legacy and Woman-Directed Revivals of *The Rover*' (PhD dissertation, University of South Florida, 2017); Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy*, 13-14.

<sup>76</sup> Milhous and Hume, *Producible Interpretation*, 9.

At present, we scholars whose work lies at the intersection of plays on the page and plays in performance are inundated with a superfluity of literary analyses of these comedies. With my analyses in this thesis, I hope to help rectify this imbalance by demonstrating that these plays are producible, relevant rather than archaic, and still hold audiences' interest.

Across my chapters, I have employed a wide range of archival and performance sources to attempt to recapture the details of these productions as performances. My methodology involves close study of the play texts (specifically the earliest printed editions, reviews by critics, the prompt books used for productions, the most recent critical editions of the texts, and in the case of Barton's *Rover*, an adapted published script), and examination of archival evidence (including filmed production footage, where available, and photographs). By bringing together archival footage with the prompt book pages, I have been able to clarify moments of staging, a key approach that has helped me to develop insights into theatre performances which, in many ways, are short-lived and indeed ephemeral. I have also turned to reviews to recapture some performance evidence, but I treat these reviews as evidence of how these productions were generally received, rather than as stable research findings. I have also consulted secondary scholarship on these plays in production when possible and in the case of Breen's 2019 RSC *The Provoked Wife*, I have drawn upon my own recollections, as I saw the production twice during its run.

Given the ephemeral nature of performances, I have confined my research to the theatre companies whose archives contain filmed recordings and from whose archivists I have received permission to view the footage. Consequently, my thesis covers a recording of one production performed at the Chichester Festival Theatre (the footage of which is in the theatre's keeping), and recordings of five RSC productions, the footage of which is housed in the archives at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon. As I address in Chapter Three, the lack of footage for the 1994 *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine* means

that I have reconstructed these productions from other sources. Most of my research is drawn from the RSC's archives due to the company's longstanding history of performing these specific works. Indeed 'the RSC has staged 18 full-scale productions of Restoration Comedies' since 1967, when they produced Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*.<sup>77</sup> Nothing, however, can fully reproduce these productions, since performance by its very nature is ephemeral. However, in my thorough analysis I have gotten as close as possible to these revivals. Through combining the various sources, I have revealed key insights concerning the deeper themes which these productions emphasised in the play themselves.

## Chapter Outline

The historical parameters of my study range from 1986 to 2019. I begin with 1986, the year in which Barton's seminal production of Behn's *Rover* premiered at the RSC in the Swan Theatre. This was a watershed moment in the revival of Restoration comedy. As Roberts notes, 'it was a declaration that Restoration Comedy could no longer be seen as the preserve of a coterie of male playwrights. Nor [since the play takes place in Naples during the Interregnum] was the genre necessarily set in post-1660 London, as the majority of Restoration Comedies are'.<sup>78</sup> In contrast to previous revivals of plays in the genre, such as Terry Hands's 1971 modern-dress/in-period hybrid take on Etherege's *The Man of Mode* for the RSC, or Peter Hall's more traditional seventeenth century-dress staging of Wycherley's *The Country Wife* for the National Theatre in 1977, this period-dress staging presented Restoration comedy as a distinctly vivid, crowd-pleasing entertainment imbued with an aspect of escapism. However, as we will see, Barton's romanticisation of Willmore's faults (especially his potential for sexual violence) was troubling. I conclude my study of these productions with Philip Breen's 2019 staging of John Vanbrugh's 1697 *The Provoked Wife* for

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<sup>77</sup> Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy*, 25.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

the RSC (also performed in the Swan), since to date, this production was the most notable recent Restoration comedy revival at a subsidised, repertory theatre.

In organising my chapters, I have grouped the productions by decades (from the 1980s onwards) and in one case, by theme. The first chapter deals with Barton's 1986 *Rover* and the second chapter discusses the 2016 Ingram *Rover* revival, since I wished to emphasise how the 2016 RSC production drew upon Barton's version. In Chapters Three and Four which discuss two productions each (1988 and 1994 in Three and 1993 and 2018 in Four), I have analysed them in chronological order, beginning with the earlier of the two.

Chapter One examines Barton's staging of *The Rover*, specifically with regards to Willmore's character as portrayed by Jeremy Irons. I will discuss how Barton revived Behn's play and adapted it into an exuberant romp-style comedy. In doing so, he pruned away Willmore's thorny character trait of the potential for sexual violence, as revealed in his drunken attempt to rape Florinda. While Barton's production rightly occupies a prominent place in the annals of Restoration comedy revivals, his alteration of Willmore's potential for predation into a source of comedy must be given consideration. This case study will establish the director's uses of revival, adaptation, and modernisation in staging libertine heroes.

Chapter Two focuses on Loveday Ingram's 2016 RSC adaptation of *The Rover*, which received enthusiastic praise for its exuberant, colourful staging and for Joseph Millson's dynamic Willmore. I argue that aspects of this revival (including interpolated music, song, and dance, as well as borrowed scene arrangements and lines from Barton's production), make it in effect a revival of and homage to Barton's adaptation. Other changes made by Ingram include the simplification of the play's seventeenth-century language and staging choices which overemphasised the play's sexual undertones (sometimes to an excessive degree). As we will see, this production proved both a worthy successor to Barton's version and a vivid adaptation of Behn. At the same time, Ingram imitated and indeed expanded upon

Barton's light-hearted treatment of Willmore's rape attempt, making it a comedic highlight and ignoring the implications of Behn's criticism of libertine behaviour.

Chapter Three turns to the 1994 Royal Court revival of George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, which was cross cast with the premiere of Stephen Jeffreys' *The Libertine*, a Restoration history play centred on the life of John Wilmot. Both were directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Given the lack of archival footage for these productions, my analysis for this chapter will focus on the play texts, rather than providing a consideration of the staging of certain scenes based on video evidence. Here we see the use of adaptation in the choice to pair Etherege's old comedy with a new work which provided a modern gloss on the Restoration comedy itself. When considered in the artistic lineage of Barton's *Rover*, which offered a glamorous view of libertinage, these two plays should be read as metatheatrical commentaries on stage portrayals of the libertine hero, specifically examining the dichotomy between his illusion (i.e. his exterior allure) and his reality (that is, his inner cunning and viciousness).

Chapter Four covers two productions of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*: Stafford Clark's 1993 period-dress revival for the RSC, and Jonathan Munby's 2018 modern-dress revival for the Chichester Festival Theatre. Specifically, I will focus on the ways in which these two revivals present the character of Horner, the lead rake. In 1993, Jeremy Northam's Horner was an ensemble member among his fellow Restoration-era debauchees; adaptational tactics here included a rewritten prologue, penned by Jeffreys, as well as interpolated songs with explicit lyrics, luridly illustrating the characters' cynicism and moral degeneracy. As we shall see, in 2018 Lex Shrapnel's Horner (portrayed as a twenty-first century sex addict) was the central figure in a panorama of contemporary libertinage. Munby uses the adaptational strategy of a modernised setting.

Chapter Five examines Phillip Breen's 2019 *The Provoked Wife* for the RSC. In addition to considering the portrayals of Sir John Brute (Jonathan Slinger), Constant (Rufus Hound), and

Heartfree (John Hodgkinson), I will study Breen's adaptational choices, which were noticeably few compared to those made by other directors in this thesis. In fact, his version was almost entirely devoid of adaptational changes. This is distinct, in many ways, from Barton's 1986 production, with which this study opens. As we shall see in Chapter One, Barton's *Rover* established a precedent for staging Restoration comedies with his successful and bold production.

## Chapter One: *The Rover* 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company

I begin my study with an analysis of John Barton's 1986 production of Aphra Behn's 1677 comedy *The Rover* for the Royal Shakespeare Company, which was performed in the Swan Theatre during its inaugural season. My method for recreating the production conditions involves close study of audio-visual and textual sources. Specifically, these sources include the production prompt book and the published script of Barton's adaptation, as well as the archival filmed performance recording of the 1986 production. The prompt book and the filmed archival recording are housed in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust archives, and the published script is part of my personal library. Other key sources include production photographs and critics' reviews for the production as reprinted in *London Theatre Record*. By considering all of these sources in relation to each other, especially comparing both the published script (printed before the production was staged) and the prompt book to the finalised production as it appears in the filmed archival footage, I have reconstructed Barton's *Rover* and provided a new analysis of it, within the history of Restoration comedy revivals. Previous twentieth-century iterations of Restoration comedy tended towards what may generally be described as a restrained, stilted performance style. By contrast, Barton's version exploded this established trend, reimagining the genre as an exhilarating crowd-pleaser; Jeremy Irons's eponymous rover Willmore was the production's swashbuckling centre. However, as we will see, this revival evaded the complexities of this character, omitting his potential dangerousness and instead presenting him as an irresistibly seductive rogue.

Within the frame of my three key analytical terms, 'revival,' 'adaptation,' and 'modernisation,' Barton's production may be read as both a revival and an adaptation. Barton revived Behn's play, which had not been staged since the eighteenth century, and made numerous alterations to the text which place it in the 'adaptation' category. Specifically, he retained some of Behn's lines, borrowed lines from her source text, a play by Thomas

Killigrew titled *Thomaso*, and added his own lines, resulting in a blended script which was further shaped with the actors' collaboration during the rehearsal process. While the production cannot be considered a modernisation, Barton's staging, marked by an air of romantic escapism and a witty humorousness, was calculated to appeal to the audiences of the mid-1980s. Here, the overly exuberant 'romp' style of performance was on full display, especially in Jeremy Irons's performance as Willmore.

The 'romp' style had become established in British culture earlier in the twentieth century, especially through certain film adaptations of eighteenth-century literature, specifically Tony Richardson's 1963 *Tom Jones* (based on Henry Fielding's 1749 novel *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*) adapted for the screen by John Osborne and his 1977 *Joseph Andrews* (based on Fielding's 1742 novel of the same name) adapted for the screen by Allan Scott and Chris Bryant, and Terence Young's 1965 *The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders* (based on Daniel Defoe's 1722 novel *Moll Flanders*) adapted for the screen by Denis Cannan and Roland Kibbee. The defining aspects of these films are broad characterisations, markedly bawdy humour, and an energetic, sometimes frenzied style of narrative progression, in which the entertainment is often frothy in nature and comedy is prioritised over subtlety and character complexity. Barton's revival, as my research reveals, drew upon this established performance style, and in its ebullience, it reflects the early definition of romp as 'a spell of rough, energetic play'.<sup>1</sup> Just as Scott and Bryant adapted Fielding in 1977 and Cannan and Kibbee adapted Defoe in 1965 following the pattern of Osborne's adaptation of Fielding in 1963, Barton adapted Behn in 1986 to reflect the conventions of the romp style. In particular, Irons's portrayal of Willmore as a sly, witty rogue recalls Albert Finney's portrayal of Fielding's eponymous hero in Richardson's *Tom Jones* as a puckish, dashing leading man. Finney's Tom, greatly simplified from his counterpart in the 1749 novel, is a blithe young

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Michael Proffitt (Oxford University Press, 2025), under 'romp.'



rapscallion primarily governed by his carnal passions. Fielding's Tom, however, is the protagonist of a coming-of-age narrative, over the course of which he learns prudence and grows in integrity; it is not for nothing that his long-sought love interest whom he eventually marries is named Sophia ('wisdom').<sup>2</sup> In the same way, Irons's Willmore in Barton's adaptation was simplified from Behn's original text, resulting in a diminishment of his complexity as a character. In Behn, Willmore is simultaneously attractive and threatening. His dual-sided nature reflects Behn's mixed feelings concerning the libertine. On the one hand, given Behn's pro-Royalist political stance, Willmore functions as an embodiment of the Cavalier ethos and a celebration of Royalist ideology. On the other hand, Behn's depiction of his drunken attempted rape of Florinda forms a forthright criticism of the libertine's darker aspects (specifically his potential for sexual violence towards women). In Barton's adaptation, as we shall see, Willmore became a bluff, honey-tongued charmer whose inebriated misdemeanours were staged as one of the play's sources of comedy. At the same time, Barton's version placed emphasis on the female characters in Behn's play, giving them additional lines and, in the cases of some supporting characters, increasing their time onstage. Barton's decision to highlight women's voices in his adapted text forms an intriguing contrast with his choice to soften Willmore's potential (and by extension the potential within all Restoration comedy libertine heroes) for sexual violence and abuse.

## Historical Context

In this section, I examine *The Rover*'s place in Behn's oeuvre; like some of her previous plays, this comedy was based upon earlier seventeenth-century works (in this case Thomas Killigrew's 1654 play *Thomaso*). Some of her plays borrowed and reworked elements from her earlier plays, although as we will see, *The Rover* appears to have been a more substantial

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<sup>2</sup> See Martin C. Battestin, 'Fielding's Definition of Wisdom: Some Functions of Ambiguity and Emblem in *Tom Jones*,' *ELH* 35, no. 2 (1968).

adaptation. Such adaptations were common in the Restoration theatre milieu, arising from the demand for new works post-Interregnum; consequently, older plays were mined for material which could be repurposed. Shakespeare's plays, for instance, were frequently adapted by Restoration-era dramatists.<sup>3</sup>

Although the precise date of *The Rover*'s first performance is unknown, it first appears in theatre performance records on 24 March 1677 and was performed at the Dorset Garden Theatre.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the comedy proved popular with audiences for the remainder of the seventeenth century as well as the first several decades of the eighteenth. It remains unclear whether some records of its later seventeenth-century revivals (specifically three court performances dated 'Thursday 29 October 1685,' 'Wednesday 19 January 1687,' and 'Tuesday 4 January 1690') refer to *The Rover* or to its 1681 sequel, *The Second Part of the Rover*.<sup>5</sup> However, it can be said with certainty that in February of 1680 there was a court revival of what Montague Summers later referred to in his 1915 six-volume edition of *The Works of Aphra Behn* as 'Part I,' though the exact date 'is uncertain'.<sup>6</sup> According to records from *The London Stage*, by 1700 the *Second Part* had ceased to be performed, presumably due to playgoers' preference for the original work, which remained a fixture in the theatrical repertoire and was frequently revived until 1760, after which it disappeared from the stage.

Like her previous plays, *The Rover* was based upon an earlier source text, penned by the courtier and theatre manager of the King's Playhouse, Thomas Killigrew. According to Jones DeRitter, Behn had become acquainted with Killigrew in 1666, when he 'had recruited Behn for a spy mission to Antwerp, and had helped arrange her release [sic] from debtor's prison in

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Dobson, 'Adaptations and Revivals,' ed. Deborah Payne Fisk, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3, 2, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> William Van Lennep et al., *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 1: 1660-1700* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 256.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 343, 355, 391.

<sup>6</sup> Aphra Behn, *The Works of Aphra Behn, Vol. I*, ed. Montague Summers (William Heinemann, 1915), 'Contents,' *Internet Archive*; Van Lennep et al., *The London Stage*, 284.

1668'.<sup>7</sup> Killigrew's comedy was entitled *Thomaso, or the Wanderer* and based loosely upon Killigrew's escapades as a Royalist supporter living abroad during the Interregnum. In the words of DeRitter, this play is:

[A] turgid ten-act, two-part autobiographical fantasy, written in 1654, about a visit to Madrid by a group of English exiles. The lead character [. . .] spends eight acts brawling in the streets and sleeping with a number of courtesans, the most prominent of these being the beautiful Angellica Bianca; then, during the last two acts of the play, he reforms and marries the chaste and virtuous Serulina.<sup>8</sup>

Robyn Bolam, in her introduction to the 2012 Bloomsbury edition of *The Rover*, remarks that *Thomaso* 'may never have been acted'.<sup>9</sup> Whether or not it was staged, it was printed in 1664 in a collection of Killigrew's plays.<sup>10</sup>

While most Restoration comedies are set in the present day and focus on English societal mores in England, *The Rover*, like *Thomaso*, takes place in the Interregnum and depicts the amorous exploits of Cavaliers abroad. Janet Todd suggests that Behn's motivation for locating the work in the Interregnum ties in with her political stance. She was a firm Royalist supporter, and 'in the late 1670s,' the government arena was tense, 'as King and Parliament jockeyed for power in echo of the 1640s,' and thus she felt compelled to offer 'some clea[r] public commitment'.<sup>11</sup> To avoid 'alienat[ing]' either the theatre-going public or the court, Todd surmises, Behn took the 'nostalgic' approach, 'sett[ing] the rake-Cavalier before the Restoration, a period as complex as the present, but now mythologised into simplicity. By 1667, the glamour of Interregnum activities had grown with Restoration disillusion'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jones DeRitter, 'The Gypsy, "The Rover," and the Wanderer: Aphra Behn's Revision of Thomas Killigrew,' *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 10, no. 2 (1986), 92.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 84, 82.

<sup>9</sup> Robyn Bolam, 'Introduction' in *The Rover* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), xi.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Killigrew, *Comedies and Tragedies written by Thomas Killigrew* (London: printed for Henry Herringman, 1664).

<sup>11</sup> Janet Todd, *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life* (Fentum Press, 2017), 362.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 363.

In addition to the idealised Interregnum era, the play's specific location in Naples carried some implications of tempestuousness; the city was known for being 'volatile and unpredictable'.<sup>13</sup> Its history was complex – originally a native Italian city, it had been under Spanish control since the mid-fifteenth century and was a multicultural hub for travellers and residents from elsewhere in Europe. The Carnival setting likewise contributes to the play's sense of flux. In the Catholic Church, Carnival is a pre-Lenten period of celebration characterised by a sense of revelry prior to the season of penitence. One significant historical aspect of Carnival was the wearing of costumed disguises and masks, 'a violent transformation of everyday appearance' in which the wearer 'appear[ed], in some sense, as one's opposite'.<sup>14</sup> These disguises and masks provided revellers anonymity (and consequently collapsed societal ranks), allowing them licence to do as they pleased. Given its innate association with Catholicism, the play's Carnival setting carried exotic connotations for Protestant English audiences.

Linda Payne suggests that Carnival's spirit of anarchy struck a chord with Restoration playgoers: 'The society which embraced *The Rover* was heavily invested in the sexual and political economies of its world turned upside down'.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the theme of subversion, evident in much of Behn's work, appears here as well. This is especially prominent in the Spanish noblewomen's pursuit of the Cavaliers: Florinda seeks to avoid an unwanted marriage to Antonio, while Hellena wishes to avoid taking the veil. To achieve their ends (according to Payne) the women reject the metaphorical disguise of prescribed societal expectations which they must enact daily for the literal disguises of Carnival attire, and their specific choice of gypsy garb signifies their rejection of the roles into which Hellena and

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor Corse, 'Seventeenth-Century Naples and Aphra Behn's "The Rover,"' *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 29, no. 2 (2005), 43.

<sup>14</sup> Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization* (Methuen, 1986), 75.

<sup>15</sup> Linda R. Payne, 'The Carnavalesque Regeneration of Corrupt Economies in "The Rover,"' *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 22, no. 1 (1998), 48.

Florinda's father and brother desire to confine them (i.e. arranged marriage and religious life) for a third, different path, that of independence.<sup>16</sup> Yet this choice is not without risk. As Anne Greenfield notes, 'dangers' can threaten 'women who step outside the bounds of domesticity'.<sup>17</sup> Greenfield's insights into the dangers for Hellena and Florinda additionally show how their Carnival disguises might conceal their noble status, as they blur societal boundaries, rendering them vulnerable to men's abuse as supposed sex workers. Meanwhile, the English men abroad, entering this milieu where women are viewed essentially as chattel, buy into the notion of women as commodities to be fought for, purchased, and sold (be it in prostitution or marriage). Tellingly, Payne notes: 'Those who are used to ruling at the top of the hierarchy are unlikely to embrace willingly the turnabout or uncrowning'.<sup>18</sup> Willmore and his companions (excepting the high-minded Belvile) view this pleasurable excursion to Naples as affording them a brief reinstatement of the social status and prestige lost to them in England. What they do not reckon on, however, is the fact that the women in Naples may be as assertive as they are themselves. As we will see, the play's carnivalesque atmosphere would later be highlighted significantly in revivals, particularly Barton's and Ingram's productions.

Behn develops a multi-faceted plot, but the play's central love triangle concerns Willmore, an English nobleman-turned-naval captain seeking pleasure (primarily sexual), Hellena, a young Spanish noblewoman determined to find herself a husband and avoid being forced into a nunnery by her domineering brother Don Pedro, and Angellica, a Paduan courtesan living in Naples (following the death of her deceased Spanish keeper) who becomes deeply enamoured with Willmore. The plot relies on the Carnival festivities: Hellena, her older sister Florinda (in love with the English colonel Belvile), and the sisters' cousin Valeria venture forth, disguised

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Greenfield, *The Rise and Fall of Rape on the English Stage* (Routledge, 2025), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Payne, 'The Carnavalesque Regeneration of Corrupt Economies in "The Rover,"' 43.

as gypsies. In Naples's streets, they encounter the Cavaliers, including Willmore, Belvile, Frederick, and their companion Ned Blunt, a country gentleman from Essex from whose store of funds the now-impooverished noblemen are wont to borrow. Hellena and Willmore meet and engage in badinage; he attempts to persuade her into an immediate sexual encounter, and she wittily parries his advances as they fall for one another. Meanwhile Florinda arranges to elope with Belvile and Valeria flirts with Frederick. A subplot concerns Blunt becoming smitten with and subsequently robbed by a local sex worker, Lucetta. Though Willmore vows fidelity to Hellena, he is frustrated by her resolute principles, complaining to his friends, 'She has play'd with my Heart so, that 'twill never lye still, till I have met with some kind Wench, that will play the Game out with me'.<sup>19</sup>

Willmore's sexuality becomes a central concern of the plot. In his sexual frustration, he is drawn to Angellica, although her rate of a thousand crowns per month prevents him from obtaining her. However, by chance he and his companions become involved in a fight with Don Pedro and his friend Don Antonio (both of whom are unknown to each other due to their Carnival disguises) outside Angellica's lodgings, when the two Spaniards make their competing offers for her and subsequently come to blows. Further brawling ensues when Willmore, desiring to at least possess 'the Shadow of the fair Substance,' steals one of Angellica's portraits which are hung outside her residence by way of advertisement, at which point Pedro and Antonio endeavour to avenge the '[r]udeness committed to the fair *Angellica*'.<sup>20</sup> Upon quelling the men's quarrel, Angellica finds herself charmed by Willmore's audacity, and invites him into her home so he may explain his theft to her in private. Once they are together, Angellica soon gives herself to him without asking any payment except his love, which he pledges her. Later, Hellena sees him as he emerges from

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<sup>19</sup> Aphra Behn, *The Rover*, in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Janet Todd, Vol. 5: The Plays, 1671-1677 (Pickering & Chatto, 1996), 466.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*; *ibid.*, 471.

Angellica's house and overhears him regaling his friends with his sexual adventure but cannot find it in her heart to hate him for his betrayal, so amused is she by his attempts to conceal his intrigue. Angellica spies him with Hellena and is heartbroken, having fallen in love with him despite her better judgement. Further significant plot points include Willmore's drunken near rape of Florinda (revealing his potential as a sexual menace), thereby inadvertently sabotaging her attempt to elope with Belvile, and an encounter between Willmore, Angellica, and Hellena (disguised as a page boy) in which both the women upbraid him for his infidelity. The play concludes with a triple marriage – Florinda weds Belvile, Valeria pairs off with Frederick, and Willmore, following a parting conversation with Angellica in which he states that 'Nature never meant [him]' to be faithful to any one woman, realises that he and Hellena 'are so of one Humour, it must be a bargain'.<sup>21</sup>

As these events reveal, Behn's comedy (as Ros Ballaster observes) examines both the libertine hero's 'charms' and his 'dark and charm/less side' which appears when 'his pursuit of sexual fulfilment is consistently frustrated'.<sup>22</sup> This reflects Behn's wider relationship to libertinism, which was more complex than mere critique. According to Ballaster, Willmore channels much of the dark and complicated energy of John Wilmot; both Wilmot and Willmore at times find 'the laudable aim found in the artistic pursuit of generating pleasure in others degenerates into frustrated narcissism'.<sup>23</sup> Ballaster is not the only scholar to have addressed the complexities of the libertine hero. Susan J. Owen also explores the links between libertinism, alcoholism, and their implications for women, remarking:

Willmore is not simply sexy and desirable. He is both predator and victim, damaging women but also tyrannised over by his own sex-addiction. [. . .] In particular, when drunk, Willmore can be a buffoon. Men's sexuality in the play is presented as

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 513, 517.

<sup>22</sup> Ros Ballaster, 'Taking Liberties: Revisiting Behn's Libertinism,' *Women's Writing* 19, no. 2 (2012), 165, 169.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 170.

dangerous, desirable and ridiculous all at the same time. Through her treatment of drink, Behn bring out the ambivalence of libertinism for women. In particular, she shows how drink brings out the dark side of male sexuality. Drunk, the rake becomes predator.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Dayne C. Riley notes: ‘Through the figure of Willmore, Behn shows that overindulgence in alcohol—a consumable product that costs money—leads libertines such as Willmore to equate women with wine, to misrepresent women as consumable products that are a mere “purchase” away and ultimately to see themselves as entitled to women’s bodies’.<sup>25</sup> As we will see, Barton’s and later Ingram’s productions softened much of Willmore’s complexities, aggression and dangers, by skirting his potential as a rapist and instead offering comedic, romantic interpretations of his character as a dashing roué.

### **Willmore as Libertine Hero**

Critical opinions on Willmore vary: some see him as a libertine redeemed by the love of a spirited, witty woman who meets him stride for stride, while others view him as a much more threatening figure, especially to women. Nancy Copeland, for instance, positions him in the lineage of ‘entertainingly disreputable libertine-tricksters’ in Spanish comedies. Meanwhile, Warren Chernaik offers a similarly benign perspective, situating him within the wider context of Restoration and eighteenth-century comedy libertines. Differentiating libertine heroes of the ‘rake’ and ‘rover’ categories, Chernaik mentions Willmore and Sir Harry Wildair of George Farquhar’s *The Constant Couple* (1699) as examples of the latter, describing them as ‘likeable blunderers, each of whom can be described as “never ruffled by misfortune . . . entertaining to others and easy to himself”’.<sup>26</sup> As Chernaik elaborates, ‘It is entirely

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<sup>24</sup> Susan J. Owen, ‘Drink, Sex, and Power in Restoration Comedy,’ in *A Pleasing Sinne*, ed. Adam Smyth (D. S. Brewer, 2004), 130.

<sup>25</sup> Dayne C. Riley, “‘The Vice of the Time’: Wine, Libertinism, and Commerce in the Age of Charles II,” *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 45, no. 1 (2021), 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, 43.



characteristic of each to mistake a virtuous woman for a whore, since to them all women are alike and no opportunity should be neglected. As a “Rover of fortune,” Willmore accepts the buffets and windfalls chance may bring’.<sup>27</sup> In Chernaik’s reading, Willmore appears inclined to uncomplicated, easy-going dalliances, such as when he declares, ‘Love and Mirth! are my bus’ness in *Naples*’.<sup>28</sup> Yet Chernaik’s commentary on Willmore’s inability to distinguish between virtuous women and sex workers also suggests the possible threat and violence beneath his geniality. Soon after his entrance, for example, when he is rejected by a Naples sex worker, he vents to Belvile: ‘Thou know’st I’m no tame sigher, but a Rampant Lion of the Forrest’.<sup>29</sup> While his self-comparison to a beast of prey may be interpreted as a comedic moment of sexual bravado, it also suggests the rake’s rapacity, which feels particularly telling when it comes to Willmore’s attempted rape of Florinda. Susan J. Owen suggests such an interpretation in her analysis of his character, describing him as ‘a sex addict, averse to commitment [. . .] with [. . .] a preference for women of easy virtue and a predisposition to rape’.<sup>30</sup> However, Jean Marsden argues that ‘no real danger exists’ in the scene between Florinda and Willmore, since ‘[s]he calls out, and both Belvile and her brother Don Pedro appear’ – of far greater importance to Behn is ‘the male objectification of women,’ on display in the second attempt on Florinda later in the play by Blunt, who is then joined by Frederick, Willmore, Belvile, and Don Pedro.<sup>31</sup> Here, Marsden observes, Behn ‘ridicules this male posturing,’ just as she swiftly dissolves the possible threat Willmore poses to Florinda.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to Marsden, Anne Marie Stewart asserts that because of the entrance of ‘Belvile, Frederick, Pedro, and Stephano [. . .] ‘Florinda is not so much “saved,” as the scenario is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Behn, *The Rover*, 460.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 461.

<sup>30</sup> Susan J. Owen, ‘Behn’s dramatic response to Restoration politics,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, ed. Derek Hughes and Janet Todd (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 72.

<sup>31</sup> Jean I. Marsden, ‘Rape, Voyeurism, and the Restoration Stage,’ in *Broken Boundaries*, ed. Katherine M. Quinsey (The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 194.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

simply interrupted'.<sup>33</sup> Derek Hughes likewise views Behn's approach as a condemnation of the libertine's menace, commenting that rape in Restoration comedies 'was always used to criticize the sexual predator, and to show the darker side of the libertinism that Horner and Dorimant carried off with such insouciant panache'.<sup>34</sup>

As these critical perspectives reveal, Willmore remains a troubling character on the page and stage. His character offers Behn plenty of opportunities for social critique. My understanding of Willmore is shaped primarily by both Jennifer L. Airey's and Sarah Olivier's analyses. Airey remarks that '[i]n Willmore, Behn offers her audiences a modified form of the debauched libertine; even as she romanticizes Cavalier behavior, she exposes the dark and frightening underside of the libertine ethos'.<sup>35</sup> Olivier, meanwhile, states that '[i]n part, rape functions in the play as revenge taken by the cavalier for the loss and exile he has suffered'.<sup>36</sup> As Olivier identifies, while Behn's characterisation of Willmore as 'attractive' and 'extravagant' indicates her 'sympathy' for the disenfranchised nobleman, 'she also offers a sophisticated critique of the rape-as-revenge formulation espoused by the cavalier characters'.<sup>37</sup> Willmore, Olivier concludes, is a multifaced emblem:

[He] is the comic hero of the play, a witty cavalier who is unjustly reduced to poverty and homeless wandering during the Interregnum, but he is also an attempted rapist. [. . .] [He] simultaneously represents the libertine ethos of the extravagant rake towards which Behn is tensely ambivalent, the banished cavalier ethos to which Behn is clearly sympathetic, and the patriarchal ethos sanctioning sexual domination of women of which Behn is highly critical.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Anne Marie Stewart, *The Ravishing Restoration: Aphra Behn, Violence, and Comedy* (Susquehanna University Press, 2010), 88-90.

<sup>34</sup> Derek Hughes, 'Rape on the Restoration Stage,' *The Eighteenth Century* 46, no. 3 (2005), 229.

<sup>35</sup> Jennifer L. Airey, *The Politics of Rape: Sexual Atrocity, Propaganda Wars, and the Restoration Stage* (University of Delaware Press, 2012), 102.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Olivier, "'Banished His Country, Despised at Home': Cavalier Politics, Banishment, and Rape in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*," *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research* 27, no. 1 (2012), 55.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 56.

However, as we will see, Barton (and subsequently Ingram, to a greater degree) eschewed Willmore's potential for sexual danger in their respective productions, instead emphasising his comedic and romantic appeal. These productions thus divert from the wealth of academic research on Willmore as potentially predatory.

Willmore's casting would have been crucial to how Restoration audiences received the complexities of his allure and danger. As noted previously, the premiere date for *The Rover* is unknown, but the play was first listed in the theatre annals for performances given 24 March 1677. It was staged at the Dorset Garden Theatre, featuring William Smith in the titular role. As Judith Milhous has noted, Smith was best known for playing 'dashing heroes in comedy, some of them noble and strictly honourable, others sex-mad scamps'.<sup>39</sup> Willmore, she continues, was in the latter of the two categories.<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Barry, later renowned for her great dramatic range, particularly for her talent in tragedy, was at that time a new member of the Duke's Company. As one of the young ingenues-in-training, she took the part of Hellena.<sup>41</sup> Given her later reputation as an acclaimed actress, it seems reasonable to assume she imbued the role with the requisite vivacity and determination. Lastly, the actress Anne Quin, née Marshall, 'one of the first actresses to appear on the English stage' and formerly a member of the King's Company before moving to the Duke's Company, played Angellica.<sup>42</sup> There is scant written evidence of her dramatic capabilities, but given her distinction among such female theatrical pioneers as Mary Betterton and Margaret Hughes, it seems a safe assumption that her characterisation had the necessary gravitas and heartfelt passion. This cast

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<sup>39</sup> Judith Milhous, 'Smith, William (d. 1695), actor and theatre manager,' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, accessed 18 February 2026, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-25925>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Philip H. Highfill et. al., 'Barry, Elizabeth, c. 1658-1713, actress,' in *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800* Vol. 1 (Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 314.

<sup>42</sup> Highfill et. al. 'Quin, Mrs. Peter? Anne, née Marshall,' in *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, Vol. 12 (Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 242.

would have had the range and talent to infuse Behn's play with a range of dramatic and comedic tones. While we can never know for certain how Smith portrayed Willmore, the fact remains that he was a noted leading man in Restoration drama.

### **Barton, Adaptation, and the Swan Theatre**

Barton's *Rover* was the by-product of a twofold development plan: the expansion, beginning in 1979, of the RSC's performance spaces to include the rehearsal space known as the 'Conference Hall' (which became the Swan), and the expansion of the company's dramatic repertoire to include non-Shakespearean works. This expanded repertoire would include specifically 'neglected sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays including the Shakespearean Apocrypha – plays that may well have been popular in their own day but that have seldom, or, in some cases, never been performed since'.<sup>43</sup> Behn's comedy, having remained in relative obscurity since the mid-eighteenth century, was in keeping with this vision. Barton's *Rover* premiered in the Swan Theatre on 10 July, 1986.<sup>44</sup> After closing, it had a brief run in 1987 at the People's Theatre in Newcastle upon Tyne from 2-14 March, followed by a transfer to the Mermaid Theatre in London, where it played from 6 November 1987 to 15 January 1988.<sup>45</sup> Regarding casting, most of the company in the original 1986 production reprised their roles in the London production. Substitutes included Vivienne Rochester, who took over the part of Lucetta, earlier portrayed by Caroline Johnson; Norman Eshley, who replaced Nathaniel Parker as Don Pedro; Susie Fairfax as Valeria (previously played by Lucy Hancock); and Stephanie Beacham, a noted television actress then known for her performance in the

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Reardon, 'Designing the Swan Theatre,' in *This Golden Round*, ed. Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Mulryne and Shewring Ltd, 1989), 9; Trevor Nunn, 'From Conference Hall to Theatre,' in *This Golden Round*, 1; Mulryne and Shewring, 'The Repertoire of the Swan,' in *This Golden Round*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> 'RSC Performances – The Rover,' *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*, <https://collections.shakespeare.org.uk/search/rsc-performances/rov198607>.

<sup>45</sup> 'RSC Performances – The Rover,' *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*, <https://collections.shakespeare.org.uk/search/rsc-performances/rov198703>, accessed 18 February 2026; 'The Rover,' *Theatre Record* 7, no. 23, 1442.

American soap opera series *The Colbys* (a spin-off of *Dynasty*), who took over the role of Angellica from Sinead Cusack.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most remarked-upon features of Barton's production were the changes which he made to Behn's original text.<sup>47</sup> His prior adapted works included a dramatisation of the lives of the British Monarchs from William the Conqueror to Queen Victoria, entitled *The Hollow Crown* (first performed in 1961), a reworking of the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* into a trilogy, *The War of the Roses* (first performed in 1963), and *The Greeks*, his adaptation of Homer's, Euripides's, Aeschylus's, and Sophocles's plays concerning the Oresteia, which premiered in 1980.<sup>48</sup> Barton was widely known as a Shakespearean expert due to his series of television masterclasses, *Playing Shakespeare*, first broadcast in 1982.<sup>49</sup> In his approach to these subjects which could justifiably be termed 'canonical' within the sphere of classic drama, Barton strove to preserve the essential tone of the originals, while presenting them in an accessible manner. He took a similar approach with Behn's comedy, shaping it for maximum audience appeal (which, as we will see, affected his staging of Willmore). Barton's adaptations in the name of accessibility and audience appeal are significant since his adapted version represents a shift in Restoration comedy revivals, presenting *The Rover* (and by extension Restoration comedies as a genre) as valid sources of popular entertainment for contemporary audiences.

In reviving *The Rover*, Barton sought to restore Behn (long ignored due to the infamous reputation her works had incurred especially during the nineteenth century) to the dramatic canon. This also reflected the RSC's shifts towards a broader representation of seventeenth-

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<sup>46</sup> 'The Rover,' *Theatre Record* 6, no. 14, 749; 'The Rover,' *Theatre Record*, 7, no. 23, 1442.

<sup>47</sup> Although it is unclear exactly which published version of Behn's text Barton used in his adaptation process, it seems reasonable to assume it was the edition printed in 1974 in Volume 2 of A. Norman Jeffares's 4 volume series *Restoration Comedy*, given the fact that this version was the one most recently published prior to Barton's revival. See Mary Anne O' Donnell, *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography* (Routledge, 2004), 54.

<sup>48</sup> Michael L. Greenwald, *Directions by Indirections: John Barton of the Royal Shakespeare Company* (University of Delaware Press, 1985), 260, 264.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

century plays, which had dropped out of regular performance. Although Behn remained of strong interest to scholars and biographers, as seen above, to the public she was a figure shrouded in obscurity. This might be considered a lingering consequence of the reputation she had increasingly gained from the mid-eighteenth century onwards as a writer of what was considered too overtly sexual work. However, as Heidi Hutner noted, in 1993, reflecting back upon recent Behn scholarship: '[I]n the past twenty years, with the great feminist critical wave, Behn has resurfaced as a major woman writer'.<sup>50</sup> Notably, Barton's changes to the text emphasized female voices (in some cases writing them new lines), which echoed the then-current increasing academic interest in Behn as a proto-feminist author.

Barton set forth his rationale in his 'Director's Note,' which prefaced the printed play text-cum-programme:

This is an adapted text, as established halfway through rehearsals. Further alterations will have been made to it before the production opened. About 550 lines have been cut and some 350 added.

Many of the new lines are taken from an earlier source play which Aphra Behn herself used extensively when she wrote *The Rover*. This is *Thomaso or The Wanderer* by Thomas Killigrew, published in 1664. [. . .].<sup>51</sup>

One such adaptation was Barton's relocation of the play from Naples to 'a colony of Spain, in Carnival time'.<sup>52</sup> According to Jessica Munns, this shift 'to the Spanish Indies' was 'perhaps in part prompted by the inaccurate belief stated in the RSC press release that Behn "grew up in the West Indies"'.<sup>53</sup> Due to the text being printed during the rehearsal process, there are differences between the published script and the production as it was eventually staged.

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<sup>50</sup> Heidi Hutner, *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism* (The University Press of Virginia, 1993), 3.

<sup>51</sup> John Barton, *An adaptation of The Rover* (Methuen, 1985), 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; Jessica Munns, 'Barton and Behn's *The Rover*: Or, the Text Transpos'd,' *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research* 3, no. 2 (1988), 12.

Barton's adapted text, for instance, rearranges Behn's Act 1, scenes 1 and 2, placing the second scene (featuring the introduction of Willmore and his fellow Cavaliers) as the first scene, and the first scene (setting up the scenario of the Spanish sisters) as the second.

However, in the stage production, the scenes are given in Behn's original order. Jeremy Irons (who took the role of Willmore) later recalled, '[A]s we worked on it during rehearsals we all agreed on various changes. Sometimes we found ourselves reverting to Behn's own work'.<sup>54</sup>

This indicates that Barton's *Rover* was partly a collectively devised production, with the director/adaptor and his cast collaborating to create a version of Behn's text which would appeal to contemporary playgoers. The textual alterations were developed in conversation with the actors during the rehearsal process, resulting in a script featuring a blend of Behn, Killigrew, and lines written by Barton himself.

Barton made a series of intriguing choices for his cast, starting with Jeremy Irons as Willmore. This was something of a departure from his typical roles, as he was at that time best known for playing pensive, rather withdrawn romantic leads, including Charles Ryder in the television adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) and Charles Smithson in the film *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981). His latest RSC performance, in the spring of 1986, had been as a particularly immature, petulant Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*.<sup>55</sup> However, according to the audience responses in the archival footage and some critics' enthusiastic reviews, he imbued the Willmore role with a compelling forthrightness and swashbuckling allure.

Barton's casting of Irons meant that Willmore's potential dangerousness, and the nuance this aspect gives his character, was somewhat softened by the actor's appeal. Meanwhile, Irons's offstage wife, Sinead Cusack, took on the role of Angellica, offering a portrayal steeped in elegantly restrained but evident passion. Imogen Stubbs, then a newcomer to the RSC, played Hellena. This production was part of her debut season with the company, and her other role in

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<sup>54</sup> Jeremy Irons, quoted in Mulryne and Shewring, 106.

<sup>55</sup> See 'The Winter's Tale,' *Theatre Record* 6, no. 9, 481-485.

the Swan's opening season was that of the Gaoler's Daughter in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsman* (1634), a role likewise characterised by a similar streak of girlish exuberance as that possessed by Behn's heroine.

### Reviving Willmore

In terms of production design, Barton's set was bare except for a balcony on either side of the stage, allowing for swift scene changes, while 'percuss[ive],' 'mardi gras' live music played during the carnival street scenes, conjuring the updated Caribbean setting.<sup>56</sup> The minimalistic set design placed a greater emphasis on the actors' performances. As for the costumes, both the 'plainer, more subdued everyday dress of the characters' and their 'flamboyant and colourful carnival' garb, mostly in 'intense reds, oranges, and yellows,' approximated the styles of the 1650s.<sup>57</sup> In this altered colonial setting, Willmore becomes less of a Cavalier abroad and more of 'a rover' in the word's original meaning, that is, 'a pirate,' with a marked swagger.<sup>58</sup> In fact, as Nancy Copeland notes, citing reviewers, "“swaggering” was the adjective most frequently used by critics to describe Irons's performance, which also evoked a “pirate king” and “D'Artagnan”".<sup>59</sup> In addition to remarking upon his swagger, critics compared him to famed swashbuckling 'matinée idol[s]' including Douglas Fairbanks and Errol Flynn.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Copeland observes, '[t]he “piratical” impression [Irons] created was also partly owing to his costume, which included high leather boots, an open jacket over an open-necked shirt decorated with tattered, stained lace, long, dishevelled hair, a scruffy beard and moustache, an earring, and a red bandanna'.<sup>61</sup> Figure 1 shows Irons in these bright

<sup>56</sup> Guy Woolfenden, 'The Music of the Swan,' in *This Golden Round*, 148.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Copeland, *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre* (Ashgate, 2004), 171.

<sup>58</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Michael Proffitt (Oxford University Press, 2025), under 'rover.'

<sup>59</sup> Copeland, *Staging Gender*, 172.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Edwards, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 6, no. 14, 19 July 1986, 752; Michael Coveney, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 6, no. 14, 11 July 1986, 750; Nicholas de Jongh, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 6, no. 14, 12 July 1986, 753.

<sup>61</sup> Copeland, *Staging Gender*, 172.



garments: his well-worn shirt, weathered breeches and boots, the red bandanas around his head and leg, and the wide belt with his sword close to hand together with the vivid red masks he and Frederick wear suggest his louche and seductive character.

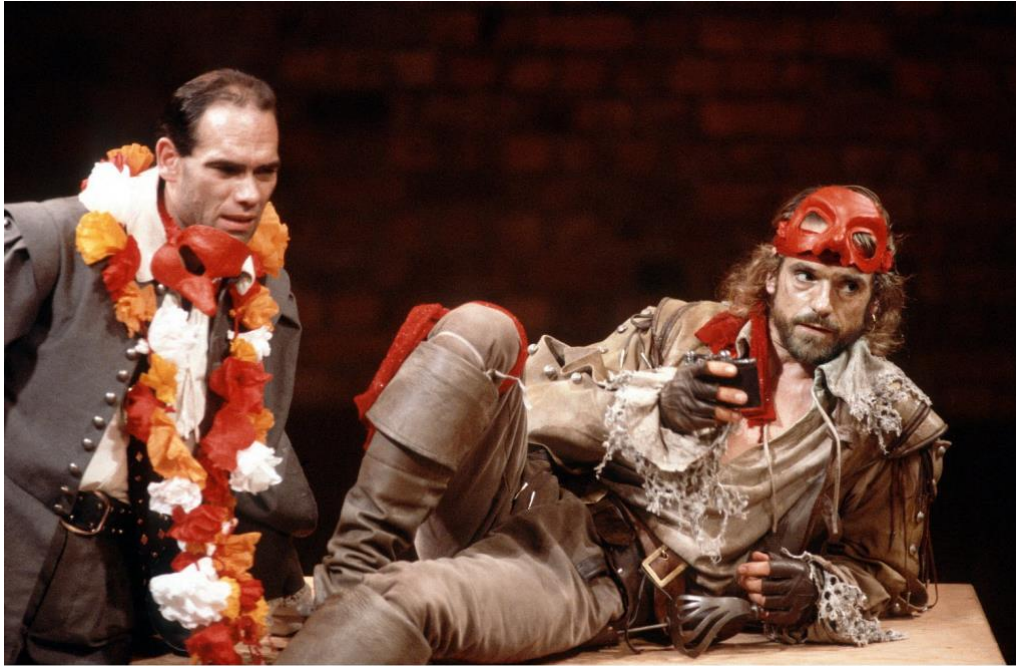


Figure 1. Peter Guinness (Frederick), Jeremy Irons (Willmore), Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1986

Irons's first entrance was as arresting as his costume. Barton positioned Belvile, Blunt, and Frederick's conversation being interrupted by a cacophony of angry shouts from an offstage Spanish gentleman and shrieks from women. Irons, as Willmore, rushed on via the upstage right balcony, from whence he descended using a rope of knotted bedsheets (the implication being that he was fleeing an enraged husband). Once Irons alighted onstage, he raced off stage left, evading a stick of dynamite which the presumed husband had flung at his retreating form. After the blast had gone off, Frederick and Belvile looked at the audience, shrugging, as they exclaimed 'Willmore!' in a tone of fond recognition, after which Irons strode on from stage

left, unharmed and thoroughly unperturbed.<sup>62</sup> His entrance helped to establish the production's tone as an exuberant, romp-style adaptation of Behn's text.

As Willmore, Irons's markedly easy-going demeanour carried over into his initial encounters with Stubbs as Hellena and Cusack as Angellica. Notably, Stubbs's interpretation of Hellena was characterised by vibrant, youthful exuberance, as well as a distinct frankness which mirrored Willmore's own. Their first meeting was marked by a playful physicality, evoking their verbal badinage. It took place against a bare stage, with each of the three pairs of courting couples coming downstage during their moments of dialogue. The carnival atmosphere was evoked by brief interludes involving ensemble members. For instance, a few women entered and flirted briefly with the Cavaliers during the men's first scene, per Behn's text when Willmore approaches one of the local courtesans and is disappointed, much to his vexation. Prior to Willmore and Hellena's meeting, there was a moment of music as revellers ran across the stage. Apart from this moment, the scene's primary focus was on the couples. Barton's staging took a light touch to the disguise and mystery of the Carnival in Behn's original Naples setting. As we will see in the next chapter, Ingram's revival, by contrast, was suffused with the Latin American carnival's heady spice.

Upon meeting Hellena, Irons's Willmore exerts a bantering tone and 'opted for' a 'blokish, chatty Essex' accent.<sup>63</sup> During their first few lines, Irons and Stubbs moved close to each other, eventually facing one another. Willmore's suggestive inquiry 'But cannot you divine what other things I have about me that I would more willingly part with?' was subtly charged, as Irons stood gazing down at Stubbs's face, his legs apart and his hips slightly forward, underscoring the phallic implication. As she replied, she picked his pocket, which he failed to notice since he was distracted with her countenance; she light-heartedly revealed her theft,

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<sup>62</sup> *The Rover*, filmed 15 December 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Archives; Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company, 23-24.

<sup>63</sup> David Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy*, 46.

holding up his money-pouch on the phrase ‘as little worth stealing as your purse.’ Per the prompt book’s directions, they ‘with[drew]’ – she darted off clutching his purse as he bpursued her, ad-libbing ‘Come ’ere!’ Such minor textual additions both scripted and unscripted were scattered throughout the performance, and Stubbs later recalled, ‘[w]e changed the original script [presumably Behn’s unaltered text] a lot, and most of it was made up between the lines’.<sup>64</sup> Figure 2 reflects the space that Barton’s revival made for increased female camaraderie, in the script and onstage. Notably, Barton’s adaptation emphasised the women’s voices by giving them various additional lines.



Figure 2. Hilary Townley (Valeria), Imogen Stubbs (Hellena), Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1986

<sup>64</sup> Imogen Stubbs, quoted in Mulryne and Shewring, 110.

After Willmore's and Hellena's re-entrance, on her line 'I perceive, good Father Captain, you design only to make me fit for heaven,' Stubbs knelt, sitting on the floor. When Hellena admitted she 'never tried [to love] yet,' Irons, as Willmore, excitedly dropped to his knees, exclaiming 'Gad, that's kind!', inching towards her, and pulling her in for a kiss on his line 'thy lodging, sweetheart.' She pushed him away and stood, swiftly moving upstage, before obtaining his promise of fidelity and agreeing to see him again.<sup>65</sup> The staging in this moment emphasised female agency, a notable facet of Barton's production.

In contrast to this lively encounter, the seduction scene between Angellica and Willmore was rooted in repartee rather than physical interaction. Cusack imbued the courtesan role with a stately poise, her thoughtful intonation throughout the scene gradually betraying the depths of Angellica's infatuation with the titular rover. Willmore's accent became slightly more refined for this scene (Roberts noted that 'Irons found a rhythm that drew on years of RSC voice training [. . .] in the best Stratford traditions of blank verse-speaking'), indicating his noble origins and his courtliness when in the presence of a lady of fashion, unlike his relaxed pronunciations with his supposed gypsy.<sup>66</sup> Momentarily, Irons reverted to his habitual speech in asides – his line 'Death, methinks I'm going to believe her' was delivered as 'Death, I think I'm gonna believe 'er!'<sup>67</sup> I suggest that his habitual, casual way of speaking was meant to help demystify the notion of Restoration comedy as a formal relic of a bygone age, in order to make the text more relevant, accessible, and familiar to playgoers. The pair stood opposite each other for much of the dialogue, circling one another, and only when she asked him to swear his love did he approach her – as he replied, 'Why, so I do,' he pulled her close and kissed her. On her line, 'Thou hast a power too strong to be resisted,' they rushed off stage

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<sup>65</sup> *The Rover*, filmed 15 December, 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company; Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company, 39, 48-49.

<sup>66</sup> Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy*, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company, 95.

left, as he gave a gleeful laugh, which she echoed. Figure 3 shows Cusack in costume, evoking the elegance and luxurious refinement of her portrayal of Angellica.



Figure 3. Sinead Cusack (Angellica Bianca), Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1986

The scene wherein Willmore attempts to drunkenly rape Florinda is indicative of the production's take on Behn's engagement with the libertine hero. Rather than highlighting Behn's criticism of libertines' abuse of women, Barton's revival mined and augmented the play's inherent comedy, sacrificing its complexity and that of Willmore himself. In Behn's original, stage directions are scant beyond the direction for Willmore to enter 'drunk' (the degree of his intoxication is open to interpretation) and the direction '[s]he struggles with him' just prior to Belvile's and Frederick's entrance.<sup>68</sup> Anita Pacheco notes that 'Florinda's responses to his advances throughout the scene tell us that he has grabbed hold of her and will

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<sup>68</sup> Behn, *The Rover*, 486, 487.

not let her go'.<sup>69</sup> In terms of direction, Barton's published script is similarly sparse, offering no guidance for the staging except for the one which appears in Behn: when Willmore declares to Florinda '[A]n y'are good at a dumb wrestle, I'm for ye,' Barton's script reads *She struggles with him*, matching Behn's direction word-for-word.<sup>70</sup> However, the prompt book indicates more specific, disturbing directions, including '[he] puts his hand up [her] skirt,' 'grabs her from behind,' and later 'pushes [her] onto t[he] ground,' where (according to the footage) they struggled.<sup>71</sup> The unsettling nature of these blocking notes was undercut by the staging itself; Irons's Willmore was deeply inebriated to the point of clumsiness and his intoxication and Florinda's startled bewilderment were played for comedy, resulting in much audience laughter. The staging doubled down on Willmore's comic drunkenness in the subsequent scene, when, on the Cavaliers' entrance, Frederick 'carr[ied] Willmore' and 'dump[ed] him' on the floor, stage right.<sup>72</sup> On his blaming 'the cursed sack,' the prompt book directions indicate, 'Fred[erick] holds out [his] hat,' and 'Will[more] vomits into hat in front of SR [stage right] audience,' who responded with hearty chuckles of disgusted amusement.<sup>73</sup> Instead of a charmer who is also a potential rapist, Irons's Willmore was a lovable buffoon whose desirability and charisma overrode his offences against women.

Barton's decision to soften Willmore's faults (specifically his predatoriness towards Florinda) and instead to emphasise the character's comedic aspects as part of his romp-style production came at the expense of Willmore's complexities, which have been remarked upon by scholars. Airey notes Willmore's contradictions, observing that '[h]e is attractive and witty but also sexually violent and lacking in morals,' yet she acknowledges that his potential for danger is somewhat lessened, subject as it is to the narrative necessities of Behn's play:

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<sup>69</sup> Anita Pacheco, 'Rape and the Female Subject in Aphra Behn's "The Rover,"' *ELH* 65, no. 2 (1998), 328.

<sup>70</sup> Barton, *An adaptation of The Rover*, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company, 141-144.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

‘Ultimately, Willmore is a more attractive version of [Shadwell’s] Don John, one whose self-serving pursuit of more and greater pleasure is tamed and reabsorbed into the matrimonial economy’.<sup>74</sup> Behn’s text seems to support this, particularly the moment when Hellena and Willmore have acknowledged their mutual love and she asks his name, to which he answers ‘I am call’d *Robert the Constant*,’ suggesting his embrace of monogamy and marital fidelity.<sup>75</sup> Olivier, however, questions this ‘taming,’ suggesting that ‘married life with Willmore, dashing cavalier and drunken rapist’ will likely ‘bring the “pack of repentance” Helena wishes to avoid,’ and noting that ‘Behn ingeniously makes her conventional ending of the comedy in marriage disturbingly problematic so that the play becomes more than the sum of its parts’.<sup>76</sup> Barton’s prioritisation of the lighter ‘parts’ of Behn’s play reveals a dismissiveness towards Florinda’s plight which compromises the production’s emphasis on women’s voices. While we can never know with certainty how Willmore’s attempted rape of Florinda was received by Restoration audiences, it is worth noting the scene’s layered qualities, which Barton’s version reduced. Owen remarks on Behn’s ‘ambivalent’ approach to the scenario in light of Willmore’s drunken state — ‘drink,’ for Behn, is simultaneously ‘a marker of Cavalier sexiness and playfulness, as well as upper-class values,’ a tool to ‘expose the outrageousness of libertinism,’ and an aspect which ‘makes the rape scene comic’.<sup>77</sup> Tellingly, Owen continues:

It may even seem to palliate the libertine’s offence. Willmore’s drunken fumbings are clearly meant to be funny. [. . .] True, some of the comedy is at Willmore’s expense; but there is also laughter at the floundering Florinda. While a reader might remain impervious to this, it would be hard for a spectator in the theatre (even a female one) to

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<sup>74</sup> Airey, *The Politics of Rape*, 101-102.

<sup>75</sup> Behn, *The Rover*, 517.

<sup>76</sup> Olivier, “‘Banished His Country, Despised at Home’: Cavalier Politics, Banishment, and Rape in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*,” 71.

<sup>77</sup> Owen, ‘Drink, Sex, and Power in Restoration Comedy,’ 131.



resist at least a temporary collusion with male values. [. . .] Even with skilful directing it would be hard to make an audience ashamed of their laughter and force them to question their collusion in oppressive values.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, the scene as staged in Barton's version did garner audience laughter, highlighting the disconcerting contradiction between Barton's supposed championing of the female characters in his adapted script and his belittling of Florinda's assault to harmonise with his focus on the play's comedic elements. The production ultimately turned her distress into another source of uncomplicated humour. In Behn's original text, Willmore (as Olivier notes) is 'an extravagant rake' whose 'confidence and blatant disregard' for the consequences of his actions appeals to audiences specifically due to 'its distastefulness,' since '[t]o be able to flaunt that of which others are ashamed garners disbelieving wonder'.<sup>79</sup> However, Barton's version positions him as an alluring figure of 'untested glorification' for the sake of the production's overall light-hearted tone.<sup>80</sup>

Despite their discomfiting aspects, Barton's exuberant production and its interpretation of the libertine figure as a loveable, dashing rogue whose charms glossed over (and indeed outweighed) his faults likewise constitutes a significant moment in both the history of Restoration comedy revivals and in the history of the Swan theatre itself. In contrast to the profusion of comparatively more contrived, arch mid-twentieth century revivals including the works of such playwrights as Wycherley and Congreve, Barton's *Rover* offered a dynamic, passionate, and (to some extent) relatively naturalistic template for Restoration comedy performances, the influence of which may be seen in certain later revivals mentioned in this thesis. Likewise, the production is a key chapter within the annals of the Swan theatre's

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

<sup>79</sup> Olivier, "'Banished His Country, Despised at Home': Cavalier Politics, Banishment, and Rape in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*," 72.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



history, given its place in the theatre's first season. With its popularity with audiences, the production helped to validate the RSC's mission to stage long-neglected works in this new space.

## Conclusion

The production's final moments were similarly steeped in a feel-good atmosphere that additionally erased the problems of Willmore's attempted rape of Florinda and the libertine's broader potential for sexual violence. Barton's production contained little room for such nuances and instead suggested the promise of the newlywed couples' sexual satisfaction. Following a bell tolling to indicate the start of Lent, all the cast exited save for Florinda and Belvile, who has the last word, in a dialogue in which she spoke a revised version of the play's ending couplet, originally delivered by Willmore. In Behn's text, Willmore's line, addressed to Hellena prior to their exit to be married, reads: 'Lead on, no other Dangers they can dread, / Who Venture in the Storms o'th' Marriage Bed'.<sup>81</sup> Here we see how Willmore's rampant desires (per Airey's commentary) are 'tamed and reabsorbed into the matrimonial economy'.<sup>82</sup> Barton adapted this couplet for Florinda, so that she was addressing her new husband Belvile: 'But let us now no future dangers dread / than present ventures of the marriage bed'.<sup>83</sup> In keeping with his emphasis on the female characters in Behn's text, Barton gives Willmore's final line to Florinda, thereby concluding his production with a woman's voice. But this adaptation also swept away much of Willmore's troubling libertine energy and danger, particularly his potential for sexual violence, and avoided exploring his most significant development as a character, that is, his shift from promiscuity to monogamy and constancy. Instead, Barton focuses on his illicit escapades prior to marriage. In the

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<sup>81</sup> Behn, *The Rover*, 519.

<sup>82</sup> Airey, *The Politics of Rape*, 102.

<sup>83</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company, 263.

production's final moments, he sidelined Willmore's character development in order to emphasise Florinda's expression of sexual desire for her new husband. Paradoxically, as we have seen, despite Barton's focus on the female characters, his staging of Willmore's drunken attempt on Florinda as a purely humorous moment implied a dismissal of her distress.

Overall, Barton's *Rover* blunted the libertine hero's sharper edges, instead framing him as a glamorous, seductive figure. As we will see in the following chapter, Loveday Ingram's 2016 revival expanded upon Barton's presentation of Willmore, paying homage to it while reinvigorating Willmore himself for twenty-first century audiences. However, on a more troubling note, in her tribute to his energetic staging, she likewise replicated Barton's romp-style comedic interpretation which staged an alluring Willmore and sidestepped the political, philosophical, and sexual complexities of the libertine hero.

## Chapter Two: *The Rover* 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company

As discussed in the previous chapter, Barton's *Rover* set a precedent for vivid, compelling revivals of Restoration comedies, although one that avoided some of the challenges and threats embodied by the libertine hero. In this chapter, I will examine how Loveday Ingram's 2016 RSC revival of *The Rover* (also staged in the Swan Theatre) expanded upon and imitated Barton's version, but also reinterpreted Behn's comedy for a twenty-first century audience. My discussion of Ingram's 2016 adaptation involves comprehensive analysis of audio-visual and textual sources, specifically the archival filmed performance recording of the production and the production prompt book which are housed in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust archives. I have also referenced production photos and critics' reviews for the production, which were included in *London Theatre Record*. The filmed archival recording proved the most revealing of these, as it conveyed how Ingram's production depicted *The Rover* as a sexy, colourful Carnival which ignored the libertine hero's potential for sexual violence and predatoriness.

Ingram's *Rover* occupies a similar place to Barton's version in my framework of 'revival,' 'adaptation,' and 'modernisation'. It is both a revival of Behn's comedy and an adaptation of it. To some extent this production may be also considered a revival and an adaptation of Barton's production, as it mirrors Barton's colourful staging style and contains various homages to the 1986 version. Although Ingram's *Rover*, like Barton's, does not strictly fall under the 'modernisation' heading, in an interview she remarked on her desire to make Behn's play and the societal beliefs held by its characters 'accessible' and 'contemporary' for 'a young, modern audience' via the use of music.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, one of the key facets of her adaptation of Behn's comedy was the liberal interpolation of songs and dances throughout, to

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<sup>1</sup> Loveday Ingram, quoted in Lyndsey Bakewell, 'An Interview with Loveday Ingram, Director of *The Rover* at the RSC,' *BSECS Criticks*, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.bsecs.org.uk/criticks-reviews/an-interview-with-loveday-ingram-director-of-the-rover-at-the-rsc/>.

the extent that this production could be considered a play with music. Ingram's musical content emphasised the entertainment value and sensory allure of her adaptation.

Ingram's version, as we will see, both owes a debt to Barton, and is its own distinct entity; there are various similarities and differences between the two productions. The most significant feature in Ingram's adaptation, according to my research, was her emphasis on Willmore, played by Joseph Millson. As we will see, Willmore was somewhat more centralised than as he appeared in Barton's *Rover*. In Barton's version, Willmore was denied his final line, which was instead rewritten for Florinda. In Ingram's version, Willmore retained the closing couplet and Millson delivered the lines in an emphatically sexual tone, a staging choice in keeping with this production's highly carnal atmosphere. While the 'romp' aspect of Barton's *Rover* was expressed in its light-hearted, exuberant style, the 'romp' factor in Ingram's *Rover* leaned heavily into the word's erotic implications.<sup>2</sup>

Ingram's production was largely structured around the Carnival motifs in Behn's play. Indeed, as we will see, various scenes in the production took place amid moments of intense Carnival revelry, and the Carnival setting with its titillating implications was the production's main selling point. In this milieu, Millson's larger-than-life portrayal of Behn's libertine hero clearly echoes Robert Jordan's description of the rover archetype (what he terms 'the extravagant rake') as 'a one-man *mardi gras*'.<sup>3</sup> In Barton, Willmore's allure was primarily conveyed through Irons's sly, witty interpretation of the character. Irons's Willmore was all knowing inflections and teasing badinage. However, as framed in Ingram's production, Willmore's definitive attribute was his raffish allure. While Susan J. Owen notes that 'Willmore is not simply sexy and desirable,' Ingram's version portrayed him as exclusively 'sexy and desirable' throughout, from his dramatic first entrance swinging out over the stage

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<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Michael Proffitt (Oxford University Press, 2025), under 'romp.'

<sup>3</sup> Robert Jordan, 'The Extravagant Rake in Restoration Comedy' in *Restoration Literature: Critical Approaches*, ed. Harold Love (Methuen, 1972), 87.

on a rope (similar to Irons's entrance) to the play's final moments as he speedily loped offstage in heated pursuit of his bride.<sup>4</sup> In Barton's version, Willmore drew women with honeyed words, while in Ingram's production Willmore (as embodied by Millson) was rooted in his physicality. The result was a production which, like Barton's adaptation, lacked Behn's ambivalence towards the libertine hero's complexities. Instead, Ingram's adaptation framed Willmore as a figure of unequivocal allure, ignoring his potential for sexual cruelty. As my analysis reveals, Ingram's staging of Willmore's drunken rape attempt on Florinda exceeded Barton's version in its comedic emphasis. Moreover, similar to Barton's *Rover*, Ingram's adaptation may be viewed as implicitly influenced by contemporary media. Just as Barton's 1986 *Rover* echoed the 'romp' conventions set forth in the boisterous, light-weight cinematic adaptations of Fielding and Defoe in the 1960s and 1970s, Ingram's highly sexualised 2016 *Rover* evokes the period dramas of the 2010s, especially *Outlander* (which premiered in 2014) and *Poldark* (which premiered in 2015). Both series were noted for passionate sex scenes between their lead couples. In the vein of Jamie Fraser and Ross Poldark, Willmore in Ingram's production was a glamorous, virile leading man, rather than the nuanced libertine hero of Behn's play, whose complexities and inconstancy held the potential for cultural critique.

### **Behn, post-Barton**

According to Nancy Copeland, the influence of Barton's *Rover* was so widespread that it subsequently 'became the "standard" acting text of *The Rover*,' staged in America and the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most notable UK revival of *The Rover* prior to Ingram's version was the 1994 production staged by the Women's Playhouse Trust. This was a 'co-production' with the BBC and Open University, staged (and filmed for television broadcast)

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<sup>4</sup> Susan J. Owen, 'Drink, Sex, and Power in Restoration Comedy,' 130.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Copeland, *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 174.

in Jacob Street Studios, and directed by Jules Wright.<sup>6</sup> Wright's production of *The Rover* 'was recorded out of sequence like a film, during the day (with no audience), and the play was performed live to audiences in the evenings'.<sup>7</sup> The recorded version was broadcast on BBC Two in the autumn of 1995; the first part aired on 29<sup>th</sup> September, and the second on 6<sup>th</sup> October.<sup>8</sup> Like Barton's version, the WPT *Rover* featured an altered setting. Instead of Italy, the location shifted to an unidentified 'colonial setting in the early twentieth century'.<sup>9</sup> As W. R. Owens noted:

A rather Oriental setting was created with colour and texture: the dominant colour was terracotta; the floor was covered with sand; a tabla player sat in a corner providing a rhythmic accompaniment to the action; the part of Angellica was played by a Kathakali dancer, Maya Krishna Rao; and movement around the stage space included the use of bicycles and rickshaws.<sup>10</sup>

Critics observed that '[b]lack actors and actresses [were] cast as the "Neapolitans,"' while Willmore (played by Andy Serkis) and his fellow Cavaliers 'looked like an offcut from a Merchant/Ivory film,' clad in 'late-Empire linen suits'.<sup>11</sup>

Among other items, Wright's version sought to counter Barton's comedic treatment of the two assaults Florinda faces. As producer Tony Coe remarked, 'There's a very dark underbelly to the play. There are two near rapes, and those weren't dealt with in any real way in the previous [RSC] production'.<sup>12</sup> The result was a markedly bleak staging. W.R. Owens later

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<sup>6</sup> Hereafter the 'Woman's Playhouse Trust' will be abbreviated as 'WPT.'

<sup>7</sup> W.R. Owens and Lizbeth Goodman, eds., *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon* (Routledge, 1996), 176.

<sup>8</sup> 'Open University, BBC Two, Fri 29<sup>th</sup> Sep 1995, 00:05,' *BBC*, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/598f6976715a47c6ab3c2cfe6e20627f>; 'Open University: Arts: The Rover, BBC Two, Fri 6<sup>th</sup> Oct 1995, 00:00,' *BBC*, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/a1d724ca157c44c3b4b96e5e66e40cf5>.

<sup>9</sup> Owens and Goodman, *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon*, 174.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Bassett, 'A-roving,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4781, 18 November 1994, 18; Jane Edwardes, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 14, no. 21 (1994), 1284; Bassett, 'A-roving,' 18.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Coe, cited in Owens and Goodman, *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon*, 178.

reflected on ‘the seeming lack of recognition that the play was supposed to be a comedy’.<sup>13</sup>

As Owens observed:

[T]he male characters [. . .] were uniformly unattractive. Thus Belville, who in the text is clearly presented as an honest, upright, constant lover, came across here as no better than any of the other louts. The swordfights of the original were transformed into vicious knifings, and the near-rape scenes were horrifyingly brutal, with much physical throwing of the women to the ground and forcing of their legs apart.<sup>14</sup>

Unsurprisingly, critics (accustomed to the liveliness of Barton’s adaptation) observed that there was ‘no romping’ as well as ‘no carnival’ and that ‘the comic spirit [was] in short supply’.<sup>15</sup> According to Kate Bassett, it ‘need[ed] more of the throb and thrust of fiesta’.<sup>16</sup> In its response to Barton’s overly ebullient interpretation, Wright’s production had veered too far in the opposite direction, for many theatre critics. Ultimately, due to its vast set (‘the size of an aircraft hangar,’ Bassett noted) and the actors’ lack of cohesiveness in their performances for the ‘dual purposes of stage and screen,’ the WPT version was deemed ‘a defeat of substance by style’.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, academia between 1986 and 2016 saw the rise of ‘Behn studies,’ with renewed scholarly examinations of Behn’s works and their ongoing influence. Twentieth-century contributions included Elin Diamond’s 1989 article ‘Gestus and Signature in Aphra Behn’s *The Rover*,’ which ‘applies Brecht’s notion of the Gestus or gest, “a moment in performance that makes visible the contradictory interactions of text, theater apparatus, and contemporary social struggle”’ to aspects of the comedy; Janet Todd’s seven-volume edition of Behn’s complete *Works* published from ‘1992-1996’; the 1993 essay collection *Rereading Aphra*

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<sup>13</sup> Owens and Goodman, *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon*, 173-174.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>15</sup> Edwardes, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ 1284; Bassett, ‘A-roving,’ 18.

<sup>16</sup> Bassett, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Bassett; Louise Chantal, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 14, no. 21, 26 October 1994, 1284.

*Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism* edited by Heidi Hutner, which ‘explores the significance of her work in the contexts of both seventeenth century English literature and of contemporary debates in critical and feminist theory’; and Janet Todd’s 1998 book *The Critical Fortunes of Aphra Behn*, an insightful overview of shifting approaches to Behn ‘through the centuries’.<sup>18</sup> The twenty-first century saw the publication of titles such as Derek Hughes’s 2003 *The Theatre of Aphra Behn*, ‘the first book-length study solely devoted to Aphra Behn’s plays’; 2004’s *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, edited by Hughes and Todd; and Mary Ann O’Donnell’s 2004 republished and revised version of her 1986 volume *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography*, featuring an ‘[a]ppendix’ with ‘an extensive [. . .] list of 34 late-twentieth century *Rover* revivals between 1979 and 2001,’ which, as Nicole Stodard notes, formed ‘the first record of contemporary stage life of Behn’s plays’.<sup>19</sup> Diverse other twenty-first century contributions have included articles from the likes of Elaine Hobby, Ros Ballaster, and Anita Pacheco covering topics such as (respectively) ‘the relationship of [Behn’s] writing to a half-submerged world of women’s talk’ relating to sex, Behn’s ‘relation to the materialist philosophy of Lucretius and to the circle of wits around the Earl of Rochester,’ and ‘her freethinking and its relationship to her politics’ as evinced by ‘the treatment of Christianity and honor in *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*’.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to these numerous scholarly publications, Behn’s dramatic works remained absent from subsidised, repertory theatres. As we will see, Ingram’s *Rover* proved the exception.

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Ann O’Donnell, *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography* (Routledge, 2017), 448, 34; Heidi Hutner, *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism* (University Press of Virginia, 1993), 1; O’Donnell, *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Copeland, ‘Review: [Untitled],’ *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 102, no. 3 (2003), 442; Nicole Elizabeth Stodard, ‘Aphra Behn on the Contemporary Stage’, PhD diss., (University of South Florida, 2017), *Digital Commons @ University of South Florida*, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/7446/>, 19-20.

<sup>20</sup> Elaine Hobby, “‘The World Was Never Without Some Mad Men’: Aphra Behn, Jane Sharp, and The Body,” *Women’s Writing* 19, no. 2 (2012), 177; Ros Ballaster, ‘Taking Liberties: Revisiting Behn’s Libertinism,’ *Women’s Writing* 19, no. 2 (2012), 165; Anita Pacheco, “‘Little Religion’ but ‘Admirable Morals’: Christianity and Honor in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*,’ *Modern Philology* 111, no. 2 (2013), 254.



## From Barton to Ingram – An Artistic Lineage

Ingram's initial connection with *The Rover* was in fact due directly to Barton. Early in her career, she acted as his 'research assistant,' and it was during her time under his mentorship that she found the script for *The Rover* 'in his office' and asked him 'what is this play, tell me more'.<sup>21</sup> Although she has never openly indicated that his production partly inspired her own, certain homages were evident, as we will see. In some ways, her revival might be viewed as a tribute to Barton's living legacy, given the fact that he was alive at the time of the production (he died in 2018). Likewise, when considered within the context of that season's Swan productions, it might be viewed as a tribute to the legacy of the Swan Theatre itself. Besides *The Rover*, the plays in the 2016 season included Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (11 February to 4 August), the premiere of James Fenton's adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (25 February to 21 May), Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (26 May to 6 August 2016), and *Two Noble Kinsmen* (17 August 2016 to 7 February 2017).<sup>22</sup> The presence of Marlowe's work in the season harkens back to the Swan's commitment to staging 'neglected sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays' including those penned by Marlowe, Jonson, and other contemporaries.<sup>23</sup> *The Alchemist* was selected to honour the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jonson's First Folio, while Fenton's dramatisation of Cervantes was in commemoration of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ingram, in Bakewell, 'An Interview with Loveday Ingram, Director of *The Rover* at the RSC.'

<sup>22</sup> 'Our Year in Performance 2016-2017,' *Royal Shakespeare Company* | RSC, <https://cdn2.rsc.org.uk/sites/default/files/corporate/year-in-performance-2016-17.pdf?sfvrsn=0,2,4>, PDF download; Emily Cole, 'Full casting announced for RSC's spring Swan productions,' *WhatsOnStage*, 24 November 2015, accessed March 8, 2026, [https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/full-casting-announced-for-rscs-spring-swan-productions\\_39199/](https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/full-casting-announced-for-rscs-spring-swan-productions_39199/); Ibid.; 'RSC Announce Full Casting for *The Alchemist*,' *Royal Shakespeare Company* | RSC, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/rsc-announce-full-casting-for-the-alchemist>; 'RSC Announces Casting for *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *The Rover*,' *Royal Shakespeare Company* | RSC, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/rsc-announces-casting-for-the-two-noble-kinsmen-and-the-rover>.

<sup>23</sup> Ronnie Mulryne, 'The Repertoire of The Swan,' *This Golden Round*, edited by Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Stratford-upon-Avon: Mulryne and Shewring Ltd, 1989), 23.

400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spanish author's death. *Two Noble Kinsman*, like *The Rover*, was part of the Swan's opening season in 1986 and both had not been staged by the RSC since then.<sup>24</sup>

Ingram's credits as a director prior to 2016 spanned a variety of genres, including adaptations (*The Blue Room*, David Hare's 1998 modernisation of Arthur Schnitzler's 1897 *La Ronde*, staged in 2000 for the Chichester Festival Theatre, and a stage version of *When Harry Met Sally*, performed in 2004 at the Theatre Royal Haymarket), musicals (Rodgers and Hart's *Pal Joey* and Gershwin's *My One and Only*, also staged in Chichester in, respectively, 2000 and 2001), classics (Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, another Chichester production in 2001), and Shakespeare (*Richard III*, performed in 2013 at both Nottingham Playhouse and Theatre Royal York).<sup>25</sup> Before her *Rover*, her only prior RSC credit had been a 2001 production of *The Merchant of Venice*, staged in the Swan Theatre, a revival which later toured internationally.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, in addition to being a director, Ingram describes herself as 'an experienced dramaturge and adapter' and now identifies her 2016 revival of *The Rover* as 'a new adaptation by Loveday Ingram,' although at the time of the production it was not marketed as such.<sup>27</sup> Though her version employed much more of Behn's original text than did Barton's, she also borrowed aspects of Barton's version and added details of her own devising to create a unique triple-stranded entity that reflected her additions, Barton's, and Behn's original text. In contrast to Barton, who was a well-established figure in the RSC, having been associated with it since its founding by his friend and colleague Peter Hall in 1960, Ingram, as a director,

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<sup>24</sup> 'RSC Announces Casting for The Two Noble Kinsmen and The Rover,' accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/rsc-announces-casting-for-the-two-noble-kinsmen-and-the-rover>.

<sup>25</sup> 'Loveday Ingram,' *United Agents*, accessed March 8, 2026, [https://www.unitedagents.co.uk/cv/9700/film\\_tv\\_theatre](https://www.unitedagents.co.uk/cv/9700/film_tv_theatre).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> 'Loveday Ingram – Theatre Director, Writer, & Adapter,' accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.lovedayingram.com/>.

was unaffiliated with the RSC. But she acknowledged the company's established legacy of producing classical theatre.<sup>28</sup> When asked in an interview if she '[felt she] had to distance [herself] from the other plays of the RSC and the very traditional Shakespeare plays,' she replied:

No, not at all. Obviously what I was doing in the rehearsal room was bringing to life the play that I had in front of me, but I am passionate about Shakespeare and text, and text analysis. And my training was with John Barton who is one of the most brilliant practitioners in the actual speaking and acting of Elizabethan, Shakespearean text, so that is my background. I am very old-school traditional in my approach to text and language and how that is delivered through an actor on stage.<sup>29</sup>

Considering this, her revival may be read as in alignment with the RSC's heritage, specifically picking up and carrying on the mantle of adapting Behn, as established by Barton. Notably, her adaptation involved interpolated songs and dances, a pronounced bawdy humour, and a palpable air of the carnivalesque. In contrast to the WPT production, this colourful production (as critics' reviews and the archival video footage reveal) was greeted with delight. However, on a far more troubling note, her devotion to the 'old-school traditional' style (as set forth by Barton) involved both an unequivocally glamorous Willmore (played by Joseph Millson) and a comedic treatment of his attempted rape of Florinda which exceeded Barton's version in its light-hearted approach to the libertine hero's sexual aggression and violence.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Barton, John Bernard Adie (1928–2018), theatre director.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. March 10, 2022. Oxford University Press, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-90000380418>.

<sup>29</sup> Ingram, in Bakewell, 'An Interview with Loveday Ingram, Director of *The Rover* at the RSC.'

### **Adaptation and Reinterpretation in Barton's and Ingram's *Rovers***

One of Ingram's starting points when approaching Behn's text was the carnival setting, which suggested Barton's influence. However, Ingram's setting was Latin American-inspired, in contrast to Barton's West Indies. Initially, as Ingram explained, the carnival aspect formed a great part of the play's appeal for her:

The flamboyance of carnival, the excitement of carnival, the colour, and my background being in classics as well, I immediately took myself back to the Saturnalia festivals of the Roman period which carnivals today, I believe, are based on, or come from, and with that the mischievousness and the upturning of order and reversal of roles and disguise, and downright naughtiness and all of those ingredients were delicious. I fell in love with it straight away.<sup>30</sup>

Another key aspect of Behn's comedy which Ingram found fascinating was the plotline of 'three women go[ing] against all the odds [. . .] determined to decide their own fate against the strong hand of the authority figures in their lives'.<sup>31</sup> With that in mind, Ingram set about finding a precise setting to explore these themes of carnival mischief and tenacious heroines:

I wanted it to be of its time because I felt it was important for a modern day audience to be able to see the constraints that women of the 1670s were faced with. If I'd put it in a totally contemporary setting I don't think their world would have resonated. So one of the first things was to make sure the play was rooted in the seventeenth century [and] its sensibilities, although how it was realised I wanted to be more contemporary, so it would be accessible to a young, modern audience today, and one of the key ways to do that for me was through music.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ingram, in Bakewell, 'An Interview with Loveday Ingram, Director of *The Rover* at the RSC.'

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Using the seventeenth-century Spanish ‘colonial power’ in Naples as a starting point, she examined other Spanish colonies ‘where the music was much more exciting’ than that in Italy to ‘find a potentially similar community and environment,’ eventually deciding upon ‘Latin America’.<sup>33</sup> She also drew on ‘South America’ as inspiration, especially Buenos Aires, as well as the island of Cuba, collaborating with designer Lez Brotherston to ‘[create] an imaginary world that was based on Buenos Aires, but was heavily influenced by Cuba,’ ‘a great melting pot of tension’ and ‘excitement’ which they called ‘Buenos Havana’.<sup>34</sup>

The interpolated script directions in the production’s prompt book for Act 1, scene one set the mood thus: ‘The play is set in a South American city in 1654 at carnival time. A Spanish colony. The docks of a bustling colonial port. A large ship has just docked. Men tumble off board carrying colourful cloth, and other riches, food and drink. This is the port of a vibrant city, a city rich with diversity. Preparations for the carnival are well under way’.<sup>35</sup> Like Behn’s original text and Barton’s revival, the play is clearly set during the Interregnum, in this case with a precise year provided (by contrast, Barton’s prompt book contains no such indication). Notably, in an evident homage to Barton’s creative legacy, Ingram’s adaptation followed the rearrangement of the first two scenes as evidenced in Barton’s published text. Barton positioned Behn’s Act 1, scene two as Act 1, scene one, and thus introduced the Cavaliers before the Spanish sisters. Ingram’s other references to Barton’s version included Valeria’s characterisation as Florinda and Hellena’s sister rather than cousin, and Belville’s portrayal by Patrick Robinson, the same Black actor who had played Biskey in Barton’s revival. Even Joseph Millson’s appearance as Willmore (costumed with long hair, a beard, and well worn-yet-colourful garb) was ‘uncannily’ reminiscent of Irons, as Dominic Cavendish noted.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, just as Irons’s Willmore had been deemed ‘a pirate king let

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Dominic Cavendish, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029.

loose to buckle his swash' (presumably referencing Kevin Kline's performance as the Pirate King in the 1983 film adaptation of *The Pirates of Penzance*), Millson's Willmore was described as being as 'sozzled as Jack Sparrow' (a clear reference to Johnny Depp's pirate captain in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film franchise). Indeed, both Irons and Millson were compared by theatre reviewers to Errol Flynn.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike Barton's version, however, Ingram's script owed most of its text to Behn, apart from the occasional nods to its previous *Swan* iteration with the inclusion of Barton's lines such as Angellica's, 'Who made the laws by which you judge me? Men! Men who would rove and ramble but require that women must be nice'. Barton added this line to his printed script, though in the 1986 production, it was shortened to: 'Who made the laws by which you judge me? Men!'.<sup>38</sup> In addition, presumably for the sake of accessibility for her playgoers, Ingram changed Behn's 'thees' and 'thous' to variants of 'you' (one instance of this was Angellica's 'You have a power too strong to be resisted' in place of her original 'Thou hast a Pow'r too strong to be resisted.').<sup>39</sup> Another difference was the prominence of the carnival atmosphere. While Barton's carnival was suggested by brief moments of ensemble members in festive attire running across the stage, Ingram's carnival enveloped and coloured the entire production. In fact, the carnival setting was a primary marketing point for the production, as evinced by the video trailer, in which a man (a supposed audience member) walks out onto the *Swan* stage, facing the seats. He pulls out a ticket for *The Rover*, as the sound of another man's voice is heard over the tannoy saying 'Ladies and gentlemen, this evening's

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<sup>37</sup> Sheridan Morley, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 6, no. 14 (1986), 749; Gill Sutherland, 'Review: The Rover at the RSC,' *Stratford Herald*, 4 October 2016, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.stratford-herald.com/whats-on/review-the-rover-at-the-rsc-9140032/>; Nicholas de Jongh, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 6, no. 14 (1986), 753; Michael Billington, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029; Colin Davison, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *British Theatre Guide*, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.britishtheatreinfo.org/reviews/the-rover-swan-13721>; Peter Viney, 'The Rover,' *Peter Viney's Blog*, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://peterviney.com/stage/the-rover/>.

<sup>38</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company, 30; John Barton, *An adaptation of The Rover*, 38; *The Rover*, filmed 15 December, 1986, Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company, 32; Aphra Behn, *The Rover*, 476.

performance of the Rover will commence in two . . .’ Abruptly, a vibrant, percussive Latin American dance tune with accompanying male vocals begins. Caught off guard, the man turns upstage to the darkness of the stage, by which he is surrounded (save for a spotlight on him) and from whence a steady surge of multi-coloured confetti issues. Overwhelmed, the man grits his teeth, bracing himself against the waves, as key words in bright red all-capital font flash on the screen at intervals: ‘PASSION. SEX. HEAT’. As the music fades, the lights come up, and confetti falls to the floor, the man looks around him, evidently pondering his experience, as the red letters reappear (as seen in Figure 4): ‘JOIN THE CARNIVAL,’ with ‘carnival’ as the largest word and therefore the focus. Within her explicitly carnival setting, Ingram’s adaptation expanded upon the exuberant elements in Barton’s revival.



Figure 4. ‘Join the Carnival,’ *The Rover* | *Trailer*, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016

### Creating the world of Ingram’s *Rover*

In terms of design, Lez Brotherston’s set featured a bare main stage area, allowing for intricate group dances in the carnival scenes, while upstage a ‘wrought iron’ balcony spanned the length between stage right and left, with a staircase leading to it upstage centre.<sup>40</sup> The

<sup>40</sup> Natasha Tripney, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1030.

balcony featured in various scenes, for instance in Angellica's first appearance. Both it and the stairs served as spaces for the performance of 'sun-kissed, salsa-saturated,' tango and jazz-influenced music (composed by Grant Olding) by the ensemble members and the band, who were situated in the stage left alcove, before shows and in between scenes (Figure 5).<sup>41</sup> The lighting was similarly evocative. While bright standard light illuminated most scenes, the carnival sequences were bathed in either cool or warm lighting, suggesting the play's extremes of passion and volatility.



Figure 5. The Rover set, Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2016

The costumes, meanwhile, were a melange of styles, a sartorial reflection of the mischievous carnivalesque chaos. Dominant colours included shades of red, gold, and black, emphasising the Latin aesthetic of the setting (and reflecting the colour schemes of the

<sup>41</sup> Cavendish, 'Review of "The Rover,"' 1029.



costumes in Barton's version). In her gypsy disguise, Hellena sported a pair of red trousers tucked into matching thigh-high heeled boots, a steampunk-style red corset, and a red jacket over a blackwork embroidered blouse. Willmore's attire was faded, torn blue trousers with a seventeenth-century style open-necked white shirt, leather boots, and a blue coat with gold trim, and Angellica wore twenty-first century lingerie with tights and heeled, short black boots (Figure 6). Figure 6 features Faye Castelow's Hellena mid-badinage with Millson's Willmore, as Alexandra Gilbreath's Angellica observes them. The resulting set and sounds vividly evoked 'a society in a permanent state of fiesta'.<sup>42</sup>



Figure 6. Alexandra Gilbreath (Angellica Bianca) [on balcony], Faye Castelow (Hellena), Joseph Millson (Willmore), Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2016

<sup>42</sup> Billington, 'Review of "The Rover,"' 1029.

### Ingram's Sexualised Willmore

In addition to the comedy's carnival atmosphere and the female-driven narrative, another aspect which spoke to Ingram's directorial invention was the character of the titular libertine. As Ingram noted about Willmore: '[He] is absolutely irresistible and despicable, [a] fabulous mixture. [. . .] [H]e's so contradictory and so full of extremes'.<sup>43</sup> Joseph Millson's 'raffish,' 'exuberant' portrayal was the core of this production.<sup>44</sup> As we will see, the 'throb and thrust of fiesta' which Kate Bassett found lacking in the 1994 WPT production was present in Ingram's production in overabundance, primarily concentrated in Millson's intensely bawdy portrayal of Willmore.<sup>45</sup>

Millson's previous stage credits included various plays, as well as some musicals (perhaps his best-known musical role to date had been Raoul in the 2010 premiere production of *Love Never Dies*, Andrew Lloyd-Webber's sequel to *The Phantom of the Opera*). More significantly, his previous experience in plays overlapped with the themes of Restoration comedy and libertine heroes (the roguish Archer in Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* in 1997 for Cannizaro Open Air Theatre), seventeenth-century comedy by female playwrights (the nobleman Don Carlos, one of the young lovers in the 1683 romantic comedy *House of Desires* by the Mexican nun Juana Inés de la Cruz, in 2004 for the RSC), and eighteenth-century theatre history plays (the celebrated actor-manager David Garrick in Ian Kelly's *Mr Foote's Other Leg* in 2015 at Hampstead Theatre). In addition, his most recent RSC credit, a 'definitive' Benedick in *About Nothing* in 2006, bore some similarity to his portrayal of Willmore, at least in their initial 'handsome, laddish commitment-phobe' attitudes.<sup>46</sup> Coincidentally, both productions also featured a Latin-American inspired setting (the 2006

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<sup>43</sup> Ingram, quoted in Bakewell.

<sup>44</sup> Sam Marlowe, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19, (2016), 1029; Jane Edwardes, 'Review of "The Rover,"' *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1030.

<sup>45</sup> Bassett, 'A-roving,' 18.

<sup>46</sup> Alastair Macaulay, 'Review of "Much Ado About Nothing,"' *Theatre Record* 26, no. 10 (2006), 589; Sam Marlowe, 'Review of "Much Ado About Nothing,"' *Theatre Record* 26, no. 10 (2006), 589.

*Much Ado*, directed by Marianne Elliot, was set in ‘the Cuba of 1953’), had a ‘sexy salsa’ score by Olly Fox, similar to Olding’s score for *The Rover*, and featured the actor Patrick Robinson as a key supporting character (Don Pedro in *Much Ado* and Belvile in *The Rover*).<sup>47</sup> Both productions’ sets were designed by Lez Brotherston.

Like Irons, Millson’s Willmore was noted for his ‘swagger’.<sup>48</sup> However, while Irons’s interpretation was primarily marked by an arch suggestiveness rather than outright ribaldry, Millson’s intensely physical characterisation was charged with an overt carnality, a fact which several critics remarked upon in their reviews. In Barton’s *Rover*, the romp aspect appeared as a general air of joviality diffused throughout the production. In Ingram’s *Rover*, the romp element, which was primarily concentrated in Millson’s Willmore, became overtly sexual in nature. If Irons’s Willmore was the 1986 version’s pulsating heart, Millson’s Willmore was the 2016 production’s physical vortex. Sam Marlowe described him as ‘swaggering and priapic [. . .] all sweaty, hairy virility [. . .] a hot-blooded philanderer whose machismo is at once seductive and absurd, his eyes bright with lust, his fleshy tongue flicking over his bearded lips in erotic anticipation’.<sup>49</sup> ‘[He] just can’t keep his rapier in his scabbard, in any sense,’ wrote Ian Shuttleworth, while Natasha Tripney noted his ‘thrillingly articulate hips’ and Dominic Cavendish mused: ‘[Y]ou almost wonder whether they need to take out insurance on his pelvis, so often is it used to thrust home a bawdy emphasis’.<sup>50</sup> One noteworthy example of this overtly sensual interpretation was Millson’s delivery of the line ‘She has played with my heart so, that ’twill never lie still till I have met with some kind wench that will play the game out with me’.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to Irons, who in his inflection of the

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<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Tyrrel, ‘Review of “Much Ado About Nothing,”’ *Theatre Record* 26, no. 10 (2006), 590; also *ibid.*, 588.

<sup>48</sup> Fiona Mountford, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029.

<sup>49</sup> Sam Marlowe, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029.

<sup>50</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1030; Natasha Tripney, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1030; Dominic Cavendish, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029.

<sup>51</sup> Behn, *The Rover*, 466.

line paused slightly on the word ‘heart,’ stressing it knowingly to make a phallic reference, Millson spoke the line without pausing, in evident frustration, emphatically gesturing to his groin on ‘heart’.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, his wonted stance onstage was wide-legged and pelvis-forward, suggesting a man led by his libido, and when informing Hellena ‘I have a world of love *in store*’ he accompanied the last two words with another groin gesture. Suffice to say, not for nothing did one reviewer compare his Willmore to ‘Blackadder’s Lord Flashheart’.<sup>53</sup> These moments were exemplary of Ingram’s production, in which ‘no innuendo [went] unstressed’.<sup>54</sup> In fact her *Rover* is the most overtly sexual production covered in this thesis; most of the others relied on intonation to communicate innuendoes. David Roberts considers the ramifications of this exaggerated playing style, specifically how it promoted intense moments of excessive ribaldry:

Sometimes [the exaggerated performances] led to crudity beyond even the usual repertoire of hip-thrusts, bent elbows, and clenched fists. [. . .] There was no shortage of boisterous interplay with the front rows. Paying tribute to Angellica’s picture in Act Two, Willmore exclaims that ‘[t]he sight on it would beget a warm desire in souls whom impotence and age had chilled’. [. . .] Millson slowed the line right down as he caught the eye of whichever senior spectator had the misfortune to be sitting nearby. Then he would tilt the picture in the same direction, adding compliments about Angellica’s womanliness that Behn did not write, and even inviting the hapless spectator to agree.<sup>55</sup>

As Roberts identifies, Millson’s portrayal exploited timing and verbal additions to amplify the sexual overtones. In the archival recording, the latter part of Millson’s added compliments

<sup>52</sup> *The Rover*, filmed 16 September 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Archives.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Ormerod, ‘Review: Riotous and ribald fun with *The Rover*,’ *WarwickshireWorld*, 10 November 2016, accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.warwickshireworld.com/lifestyle/review-rioutous-and-ribald-fun-with-the-rover-765350>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Billington, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029.

<sup>55</sup> Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy*, 91-93.

were somewhat muffled by audience laughter, but apparently, in a mischievously wolfish tone, he said: ‘Look again, these breasts are real’. As we will see, Ingram’s sex-saturated revival (in an attempt to replicate the success of Barton’s revival for a new generation) was centred wholly on Millson’s alluring Willmore, whose portrayal, like that of Irons, eschewed the libertine’s darker elements. Seeking to present the libertine hero as unquestionably desirable, Ingram magnified his appetite (what Christopher Tilmouth describes as ‘Man’s perpetual desire [. . .] for “more of this, more of this” hereafter’) wholly ignoring his potential for predatoriness and sexual violence.<sup>56</sup>

### **Adapting Barton’s Libertine Hero**

In an obvious homage to Barton’s revival, Millson’s Willmore was introduced via a rope swing. From offstage, he shouted ‘Dear Belvile!’ The other actors, centre stage on the floor below, looked up, as Belvile called ‘Willmore?’ Ad-libbed, somewhat muffled arguments and sounds of pursuit were heard, as the gentleman in question appeared, running along the upper balcony stage right. Stopping at its upstage edge, Willmore answered Belvile, ‘Noble colonel!’ then flung down his bundle of worldly goods, just as his pursuer caught up with him. The scenario suggested they had had a quarrel aboard ship prior to disembarking. Dispatching the man with a knee to the groin, Willmore grabbed the rope which hung near the balcony’s edge and swung out over the stage, before ‘dismount[ing]’.<sup>57</sup>

Willmore’s first meeting with Hellena (unlike its counterpart in the 1986 production which featured the sisters and their would-be wooers on a bare stage) took place amid a pulsating group dance, the brief exchanges between the various couples strung together by a background of trumpet-heavy, rhythmic carnival music. Whereas Imogen Stubbs’s Hellena exuded pertness, Faye Castelow’s heroine was imbued with a steady, composed confidence,

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<sup>56</sup> Christopher Tilmouth, *Passion’s Triumph over Reason*, 223.

<sup>57</sup> Marlowe, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ 1030.

‘sparklingly witty’ and ‘unfazed by Willmore’s randy promiscuity’.<sup>58</sup> Castelow was well-versed in portraying spirited, poised women. Prior to 2016, her credits included Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 2011 for Headlong Theatre Company, Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 2012 for the Rose Theatre in Kingston, and a trio of roles in 2014 for the RSC, including the ingenues Susan and Mary in (respectively) Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley’s *The Witch of Edmonton* and Dekker and Thomas Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*, and the good-hearted, doomed wife Isabella in John Webster’s *The White Devil*.<sup>59</sup> In addition to her Hellena’s demeanour, her attire of trousers in contrast to her sisters’ skirts (and Stubbs’s own blouse-bodice-and-ruffled-skirt gypsy garb) likewise set her apart, underlining her tenacity and assertiveness, as did her bearing. Rather than coyly keeping her distance, as Stubbs had done, she stood facing Willmore, mirroring his wide-legged stance. Moreover, barring her black, floor-length gown in her first scene which suggested the severity of her domestic surroundings, Castelow’s Hellena wore trousers throughout the entire piece, both in her gypsy garb and her disguise as a page boy. This attire, in its reflection of Willmore’s masculine garb, subliminally indicated that the two were indeed cut from the same cloth.

Still another tribute to Barton came in the form of Millson’s ad-libs, both scripted and unscripted in the prompt book. As Imogen Stubbs recollected, she and her fellow cast members in Barton’s revival made up various lines in between those in their scripts. Evidently, Millson’s textual additions were much in the same vein. For instance, when Hellena referred to Willmore as ‘Father Captain,’ Millson murmured in mock-piety ‘God bless you,’ crossing himself (this was not indicated in the prompt book). Another such moment – this one pencilled in the prompt book, between the lines of Behn’s text – occurred in the Cavaliers’ initial encounter with Angellica, prior to the seduction scene. When

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.; Michael Billington, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record*, 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Faye Castelow,’ *AHA Talent*, <https://www.ahatalent.co.uk/actor/faye-castelow/>.

Angellica assured him ‘all I have to wound with is my eyes,’ Willmore, mishearing, informed his fellows ‘all she has to wound with are her thighs’.<sup>60</sup> These additions dimmed his potential for violence against women, instead framing him as a comedically amorous rascal whose aggressive sexuality was merely amusing.

Angellica and Willmore’s seduction scene, in contrast to the subtle presentation of this encounter in Barton’s revival, was marked by an uninhibited sultriness in Ingram’s staging. Unlike Cusack’s refined, almost reticent courtesan, Alexandra Gilbreath’s Angellica overtly ‘exude[d] sexual prowess,’ as well as ‘a perfect mix of hauteur, wit, and surprised passion’.<sup>61</sup> Similar to Castelow, Gilbreath had experience playing particularly impassioned women. Her previous roles included Hedda Gabler in 1996 for English Touring Theatre, as well as Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale* and Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, both for the RSC, in 1999 and 2003 (two of her many RSC credits).<sup>62</sup> As soon as Moretta departed the stage, Angellica and Willmore rushed into each other’s arms and kissed ferociously. Throughout the rest of the scene, the black leather chaise centre stage and its immediate vicinity in the space surrounding it became the sites of much caressing and clinching. One such moment was when Willmore stood behind Angellica, as she leaned back against his chest, sighing throatily, ‘Why are you soft?’<sup>63</sup> In Behn’s text and Barton’s version, the term ‘soft’ plainly referred to Willmore’s use of honeyed words, with no suggestiveness attached. In Ingram, however, this line took on a racy significance and involved yet another reference to Willmore’s body. By way of response, he gave Angellica a knowing look as he placed her hand upon his groin, thereby assuring her of his ‘excitement’ and thus his *lack* of ‘softness,’ much to her delight (Figure 7) and the audience’s amusement.

<sup>60</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Gill Sutherland, ‘Review: The Rover at the RSC,’ accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.stratford-herald.com/whats-on/review-the-rover-at-the-rsc-9140032/>; Michael Billington, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ *Theatre Record* 36, no. 19 (2016), 1029.

<sup>62</sup> *The Rover* programme, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> In Behn’s original text, the line reads ‘Why art thou soft?’ – Behn, *The Rover*, 28.



Figure 7. Alexandra Gilbreath (Angellica Bianca), Joseph Millson (Willmore), Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2016

The conclusion of their dialogue was similarly ribald. Following her line ‘You have a power too strong to be resisted,’ he picked her up and flung her over his shoulder, slapping her rear end, at which she laughed delightedly, and he followed suit as they exited, amid more audience laughter and applause. This staging emphasised the libertine hero’s explicit sexuality as a sensual appetite, something alluring to be explicitly desired, rather than a cause of concern regarding his appetite’s potentially more predatory aspect.

For the attempted rape scene with Willmore and Florinda, Ingram adopted essentially the same approach as Barton. Millson’s Willmore was so intensely intoxicated that he was barely able to stand upright, though he did wrestle Florinda to the floor by the end of their exchange,



at which point Belvile and Frederick entered to rescue her. Moreover, Florinda's tone throughout the scene was one of firmness, attempting to reason with his clumsy drunken advances, rather than desperately pleading with him to desist. To some extent, this gave her more agency than in Barton's staging. However, like Irons's interpretation, Millson's exuberantly comedic portrayal of Willmore's inebriation, while it elicited waves of audience laughter, obscured the character's potentially threatening edge and elided Florinda's distress. Among the reviewers, Sam Marlowe briefly referenced the 'near-rape,' and Dominic Cavendish alone noted explicitly that 'this rake verges on rapist,' but the production's effervescent 'energy levels' kept the darker elements at bay.<sup>64</sup> Most critics remarked approvingly on the scene, including Ian Shuttleworth, who noted that Millson 'engages in the finest comic-drunk acting [Shuttleworth had] seen in an age'.<sup>65</sup> Here we see how Ingram's adaptation refused to wrestle with the complexities and dangers of the libertine hero, by using alcohol to excuse his potential violence and sexual threat. Ingram took the alcoholic excuse from Barton and maximised its comedy to the extent that Florinda's fear was implicitly ridiculed. Even her agency in the scene (as indicated by her firm tone and the moment she slapped Willmore, rebuffing him) fell flat amid the audience's loud laughter at Willmore's drunken antics.

Lastly, in sharp contrast to the final moments of Barton's *Rover*, Willmore and Hellena had the play's last words. Willmore asked 'Have you no trembling at the near approach?', and Hellena replied 'No more than you have in a battle or a tempest,' to which he returned 'You are a brave girl and I admire your love and courage'. At his 'Lead on,' she exited downstage right; he paused on the brink of following her. An audible noise of surprise rose from the audience. This audience response suggested a collective surprise at this moment, and potential questioning for a fleeting moment if the play would indeed end happily. After a few seconds

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<sup>64</sup> Marlowe, 'Review of "The Rover,"' 1030; Cavendish, Review of "The Rover," 1029.

<sup>65</sup> Shuttleworth, 'Review of "The Rover,"' 1030.

hesitation, Willmore continued, addressing the rest of the couplet to the audience – ‘[N]o other dangers can they dread, who venture in the storms of the marriage bed’ – before rushing off in pursuit of Hellena. His emphatic growl on the words ‘marriage bed’ spelled out his eagerness in no uncertain terms, reiterating the erotic emphasis of Ingram’s production.

Following Willmore’s exit, the production concluded with an elaborate, explosive final song and dance (the refrain of which was ‘Move to the rhythm of the festival / Come feel the heat of the carnival / Dance to the drumming of the festival’), featuring the entire ensemble and the leads.<sup>66</sup> The assembled cast’s final onstage pose (following the last lyric ‘At the carnival!’) saw all the main characters happily paired off, including Angellica (in a clinch with Antonio). Willmore and Hellena, who ended the song in a kiss centre stage, were the tableau’s focus. This sensually charged image of the ensemble’s entwined bodies reflected the production’s overall titillating emphasis, as disconcertingly reflected in Ian Shuttleworth’s comment: ‘I needed to go and lie down in a cool, dark room after seeing Loveday Ingram’s glorious revival of Aphra Behn’s subversive 1677 Restoration romp. Lawks a-mussy, how many people are there on that stage to fall in love with!’<sup>67</sup> Ingram’s framing of Willmore’s aggressive sexuality as a titillating, endearing foible drew upon Barton’s own light-hearted framing of the character’s libidinousness. She replicated and expanded upon his depiction of Willmore; problematically, like Barton, she also undermined Florinda’s agency for the sake of audience laughter. Furthermore, in her carnivalesque staging, Ingram stressed even more markedly the sexual undercurrents simmering throughout Barton’s version, bringing them to a boil. While Barton’s version ended with Florinda coyly expressing to Belvile her desire for their ‘marriage bed,’ Ingram’s version doubled down on Willmore’s amorous, animalistic growl on the same phrase, followed by the tableau of him heatedly kissing Hellena, suggesting their impending consummation of their union.

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<sup>66</sup> Prompt Book for *The Rover*, 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company, 88.

<sup>67</sup> Shuttleworth, ‘Review of “The Rover,”’ 1030.

## Conclusion

Ingram's *Rover* drew upon Barton's revival, expanding his production's buoyancy and sensuality (as concentrated in the character of Willmore) and suffusing the Swan stage with an adaptation which bore more than a passing resemblance to Barton's precursor. While Ingram's version allowed the women somewhat more agency than Barton's (especially in Florinda's scene with Willmore), Willmore's comedically exaggerated drunkenness resulted in audience laughter which minimised Florinda's plight. Moreover, Millson's portrayal of Willmore as easy-going, endearingly mischievous, and intensely sexually magnetic (like Irons's more arch interpretation) entirely ignored the character's riskier complexities. Ingram's version of Willmore does not reflect scholarship on the Restoration libertine (including works by Jennifer Airey and Sarah Olivier) and Willmore's range of traits as a libertine hero. Moreover, it does not engage with his complexities in Behn's own text, instead combining his comedic and libidinous aspects to frame him as a stereotypical loveable rogue. As we will see in subsequent chapters, other libertine hero characters in these productions are staged as more complex figures, rather than purely sexual bodies. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, we will encounter revivals that depict some of the critical debates about the nuances and flaws of the libertine hero.

### Chapter Three: *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*, 1994 Royal Court

In this chapter I will examine the 1994 Royal Court revival of George Etherege's 1676 *The Man of Mode*, which was cross cast with the premiere of Stephen Jeffreys's 1994 *The Libertine*, a history play centred on the life of John Wilmot. Both productions were directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Given the lack of archival footage for these productions, my analysis for this chapter will focus on the play texts, rather than a consideration of the staging of certain scenes based on video evidence. This is an advantage, since it places the emphasis on the text itself, opening the discourse to 'producible interpretations,' as Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume term critical readings of play texts which may be staged. In applying Milhous and Hume's approach to producible interpretations, my discussions reveal how such theories of performance can work in practice, both in analyses of productions which include recorded archival footage and analyses of those for which only reviews and photographs remain. By close study of these alternative sources (ephemera and play texts, as considered in this chapter), theatre historians can discern a variety of potential performance interpretations. Through this range of sources, it is possible to reconstruct the specifics of performance interpretations even when archival footage does not exist, in keeping with Milhous and Hume's methodology. Moreover, this play text-based study is particularly fertile ground for a study of Etherege's play, given its innate narrative ambiguity, as centralised in the figure of Dorimant, the comedy's libertine lead. As we will see, his complexities have engendered various scholarly responses. Following Barton's interpretation of libertinage in his production of *The Rover*, these twinned productions *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine* may be read as interrogatory pieces which provide a metatheatrical commentary on stage portrayals of the libertine hero. Specifically, both productions examine the dichotomy between the libertine's illusive dimensions (i.e. his exterior allure, as represented by Barton's version of Willmore) and his reality (that is, his potential predatory danger).

Within the frameworks of ‘adaptation,’ ‘revival,’ and ‘modernisation,’ Stafford-Clark’s paired plays, like the productions examined in the preceding chapters, participate in all three of these categories to some extent. Specifically, Jeffreys’s *The Libertine* is an adaptation of history which provides a prism through which to analyse Stafford-Clark’s interpretation of Etherege’s *The Man of Mode*, in light of Rochester as a source of inspiration for Etherege’s Dorimant. Through Dorimant, and, to a more extreme degree, through Rochester, Stafford-Clark probes the image of the libertine hero’s glamour, revealing the figure’s darker aspects despite his external attractiveness. In Etherege’s comedy, the libertine hero Dorimant, according to Warren Chernaik, reflects many of the qualities of the ‘rake’ variety of the libertine, as he plots his way through various self-serving schemes, often involving the manipulation of others in order to amuse himself or to make a sexual conquest. Meanwhile, in *The Libertine*, Rochester exhibits wilful provocation, sometimes alienating those closest to him, as he stubbornly clings to his cherished vices of promiscuity and drink even as he succumbs to the ravages of syphilis and alcoholism. Here, Stafford-Clark pulls back the curtain of the libertine hero’s surface-level allure to expose his grim reality.

As we will see, Stafford-Clark’s take on *The Man of Mode* is a revival, and it both informs and is informed by Jeffreys’s *The Libertine*. Both it and *The Libertine* are steeped in Stafford-Clark’s signature hard-edged directorial style, and a key feature of this style is the use of markedly frank references to sexual behaviour and bodily functions. Although critics did not comment extensively on such details in his interpretation of *The Man of Mode*, reviews of his production of Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (staged a year prior in 1993) offer an encapsulation of his directorial style. Lastly, as we will see, the modernised aspect of these plays engage with the in-yer-face theatre trend of the 1990s. Both of these productions bear the distinctive features of this particular staging style, which was a significant feature of the

wider theatrical landscape of the 1990s and reflected societal dissatisfaction at the time (a context I examine in Chapter Four where I discuss Stafford-Clark's *The Country Wife*).

From my close study across various archival sources, I have been able to reconstruct the telling details of these productions when it comes to Stafford-Clark's interpretation of Dorimant and Rochester as libertine heroes. Within the parameters of his trademark cynical style, Stafford-Clark examines the libertine hero in a starkly matter-of-fact way. Stafford-Clark's bleak interpretation of the figure is in marked contrast to the comparatively uncritical approbation and carefree exuberance proposed by Barton in his *Rover* and also by Ingram. As noted above, Stafford-Clark's pairing of Etherege's and Jeffreys's plays may be read as an implicit interrogation of Barton's 1986 adaptation of Behn. Tellingly, in *The Libertine*, Rochester himself implicitly points towards this interrogation of surface-level allure, referring to himself and his libertine companions as 'the froth' of Charles II's 'reign,' and suggesting that if people knew the reality they would be 'frighten[ed]' and begin to 'question' all they believed that they knew.<sup>1</sup> I suggest that Jeffreys's use of the word 'froth,' as contrasted with reality, may be read in relation to Barton's light-hearted and even lightweight adaptation of *The Rover*. Moreover, within the wider focus of my thesis, Rochester's remark that the revelation of this unsettling reality would cause people to question their beliefs concerning him and his companions' happiness (and by extension question their own happiness) is particularly relevant to more recent Restoration comedy revivals which delve into the libertine hero's darkest recesses and offer explicit criticisms of his behaviour. As we will see, Jonathan Munby's 2018 *The Country Wife* and Philip Breen's 2019 *The Provoked Wife* (discussed in Chapters Four and Five) can be read as moral commentaries on libertinage that extend from Stafford-Clark's intervention into adaptations and revivals and modernisations of the libertine on stage.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Jeffreys, *The Libertine* (Nick Hern Books, 1995), 11.

## Historical Context

*The Man of Mode*, Etherege's last comedy, premiered in 1676 at the Dorset Garden Theatre, a year before Behn's *The Rover*. While Behn was associated with Thomas Killigrew, Etherege's courtly connection stemmed from his membership in the Court Wits. His membership in the group was likely connected to his association with Charles Sackville, the Earl of Dorset, also known as Lord Buckhurst, with whom he had become acquainted circa 1663, and to whom he dedicated his first his first play (the 1664 work *The Comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub*).<sup>2</sup>

The characters in *The Man of Mode* are all (to various degrees) obsessed with the external trappings of contemporary fashionable entities and respond to them in some manner. In the case of the libertine lead, Dorimant, this manifests as an utterly self-absorbed desire to amass sexual conquests. For his would-be mistress Bellinda this means a pretence of sincere friendship to his former paramour Mrs Loveit, as well as a concealment of their forthcoming assignation. For his fellow men-about-town Medley and Sir Fopling Flutter, the titular 'man of mode,' it means (respectively) an all-consuming fixation with spreading gossip and being complicit in various intrigues, and an excessive devotion to all French items in vogue. Briefly, the plot follows Dorimant's rakish exploits as he seeks to sever all ties with his former mistress Mrs Loveit, in order to focus his attentions on her friend Bellinda, whom he wishes to seduce. At the same time, Dorimant seeks to woo Harriet, a wealthy country heiress newly arrived in London with her mother, the decidedly old-fashioned Lady Woodville, 'a great admirer of the forms and civility of the last age,' who deeply despises the new modes, particularly those related to romantic relationships.<sup>3</sup> As she remarks: '[L]ewdness is the

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<sup>2</sup> John Barnard, 'Etherege, Sir George (1636-1691/2), playwright and diplomat,' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8923>.

<sup>3</sup> George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, 224.

business now, love was the business in my time'.<sup>4</sup> At Dorimant's urging, Sir Fopling endeavours to court Mrs Loveit, who flirts with him in order to spite Dorimant for his earlier rejection. Unknown to either Fopling or Loveit, Dorimant has orchestrated their romance in order to have a legitimate excuse (i.e. her supposed fickleness in affections) to discard Loveit. His plot serves his own amusement, while freeing him to pursue other women. A subplot concerns Dorimant's friend, Young Bellair, and his clandestine courtship of Emilia, the young woman whom he wishes to marry despite his father Old Bellair's insistence that he wed Harriet. In the end, Dorimant, who has apparently fallen in love with Harriet, professes his passion, to which she replies that he must visit her in the country, to prove his feelings. Etherege concludes the play on an ambiguous note, leaving it unclear if Dorimant will ever make the visit. Although he has sworn his devotion ('this day my soul has quite given up her liberty'), he has only moments before in a private discourse suggested to Bellinda that they meet for another assignation.<sup>5</sup>

### **Adapting Dorimant**

To analyse the character of Dorimant, it is necessary first to understand the nature of the comedy of which he forms the dramatic nucleus. When the play premiered at the Dorset Garden Theatre in March 1676, the role of Dorimant was taken by the celebrated actor Thomas Betterton, who typically played male leads but was known for his versatility in a range of roles.<sup>6</sup> His wife Mary Betterton, who would go on to play the Florinda to his Belvile in *The Rover*, was cast as Bellinda, and the part of Mrs Loveit, was taken by Elizabeth Barry, though it is somewhat unclear if she premiered the role or was replacing another actress.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Milhous, 'Betterton, Thomas (bap. 1635, d. 1710), actor and theatre manager,' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-2311>.

<sup>7</sup> Van Lennep et al., editors, *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 1: 1660-1700*, 243.



Notably, she became Rochester's mistress, which as Michael Neill remarks, 'must have given additional piquancy to her performance,' given the rumour that the role of Dorimant was based on Rochester.<sup>8</sup> As Etherege's contemporary, the writer and dramatist John Dennis remarked, Dorimant was 'unanimously agreed' to have 'several of the qualities of Wilmot Earl of Rochester, as, his Wit, his spirit, his amorous Temper, the Charms he had for the fair Sex, his falsehood, and his Inconstancy; the agreeable Manner of his chiding his Servants [. . .] and his repeating, on every occasion, the Verses of Waller, for whom that Lord had a very particular Esteem'.<sup>9</sup> Such commentary shows how closely Dorimant was linked to the leading Restoration libertine of Etherege's day and how contemporaries recognised Rochester's falsehood and inconstancy.

The work in question evades an easy classification within the annals of Restoration comedy and has provoked debate among scholars and critics since the early decades of the eighteenth century. In 1711, in *The Spectator* no. 65, noted writer and dramatist Richard Steele offered an examination of '[t]he Application of Wit in the Theatre,' stating 'I am going to look into some of our most Applauded Plays, and see whether they deserve the Figure they at present bear in the Imaginations of Men, or not'.<sup>10</sup> Steele himself had written comedies, including *The Funeral* in 1701, *The Lying Lover* in 1703, and *A Tender Husband* in 1705; the second of these works is noteworthy 'as one of the first sentimental comedies'.<sup>11</sup> Of *The Man of Mode*, to which he referred by its subtitle of *Sir Fopling Flutter*, Steele concluded that although according to public opinion, the play was deemed 'the Pattern of Gentile Comedy,' in fact it was populated by deeply flawed lead characters. Steele focused mainly on Harriet's

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<sup>8</sup> George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, ed. Michael Neill (Bloomsbury, 2019), 4, note to line 0.

<sup>9</sup> John Dennis, *A defence of Sir Fopling Flutter* (London: printed for T. Warner, at the Black Boy in Pater-Noster Row, 1722), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Sir Richard Steele, 'Tuesday, May 15, 1711,' *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, 278, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://www-oxfordscholarlyeditions-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198186106.book.1/actrade-9780198186106-div1-85>.

<sup>11</sup> Reginald P.C. Mutter, 'Sir Richard Steele' in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Steele>.

mockery of her mother and the fact that Dorimant is ‘a direct Knave in his Designs,’ i.e. a calculating manipulator, whose behaviour (in his opinion) rendered the play extremely ungenteel.<sup>12</sup> Summarising his views on the play, he appealed to *The Spectator* readers’ sense of moral sensibility:

To speak plainly of this whole Work, I think nothing but being lost to a Sense of Innocence and Virtue can make any one see this Comedy, without observing more frequent Occasion to move Sorrow and Indignation, than Mirth and Laughter. At the same time I allow it to be Nature, but it is Nature in its utmost Corruption and Degeneracy.<sup>13</sup>

Here we see Steele’s view of the play as exhibiting the worst corruption of the libertine philosophy, describing it as the epitome of ‘Corruption and Degeneracy’.

Eleven years later, Steele’s contemporary, fellow playwright and writer John Dennis, offered a rebuttal to this critique of Etherege in *A Defence of Sir Fopling Flutter* (1722). In response to Steele, Dennis asserted that the play was in fact morally instructive:

[C]an any Thing but corrupt and degenerate Nature be the proper Subject of Ridicule? And can any Thing but Ridicule be the proper subject of Comedy? [. . .] [The Comick Poet] exposes [Vices] to the View of his Fellow Subjects, for no other Reason, than to render them ridiculous and contemptible.<sup>14</sup>

Where Steele saw a showcase of debauchery, Dennis discerned a thought-provoking satire and critique of vice. Certain critics, however, especially Robert Hume, have questioned Dennis’s assessment: ‘Suppose that the play were a serious social satire, designed to render its characters ridiculous or contemptible. We might then enquire [. . .] just what the moral of this edifying fable is supposed to be’.<sup>15</sup> The question then arises: if this play is a satire, how is the

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<sup>12</sup> Steele, ‘Tuesday, May 15, 1711,’ 278.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>14</sup> Dennis, *A defence of Sir Fopling Flutter*, 3-5.

<sup>15</sup> Robert D. Hume, ‘Reading and Misreading “The Man of Mode,”’ *Criticism* 14, no. 1 (1972), 4.

chameleon-like Dorimant meant to be interpreted on the stage? On the page, he seems straightforward. He is Janus-faced, consummately suave and charming among his fellow men-about-town (and in the company of Bellinda and Harriet) and utterly callous towards Mrs Loveit, who aptly sums up his dual nature: 'I know he is a devil, but he has something of the angel yet undefaced in him, which makes him so charming and agreeable, that I must love him be he never so wicked'.<sup>16</sup> For Loveit, Dorimant as both angel and devil renders him compelling despite his corruption.

Initially, there seems to be textual evidence for him to be played as a libertine hero redeemed by love, who eventually falls for a good woman who suits his disposition. However, on closer examination, Harriet proves to be anything but 'good,' enjoying 'the dear pleasure of dissembling' just as much as Dorimant does, revealing a ruthless streak which matches Dorimant's.<sup>17</sup> For instance, her ridicule of Loveit at the play's end mirrors Dorimant's mockery of the letter (and by proxy his discarded mistress herself) that he sends her in the first scene. While he observes, 'What a dull insipid thing is a billet doux written in cold blood, after the heat of the business is over?,' Harriet suppresses any lingering feelings Loveit might have cherished: 'Mr Dorimant has been your God Almighty long enough, 'tis time to think of another —'.<sup>18</sup> When Loveit interrupts her, exclaiming 'Jeered by her! I will lock myself up in my house, and never see the world again,' Harriet retorts 'A nunnery is the more fashionable place for such a retreat, and has been the fatal consequence of many a *belle passion*'.<sup>19</sup> Linguistically, her use of 'belle passion' recalls Dorimant's 'billet doux,' both reflecting libertine culture's connections to fashionable France. It would seem, then, that in one another Dorimant and Harriet have met their equals, and yet Etherege's conclusion remains ambiguous, leaving unanswered the question of whether their marriage will indeed

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<sup>16</sup> Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, 245.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 219, 330.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

take place. Although they declare their love for one another, Harriet inquires if visiting her in the country will ‘stagger [his] resolution’.<sup>20</sup> He declares, ‘Not at all, madam! The first time I saw you, you left me with the pangs of love upon me, and this day my soul has quite given up her liberty,’ whereupon she somewhat cryptically remarks, ‘This is more dismal than the country!’<sup>21</sup> Of this moment, Judith Fisher notes, ‘A choice must be made about what the “this” refers to: Dorimant’s delivery of his lines or the lines themselves’.<sup>22</sup> As she observes, the key lies in the tone of Dorimant’s profession of love. His sincerity is certainly dubious, given that only moments before this declaration he has suggested to Bellinda that they meet for another tryst. Though she at first rejects him with an apparently emphatic ‘Never,’ she qualifies it with ‘When we do, may I be as infamous as you are false’.<sup>23</sup> Tellingly, she uses the term ‘when’ rather than ‘if’, perhaps suggesting that their subsequent assignation is inevitable. Possible interpretations of the play and its problematic leading man range from optimistic (Dorimant as a libertine who meets his witty soulmate in Harriet) to grimly cynical (Dorimant as a thoroughly inveterate, unrepentant libertine).<sup>24</sup> My study will consider some of these choices as staged in certain revivals.

### **Prior Productions to 1994**

In the eighteenth century, *The Man of Mode* followed a similar trajectory as its fellow Restoration comedies, according to Hume and Scouten’s analysis of production trends. It remained moderately popular throughout the first several decades, then began to dwindle into obscurity, its cynical tone becoming too challenging to Georgian-era theatregoers. The last recorded eighteenth-century performance was on 15 March 1766 at Covent Garden Theatre,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Judith W. Fisher, ‘The Power of Performance: Sir George Etherege’s “The Man of Mode,”’ *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre Research* 10, no. 1 (1995), 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, 327.

<sup>24</sup> For an optimistic interpretation, see John Harrington Smith, *The Gay Couple in Restoration Comedy* (Octagon Books, 1971); for a cynical reading see Barbara Kachur, *Etherege & Wycherley*, 95-126.

which was listed as a '[b]enefit for Woodward' (Henry Woodward, the actor in the role of Sir Fopling Flutter). The play then disappeared from the stage until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Unlike other Restoration comedies in this thesis, *The Man of Mode* did not receive any stage revivals in the 1920s-1950s, and it reappeared on the stage only in 1965 when the classical theatre company Prospect Company presented it at the newly restored Georgian Theatre in Richmond, Yorkshire.<sup>26</sup>

The next noteworthy revival was in 1971, when Terry Hands directed Etherege's comedy for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in London. This production featured contemporary dress, a sleekly minimalist set design, 'pop songs and dances by [the jazz musician] John Dankworth' and a light-hearted interpretation of Etherege's text.<sup>27</sup> As critic Irving Wardle noted: '[T]he full gesture of the production [was] one of benevolence [. . .] an action in which many mean things [happened], but which finally [developed] into a celebration of fecundity from which no one [was] excluded'.<sup>28</sup>

In 1988, Irish female director Garry Hynes's RSC production (staged in seventeenth-century costume) attempted to offer a benign, optimistic revival, but this adaptation strategy was not entirely carried through to the resulting production. Hynes's revival was staged as part of the Swan's 1988 'Restoration season,' which was in essence a calculated attempt to replicate the popular appeal of Barton's *Rover*.<sup>29</sup> Keen to repeat the success of Barton's *Rover*, the *Man of Mode* revival was described as 'Restoration comedy with a heart'.<sup>30</sup> Yet the play's hardened tone ultimately contradicted this marketing claim. This world of 'resonant

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<sup>25</sup> George Winchester Stone, Jr., editor, *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 4: 1747-1776* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), 1157.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Neill, 'Introduction to *The Man of Mode*,' xii; Eric Shorter, 'Etherege play revived after 172 years' *The Daily Telegraph*, September 6, 1965, 14.

<sup>27</sup> John Barber, 'Restoration classic's irrelevant nonsense,' *The Daily Telegraph*, September 15, 1971, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Review of *The Man of Mode*,' *The Times*, September 14, 1971, 16. By contrast, Declan Donellan's 1986 revival for his company Cheek by Jowl, staged in the Donmar Warehouse, featured both Restoration period dress and a far more cynical interpretation, lacking in comedy.

<sup>29</sup> Lois Potter, 'The Restoration Season,' in Mulryne and Shrewring, *This Golden Round*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Man of no mode,' *The Daily Telegraph*, April 17, 1989, 17.

solitude and sexual cruelty' was characterised by various debauched moments including 'a teasing bit of groin-on-groin business' between Dorimant and Foggy Nan the fruit seller; Dorimant and Bellinda's 'post-coital scene' in which 'she struggle[d] into her clothes while he [sat] slumped like a Hogarthian rake'; and in the scene following (wherein Dorimant's fellow libertines visit him), Young Bellair physically dragged on a drunken woman (presumably a sex worker), whom he unconcernedly deposited on the floor and proceeded to ignore.<sup>31</sup> In these environs, the added final scene — a wordless moment wherein Harriet and Dorimant are in the country together and their almost-kiss is interrupted by the cawing of rooks — rang hollow.<sup>32</sup> The relevant facet of this production which anticipates Stafford-Clark's 1994 revival is its inclusion of a song adapted from the first verse of 'Régime de Vivre', a poem attributed to Wilmot but, according to David Vieth, '[p]robably by Charles Sackville, Earl of Dorset,' sung by Dorimant and Medley.<sup>33</sup> Later, as we will see, the poem appears in its original state, spoken by Rochester in Jeffreys's *The Libertine*. Despite its unevenness, then, Hynes's production introduced an explicit connection between Dorimant and Rochester.

In contrast to the stylishness of Hands's revival and in line with the bleaker ones of Donnellan and Hynes, Max Stafford-Clark and Stephen Jeffreys's 1994 revival and especially its twin *The Libertine* emphasised the sordid side of Restoration libertinage, which as we shall see, provided a compelling contrast between the libertine hero's romantic exterior and his inner darkness.

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<sup>31</sup> David Roberts, *Staging Restoration Comedy*, 70; Robert Hewison, 'Characters unmasked with a sense of style,' *The Sunday Times*, July 17, 1988.

<sup>32</sup> I observed this detail in my viewing of the archival footage for the 1988 RSC revival, in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust archives.

<sup>33</sup> *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth (Yale University Press, 2002), 227-228.

### Max Stafford-Clark and Stephen Jeffreys and Collaboration

Prior to his 1994 revival of Etherege's play, staged with his touring company Out-of-Joint, Stafford-Clark had been the Artistic Director at the Royal Court, where he had met the playwright Jeffreys. Their most recent foray into Restoration theatre had been their collaboration in 1993, when Stafford-Clark directed Wycherley's *The Country Wife* for the RSC, featuring a new prologue by Jeffreys, a revival whose significance I address in Chapter Four. Notably, Stafford-Clark's *The Man of Mode* was paired with the premiere of Jeffreys's *The Libertine*, a history play centred around John Wilmot's career as a court wit and his subsequent decline and death. These two works were staged in repertory; the tour began at Warwick Arts Centre on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1994 with *The Libertine*, and *The Man of Mode* followed on 24<sup>th</sup> October.<sup>34</sup> Subsequent tour stops were Oxford Playhouse (November 8-9), the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury (November 15-16), Chichester Festival Theatre (November 29-30), and finally the conclusion of the run in the downstairs playing space of the Royal Court Theatre in London from December 1994 to February 1995 (*The Libertine* opened 9 December and *The Man of Mode* opened 15 December – both plays closed on 4 February).<sup>35</sup> Significantly, the two plays were cross-cast in a way which highlighted their similar themes, and also recalled the stock roles in which certain Restoration actors were typically cast (e.g. Charles Hart often played leading men, Anne Bracegirdle usually portrayed winsome ingenues, etc). David Westhead took on the roles of Rochester and Dorimant, the libertine leads.<sup>36</sup> Other examples of linked casting included Katrina Levon's portrayals of Elizabeth Barry and Mrs Loveit (presumably a nod to Barry's supposed premiere of the role of Loveit), and Bernard Gallagher's casting as Dorimant's servant Handy and Wilmot's servant Alcock (that is, the Restoration comedy stereotype of the trusty

<sup>34</sup> 'Follow a rake's progress,' *The Times*, October 8, 1994, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.; *Theatre Record* 14, nos. 25-6, December 19, 1994, 1551, 1554.

<sup>36</sup> *Theatre Record* 14, nos. 25-6, 1551.

manservant privy to his master's intrigues).<sup>37</sup> The casting overlaps between the productions further emphasised the connections between Dorimant and Rochester.

### ***The Man of Mode and The Libertine as Revival and History***

*The Libertine's* origins are innately tethered to Stafford-Clark and Jeffreys's professional association. As Jeffreys himself later explained, in 1992 he took on the role of 'Literary Associate' at the Royal Court, '[a]t the invitation of Max Stafford-Clark,' and his 'role [was] to be that of a playwright inside the building liaising with playwrights outside the building'.<sup>38</sup> In one of the regular meetings he attended with these outside playwrights, he noticed that one of them was planning to write a play based on Wilmot's life.<sup>39</sup> Piqued (as he had been given a biography of Wilmot in 1975 and been intrigued ever since), Jeffreys recounted that he told Stafford-Clark that 'The Earl of Rochester [. . .] is my territory. Max, rightly throws my intervention back at me: "If it's your territory, then write it" and commissions the play on the spot'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, *The Libertine* came to exist.

In brief, the plot concerns the Earl of Rochester's life, specifically focusing on his career as a wit (and unofficial authorised jester) in the court of Charles II, his fall from the King's grace, and subsequent decline and death brought on by the ravages of tertiary syphilis and alcoholism. Key characters (besides Rochester and Charles II themselves) include Rochester's wife Elizabeth Malet, his mistress the actress Elizabeth Barry, his favourite sex worker Jane, his wily manservant Alcock, and his cronies Charles Sackville ('Earl of Dorset and Middlesex'), Etherege, and Billy Downs, 'a young spark' and aspiring libertine.<sup>41</sup> Rochester

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<sup>37</sup> *Theatre Record* 14, nos. 25-6, 1551, 1554.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Jeffreys, 'Writer Stephen Jeffreys' Diary of His Journey with *The Libertine*,' *Bristol Old Vic*, May 21, 2014, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://bristololdvic.org.uk/blog/2014-05-21-writer-stephen-jeffreys-diary-of-his-journey-with-the-libertine>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Jeffreys, *The Libertine*, 2.



himself opens and closes the play with a prologue and epilogue. While these addresses to the audience are in prose rather than rhyming couplets, they nevertheless indicate an homage to the prologues and epilogues featured in Restoration comedies. Indeed, Rochester himself references these speeches when, towards the end of his prologue he sneers: 'That is it. That is my prologue, nothing in rhyme, certainly no protestations of modesty, you were not expecting that I trust'.<sup>42</sup> From the opening of Jeffreys's play, then, the clash between the libertine's inner grim reality and exterior glamour is apparent. As we will see, this juxtaposition is reflected in Stafford-Clark's directorial approach, which was summarised by John Peter as follows: 'Stafford-Clark is a puritan. He profoundly mistrusts all glitter. His style is harsh, hard-edged and sombre. It is a style which actually includes a criticism and a debunking of style'.<sup>43</sup> Stafford-Clark and Jeffreys thus draw attention to the libertine hero's potential for violence and sexual abuse, what Jennifer L. Airey describes as 'the dark and frightening underside of the libertine ethos'.<sup>44</sup>

Critics noted *The Libertine*'s interwoven juxtaposition of surface-level allure and harsher interior realities threaded throughout the two productions. John Goss, for instance, observed 'Stafford-Clark's excessive anxiety to establish the contrast between make-believe and reality,' and described the opening scene in *The Man of Mode* which 'signalled' this anxiety 'at the very outset' [. . .]: 'first we hear strains of *Nymphs and Shepherds*, then Dorimant appears with a brimming chamber-pot, accidentally and unconcernedly drops a love letter in it, and comes close to slopping out over the audience'.<sup>45</sup> Visually, this moment may be read as a metaphor for Dorimant's disregard towards his former mistresses; he views women as things to enjoy and then metaphorically excrete.

Such scenes played out in a theatre whose capacity had been reduced for this production.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>43</sup> John Peter, 'Sleaze beneath the tease,' *The Sunday Times*, December 18, 1994.

<sup>44</sup> Jennifer L. Airey, *The Politics of Rape*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> John Goss, 'Review of "The Libertine,"' *Theatre Record* 14, nos. 25-6, 1 January 1995, 1558.

The seating capacity for the downstairs space in the Royal Court was normally 841, across the stalls, dress circle, amphitheatre, and gallery.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the Royal Court had (and continues to have) a proscenium stage. The distancing effect that a proscenium stage typically creates was offset by the reduced seating capacity, which fostered a relative proximity between the actors and audience, such that the playgoers became both unwilling co-conspirators in Dorimant's manipulative schemes and spectators-cum-confidants for Rochester in his descent. Presumably the use of Restoration-era music in the first scene of *The Man of Mode* was intended to set up audience expectations for a standard, elegant in-period revival, only to subvert these expectations with shockingly realistic imagery surrounding bodily functions. Tellingly, one finds forerunners of this in some of Stafford-Clark's previous productions: in *The Recruiting Officer* (1988), 'Captain Plume urinate[d] in the River Severn to the accompaniment of a sound effect' and the opening scene of his '[d]eliberately transgressive' staging of *King Lear* (1993) was set 'in the Gents' toilet, where the discussion between Kent and Gloucester about the King's likely mood and Edmund's bastardy took place over male bonding and a gentlemanly pee', in Stafford-Clark's own description.<sup>47</sup> Thematically, this clash between escapist, idealised allure and unenticing, repulsive materialities echoes a similar line in one of Rochester's monologues, which I will examine later.

Such body-centric moments reflect part of a wider dramatic genre which arose in the 1990s, that of 'in-yer-face' theatre, which 'used explicit and directly confrontational material to explore the way we live and feel,' in works variously characterised as 'blatant, aggressive or emotionally dark'.<sup>48</sup> One of the dichotomies considered in these works was that of 'clean/dirty,' which in both productions was literally embodied in these moments of

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<sup>46</sup> 'UK – London – Royal Court Theatre,' *TheatreCrafts.com*, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://theatre crafts.com/pages/home/venues/uk-london-royal-court-theatre/>.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Review of "The Recruiting Officer,"' *Theatre Record* 8, no. 15, 27 July 1988, 994; Max Stafford-Clark and Philip Roberts, *Taking Stock: The Theatre of Max Stafford-Clark* (Nick Hern Books, 2007), 217.

<sup>48</sup> Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (Faber, 2001), 30.

scatological realism. While Stafford-Clark's *The Libertine* and *The Man of Mode* cannot be categorised exactly as works of in-yer-face theatre, their stage interpretations share directorial similarities with plays in the genre. These similarities take on greater significance considering that several notable in-yer-face works premiered in the Royal Court Theatre over the course of Stafford-Clark's tenure as Artistic Director, during which he mentored many of these fledgling writers, including Sarah Kane. In fact, Kane's play *Blasted* received its world premiere in the Royal Court's 'smaller Theatre Upstairs' while *The Libertine* and *The Man of Mode* were being performed in repertory in the downstairs theatre.<sup>49</sup> As revealed by critics' commentaries, Rochester's attitude towards the audience in *The Libertine* reflects this confrontational style, while Dorimant (especially in Stafford-Clark's staging) embodies the in-yer-face aspect of emotional darkness. This style of staging in the 1990s forms one of the crucial external artistic contexts that shaped the dramaturgy of Etherege's revival in contemporary theatre. A number of theatre reviewers identified the caustic and aggressive potential of Stafford-Clark's vision of the Restoration libertine. Of David Westhead's performance of Etherege's libertine, Charles Spencer remarked:

When the play was first performed, Dorimant was said to have 'charmed all the world'. Here he seems about as charming as a boa constrictor, and Westhead's icy performance, with his dead eyes and lascivious, reptilian tongue, is a horribly plausible portrait of a man who will stop at nothing to have his own will.<sup>50</sup>

In this Dorimant, we see the libertine's potential predatoriness realised in his emotional savagery to the women around him as he discards old loves and pursues new ones purely for his own diversion. Meanwhile in *The Libertine*, Rochester is depicted as taking the libertine's potential darkness to its extreme in his brutal nonchalance and wilful provocativeness, as he explains to Charles II: 'I have to go too far, d'you see? If I don't go too far, I'm just your

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Brustein, 'The Royal Court in Spunky Middle Age,' *New Republic*, February 27, 1995, 28.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Review of "The Libertine,"' *Theatre Record* 14, nos. 25-6, December 19, 1994, 1556.

performing monkey. [. . .] I won't have that. I must always exceed or I don't feel like I'm alive'.<sup>51</sup> As Paul Taylor observed in his review:

Perhaps because *The Libertine* is designed to blow the gaff on certain distortions and evasions in Restoration comedy, Max Stafford-Clark's entertaining production of *The Man of Mode* uncharacteristically downplays some of the unlovely realities already there in the Etherege. But what a rich, thought-provoking pairing these two plays make, and not just in the contrast they afford between the disease-immune Dorimant and the debauched wreck that is Rochester in *The Libertine*.<sup>52</sup>

Such responses suggest how critics clearly recognized Stafford-Clark's emphasis on the libertine's violence and physical excess. According to Taylor's review, the simultaneous productions meant that the revival of Etherege's play was shaped by *The Libertine*'s critical assessment of the libertine figure.

In Jeffreys's play, the audience was confronted with many notes of enticement juxtaposed with repulsion, including in the very first scene, in Rochester's address to the audience in the 'Prologue':

Allow me to be frank at the commencement: you will not like me. No, I say you will not. The gentlemen will be envious and the ladies will be repelled. You will not like me now and you will like me a good deal less as we go on. Oh yes, I shall do things you will like. You will say 'That was a noble impulse in him' or 'He played a brave part there', but DO NOT WARM TO ME, it will not serve. When I become a BIT OF A CHARMER that is your danger sign for it prefaces the change into THE FULL REPTILE a few seconds later. What I require is not your affection but your attention. I

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<sup>51</sup> Jeffreys, *The Libertine*, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Review of "The Libertine,"' *Theatre Record* 14, nos. 25-6, December 19, 1994, 1556.

must not be ignored or you will find me as troublesome a package of humanity as ever pissed into the Thames.<sup>53</sup>

As with the chamber pot moment in *The Man of Mode*, the bodily evacuation image here undermines the Restoration libertine's glamorous allure. Neil Smith remarked 'Every time we are tempted to [like Rochester], he shocks us out of our empathy with another despicable act of vandalism or cowardice'.<sup>54</sup> Thus this play emphasises what literary critics have long identified as the social drawbacks of the libertine hero. Critics such as Carole Fabricant and Jonathan Kramnick emphasise the libertine hero's diseased, decaying body and sexual activity as a source of shame and disappointment, as articulated in Rochester's poetry.<sup>55</sup> Stafford-Clark's productions reflect this side of the libertine as an exploitative, grotesque figure and a negative model of masculinity.

In Etherege's Dorimant and (to a greater degree) Jeffreys's Rochester, we see the insidious side of the Restoration libertine hero: his charm co-exists with and in some cases conceals his potential danger, yet the darkness is always present beneath the glamorous exterior. One moment in Jeffreys's text which illustrates this contrast between the libertine's charm and his danger occurs in the play's first scene, set in 'Will's coffee house,' during a conversation between Rochester and his fellow libertines.<sup>56</sup> When Etherege informs Rochester that he has written *The Man of Mode* and based the character of Dorimant upon him, Rochester is relieved to find that his friend has 'made [him] endearing' and replies:

So you haven't told the truth. (*Pause.*) Good. Don't want to go frightening people. We are the merry wits after all, ain't we? We are the froth and fizz of the reign. Once people

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<sup>53</sup> Jeffreys, *The Libertine*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Neil Smith, 'Review of "The Libertine,"' *Theatre Record* 14, nos. 25-6, December 21, 1994, 1554.

<sup>55</sup> Carole Fabricant, 'Rochester's World of Imperfect Enjoyment,' *The Journal of English and German Philology* 73, no. 3 (1974), 346; Jonathan Brody Kramnick, 'Rochester and the History of Sexuality,' *English Literary History* 69, no. 2 (2002), 277.

<sup>56</sup> Jeffreys, *The Libertine*, 4.

tumble to the fact that *we're* not happy they'll start to question the purpose of the whole enterprise won't they?<sup>57</sup>

Here Jeffreys contrasts the attractive exterior image of libertinage with its concealed reality of profound cynicism and enervation. Such dialogue shows how Jeffreys's play offers a critical reading of *The Man of Mode* that sees Etherege's play as a sanitised depiction of the libertine, one that suppresses its darker realities.

In an echo (apparently coincidental rather than intentional) of Hynes's 1988 RSC *Man of Mode* wherein Dorimant and Medley sang a musical version of the poem 'Régime de Vivre', in *The Libertine*, Rochester speaks the poem at the close of Scene Eight, when Charles II has banished him once more. The other characters exit, save for Rochester, who 'gets a bottle out of his coat and drinks steadily,' and Downs, who 'walks slowly forward' throughout the speech.<sup>58</sup> The scene suggests that the older libertine is advising the younger in the debauchee's ethos (an interpretation supported by Downs's speech about being a 'spark' which opens the next scene).<sup>59</sup> Jeffreys's script provides various moments of crude realities associated with the libertine characters which clash with any notions playgoers might harbour of the archetype's glamour. Some examples of these moments include a brothel scene set in 'Dog and Bitch Yard' wherein Charles II frankly mentions to Rochester his offstage intercourse with one of the women and Rochester, onstage, requests gratification from Jane (though his enervation prevents stimulation), and the moment following the horse race at Epsom when the drunken Downs relieves himself against the local constable's door and on the constable's boots when the man opens the door.<sup>60</sup> The last instance yet again recalls the urine-referential imagery in Rochester's prologue, as well as the brimming chamber pot featured in

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 33, 35-36, 60.

the first scene of Stafford-Clark's *The Man of Mode* — and how this Restoration-set play thus reflects the in-er-face contexts of 1990s theatre.

The most compelling contrast between the libertine hero's glamorous illusion and his savage reality appears in the backstage scene near the end of the second act, when Rochester, in ill health and rapidly declining, comes to see Barry and encounters Harry Harris, who in Jeffreys's version of events plays Dorimant in Etherege's *Man of Mode*.<sup>61</sup> In the play's first scene, Etherege informs Rochester that his new play is about him. Now, Rochester tells Barry to consider him alongside Harris:

Well, Mr. Harris, I am nature and you are art, let us see how we compare. [. . .] I don't half feel a jolly gaping gulf between the ideal and the real. Here we have him, your Restoration Gent. He has not pissed his breeches today and there are no creatures in his periwig. He is in the tip-top pink of health, that is to say he can walk in a more or less straight line for over two hundred yards without falling on his face and retching. He has a sparkish spring to his boots and conveys the overwhelming impression of a few hundred pound under his mattress and a rising fountain of blood in his cods. Now look you upon this picture and on this. He has not washed, he cannot walk and he most certainly will not be able to raise either the price of a dinner or his own pintle. But he can drink. Which of these would you prefer to see on the stage?<sup>62</sup>

Rochester's question may be read as a metatheatrical commentary on how libertine heroes can and should be portrayed, and whether their appealing exteriors or darker interiors should be emphasised. Though on the surface (that is, the 'art') the libertine's existence might appear glamorous and sensual (as seen in Barton's and Ingram's *Rovers*), Stafford-Clark's *The Libertine* reveals the stark reality ('nature'). Behind this façade (as Fabricant and Kramnick

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<sup>61</sup> This is inaccurate, since, as mentioned earlier, Thomas Betterton premiered the role of Dorimant; Harris played Medley.

<sup>62</sup> Jeffreys, *The Libertine*, 74-75.

discuss) lies the possibilities of venereal disease, bodily decay as a repercussion of intense hedonism, and profound cynicism.

Stafford-Clark's revival of *The Man of Mode*, as suggested by contemporary reviews, probed the surface-level appeal of the libertine hero, revealing glimmers of his potential predatoriness and cruelty, and, as we have seen, *The Libertine* explored his potential malevolence further. Deborah Payne Fisk observes that in *The Man of Mode*, Etherege offers a 'coolly ironic and analytical' portrayal of the libertine hero's behaviour which 'demystif[ies] libertinism while retaining its allure' and '[i]n that sense, the play is rather like Dorimant himself: showing its teeth while reeling us in'.<sup>63</sup> This simultaneous attraction and distancing ties in with Rochester's ambiguous final lines to the audience concluding his account of his deathbed conversion, which he ends by repeatedly asking, 'Do you like me now?,' daring the audience to accept him despite the shocking cruelties they have seen him commit.<sup>64</sup> Without an archival recording of Stafford-Clark's *The Man of Mode* it is difficult to recreate how the play was staged. However, Stafford-Clark's choice to stage *The Libertine* on alternating days with *The Man of Mode* demonstrates his attempt to expose libertine ideology as fantasy.

## Conclusion

Stafford-Clark's *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine* recognised the libertine hero's darker aspects. Various critics have discussed *The Man of Mode*'s internal contradictions, especially as exhibited in Dorimant and his supposed real-life counterpart (Rochester). For instance, James Turner examines the 'deliberate conjunction of festivity and violence, high and low behaviour, punitive and seductive gesture [. . .] in Rochester and the ritualized transgressions

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<sup>63</sup> Deborah Payne Fisk, 'Introduction' to *Four Restoration Libertine Plays* (Oxford University Press, 2005), xxxi.

<sup>64</sup> Jeffreys, *The Libertine*, 84.



of sex-comedy,' including Dorimant's actions in *The Man of Mode*.<sup>65</sup> Laura Brown notes the 'contradiction' in Dorimant's dual nature as exhibited in the play's final scene.<sup>66</sup> Concluding the comedy engaged but not yet married to Harriet, '[t]he libertine hero ends his action unmatched, in the full possession of his libertinism and [. . .] is both libertine and loyal husband'.<sup>67</sup>

Deborah Payne Fisk, meanwhile, remarks on the fact that since Dorimant's tryst with Bellinda and his subsequent 'tormenting' of Loveit for his own amusement in Bellinda's presence occur 'immediately prior to his courtship of Harriet,' these moments imply 'a continuity of behaviour, rather than a transformation'.<sup>68</sup> Concerning the play's ambiguous ending, she notes:

*The Man of Mode* defers indefinitely the narrative pleasure accruing from the spectacle of a permanent union, and thereby re-enacts the central paradox confronting the libertine, that the very appetite spurring him to 'heroic' conquests must perforce render inadequate every woman, every sexual experience. [. . .] [I]t is precisely this teasing deferral of satisfaction that makes this comic masterpiece and its central figure so compelling.<sup>69</sup>

These readings of Etherege's comedy encompass its multifaceted state. Likewise, in contrast to Barton's and Ingram's interpretations of the libertine hero as a figure of intense glamour, Stafford-Clark's *Man of Mode* confronts the libertine hero's troubling complexities. Similarly, in 2007, Nicholas Hytner's *The Man of Mode* at the National Theatre (starring Tom Hardy as Dorimant) explored twenty-first century libertinage. Although Hytner later reflected that it

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<sup>65</sup> James Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics and Literary Culture, 1630-1685* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 248.

<sup>66</sup> Laura Brown, *English Dramatic Form, 1660-1760*, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Fisk, 'Introduction' to *Four Restoration Libertine Plays*, xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

was unsuccessful and some critics found its updates strained, critic Charles Spencer praised it, noting the contemporary resonances in Etherege's text:

Hytner has created a coherent and persuasive modern equivalent of Restoration high society, and as a result the old comedy sparkles and shocks anew. Tom Hardy's heavily tattooed Dorimant plays the amoral hero with sensual lips, superficial charm, rippling musculature and a lump of ice where his heart ought to be. Give him a few more years and he'll be checking into the Priory's sex-addiction programme, but for now he is an unreformed rake on the make, coldly using sex for revenge, profit and power as well as self-gratification.<sup>70</sup>

Here, we see a contemporary rendering which throws Dorimant's flaws into markedly stark relief. Ultimately in this version, Dorimant was (in the words of John Nathan) 'a sexual predator,' and the staging of this production's concluding scene emphasised his sinister qualities.<sup>71</sup> John Mullan described the moment when, following the comedy's final lines, spoken by Old Bellair, 'a blonde whom we ha[d] not seen before enter[ed] the bar, and Dorimant return[ed] from the doorway to begin another seduction,' his vows to Harriet immediately discarded.<sup>72</sup> In Mullan's reading of Hytner's staging, this *Man of Mode* modernisation closes on a note of continual seduction.

In Hytner's striking modernisation of the libertine hero's potential cruelties, we see the lingering influence of Stafford-Clark's exploration of libertine ruthlessness. Hytner's revival may be read as a spiritual descendent of Stafford-Clark's production. His production in its modernity reflects Stafford-Clark's unflinching look at the grisly realities of libertinism. While Stafford-Clark's Restoration-set production employed elements of then-popular theatre (specifically in-er-face theatre) to explore Dorimant's darker complexities, Hytner's

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Spencer, "Review of 'The Man of Mode,'" *Theatre Record* 27, no. 3, February 8, 2007, 133.

<sup>71</sup> John Nathan, "Review of 'The Man of Mode,'" *Theatre Record* 27, no. 3, February 16, 2007, 136.

<sup>72</sup> John Mullan, 'Modern life after a fashion,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, February 23, 2007, 20.

production used a present-day, twenty-first century setting to de-glamorise Dorimant's flaws, highlighting their sordidness. As we will see, later Restoration comedy revivals have drawn from these approaches. The Restoration comedy productions discussed in the subsequent two chapters similarly reflect Stafford-Clark's dramatic legacy in their interpretations. In 2018, the Chichester Festival Theatre production of William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* offered a revelatory portrayal of Horner within a modern-day context, while John Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife*, produced at the RSC in 2019, combined an in-period (1690s) aesthetic with a staging approach which highlighted the text's relevance for contemporary concerns regarding relationships between men and women.

## Chapter Four: *The Country Wife*, 1993 Royal Shakespeare Company and 2018

### Chichester Festival Theatre

In this chapter, I will examine two distinct productions of William Wycherley's 1675 comedy *The Country Wife*: the 1993 Royal Shakespeare Company revival directed by Max Stafford-Clark (staged a year prior to his 1994 paired productions of *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*) and the 2018 production staged at the Chichester Festival Theatre directed by Jonathan Munby. Like my analyses of the two *Rovers*, my analyses of the two versions of *The Country Wife* involved close study of audio-visual sources and textual sources. The 1993 RSC production prompt book was of particular significance to my study of Stafford-Clark's production, as well as the filmed archival performance recording (dated 15 January 1994), both of which are housed in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon. Similarly, the filmed performance recording, production photographs, and the programme for the 2018 Chichester Festival Theatre revival have enabled me to reconstruct Munby's production. Other sources include the programme for the 1993 revival, and critics' reviews for both productions in Volumes 13 and 14 (for Stafford-Clark's version) and Volume 38 (for Munby's version) of *Theatre Record*. As we will see, an audio recording of a pre-show conversation between Munby and Kate Mosse, conducted before the audience, is of particular significance to my study, since Munby's commentary revealed his directorial concept, which was borne out in the staging choices depicted in the archival footage. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which these two revivals present the character of Horner, the lead rake. In 1993, Jeremy Northam's Horner was an ensemble member amid his fellow Restoration-era debauchees; meanwhile, in 2018 Lex Shrapnel's Horner (portrayed as a modern-day sex addict isolated and emotionally benumbed by his all-consuming passion) was the central figure in a vivid panorama of twenty-first century libertinage. Reading across these

performance sources, this chapter identifies how each production revived the character of Horner to different ends, reflecting their distinct re-interpretations of the Restoration libertine.

Within my framework of ‘adaptation,’ ‘modernisation,’ and ‘revival,’ Stafford-Clark’s RSC *The Country Wife* (similar to the previous productions considered in this thesis which were set in the seventeenth century) can be considered both an adaptation and a revival, with some modernisation. Though it was a revival of Wycherley’s comedy, Stafford-Clark’s 1993 production also featured various interpolated components, including a new prologue by Stephen Jeffreys (a collaboration which may be viewed as a foreshadowing of their subsequent work in 1994 on *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*), and three songs sung by the cast at certain points through the play (which I discuss later in this chapter). Meanwhile, one of the hints of modernisation was the costuming, which featured contemporary garments of the 1990s mingled with fashions of the Restoration era (the costume aesthetic was primarily reflective of the late-seventeenth century, specifically the 1670s-1690s). Also, much like his paired productions of *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*, Stafford-Clark’s *The Country Wife* reflected late twentieth-century modernity in that it was imbued with the disillusioned societal views common in the 1990s. As we will see, his vision of Wycherley’s Restoration London was steeped in his trademark cynical style, as well within a wider cultural sense of disenchantment. In this version of Wycherley’s comedy, Horner was removed from his central place as the play’s libertine hero and reduced to a member of a debauched collective of corrupt individuals. Here, all were depraved in some way, and vice was evenly distributed among the characters.

In contrast, Jonathan Munby’s 2018 production of *The Country Wife* for the Chichester Festival Theatre was simultaneously a revival, an adaptation, and a modernisation. Besides its status as a revival of Wycherley’s play, and the various adapted aspects (including some added scenes), the most crucial of these three terms with regards to this production is its

modernisation. In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, Munby's relocation of the play to a twenty-first century metropolitan milieu brought to the forefront its resonances with present-day century societal issues surrounding sex, most particularly toxic masculinity and sex addiction as embodied in the modernised figure of Horner. Unlike Jeremy Northam's Horner, who was a louche member of an equally licentious throng, Lex Shrapnel's Horner was the play's central figure from beginning to end. As my discussions reveal, the opening and closing scenes which mirrored each other and bookended the play especially reinforced the presence of his addiction. Shrapnel's modern-day Horner was the focal point for Munby's directorial exploration of contemporary sexual mores. Moreover, during Munby's pre-show conversation with Mosse, he emphasised his desire for the play to engage audiences and invite them to reflect on contemporary morality, and remarked that there was little difference between the characters' various schemes and intrigues and the betrayals and illicit affairs which take place today in twenty-first century society.

Munby's insights are particularly vital to my study, as he provides a straightforward account of his directorial intent to examine twenty-first century moral decay within his production of Wycherley's comedy. Unlike previous Restoration comedy revivals examined in this thesis which either unequivocally glamourise the libertine hero (in the cases of Barton's and Ingram's *Rovers*) or matter-of-factly reveal his potential for darkness and sexual predation without further commentary (as Stafford-Clark did with *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*), Munby's *The Country Wife* is a blistering condemnation of libertinage in the present age.

### ***The Country Wife's Origins***

Wycherley's third play, *The Country Wife*, was staged by 'the King's Company' in their 'new Drury Lane Theatre' built on the site of the previous one, which had caught fire and burned

down in 1672.<sup>1</sup> The comedy first appears in the 1675 season records on the date Tuesday 12 January.<sup>2</sup> While it remains uncertain if this was the date of the first performance, it seems a reasonable conjecture based on the record of ‘another performance on 15 Jan. 1674/5 and its entry in the *Stationers Register* 13 Jan. 1674/5’.<sup>3</sup> Like Wycherley’s previous comedies, *The Country Wife* is set in present-day London; the plot centres around the rakish libertine Mr Horner’s stratagem to seduce ‘the handsome young women’ and ‘the married women’ in his friends’ circle, by pretending he has been accidentally castrated by a surgeon in a syphilis cure gone awry.<sup>4</sup> As his friends believe him to be impotent, he is free to be alone with their wives with impunity. Only one gentleman of his acquaintance, the recently married former libertine Mr Pinchwife – just arrived in town to wed off his sister Alithea to his and Horner’s mutual friend, the would-be witty fop Mr Sparkish – has not heard the rumours concerning Horner’s supposed obliterated libido. For fear of being cuckolded, he keeps his much younger, Hampshire-bred wife Margery under lock and key in their London residence. However, Horner spies them together at the theatre and afterwards informs Pinchwife: ‘She was exceedingly pretty; I was in love with her at that distance’.<sup>5</sup> Later the furiously jealous Pinchwife, in an effort to warn Margery of ‘the pleasures of the town’ when she begs him to take her back to the theatre, makes the mistake of telling her that Horner (whom he does not name), ‘one of the lewdest fellows in town, who saw you there, told me he was in love with you’.<sup>6</sup> All of Pinchwife’s efforts to preserve himself from cuckoldom fail, as Margery, who initially is green to the ways of amorous intrigue, contrives to pen Horner an impassioned love letter, and arranges a tryst with him.

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<sup>1</sup> Highfill, et al. ‘Hart, Charles,’ *Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Volume 7* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 150.

<sup>2</sup> Van Lennep et al., *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 1: 1660-1700*, 227.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> William Wycherley, *The Country Wife* in *The Plays of William Wycherley*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 233.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 252.

Horner's sexual exploits form the main plot, as exemplified in his concurrent affairs with Lady Fidget (wife to his friend Sir Jaspar Fidget), Sir Jaspar's sister Dainty Fidget, and Lady Fidget's cousin Mrs Squeamish, and in his conquest of Margery. The supporting plot concerns a love triangle between Alithea, her fiancé Sparkish, and his (and Horner's) friend and fellow man-about-town Mr Harcourt, who wins Alithea's hand in the end. Other key secondary characters include the Quack, the doctor who first spreads the word that Horner has been rendered impotent, Mr Dorilant, one of Horner's other cronies (an ancillary figure, akin to Medley in *The Man of Mode* and Frederick in *The Rover*) and Lucy, the Pinchwives' maid, who aids Margery in achieving her sexual encounter with Horner. At the conclusion of the play, Horner has seduced his friends' wives while managing to dupe his friends, even (apparently) Pinchwife, who is finally informed of Horner's pretended state of being 'an eunuch'.<sup>7</sup> Tellingly, Pinchwife's final couplets indicate that despite his efforts to shroud himself in wilful ignorance, he is not deceived and knows the truth, to his shame and regret: 'For my own sake fain I would all believe; / Cuckolds like lovers should themselves deceive. But ....His honour is least safe, too late I find, / who trusts it with a foolish wife or friend'.<sup>8</sup> Horner thus emerges as the libertine triumphant, smugly confiding to the audience in the play's last lines: 'Vain fops but court and dress and keep a putther, / to pass for women's men, with one another, / But he who aims by women to be priz'd, / First by the men, you see, must be despis'd'.<sup>9</sup> Anne Richter, summarising the play, states that 'In its overall effect, *The Country Wife* is nihilistic'.<sup>10</sup> As we will see, Horner as portrayed in Jonathan Munby's 2018 production embodied this nihilism in his abandonment to amorality and hedonism.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Richter, 'William Wycherley,' in *Restoration Theatre*, John Russell Brown, Bernard Harris, eds. (St Martin's Press, 1965), 79.



### Horner as a Libertine Figure

Despite the play being named for Margery Pinchwife, the titular country wife, Horner looms large as the drama's central figure. In terms of the two libertine subcategories as summarised by Warren Chernaik, he may be considered a confirmed rake. Chernaik cites both Horner and Dorimant (as noted in the previous chapter) as clear examples, identifying their shared 'hard, ruthless drive toward mastery'.<sup>11</sup> Possible stage interpretations of Horner have varied routes in revivals. Robert Hume and Judith Milhous offer three potential readings. In a light-hearted 'farce' setting, they suggest, he would likely be played 'as a dashing young scamp [. . .] handsome, ingratiating, and aged no more than twenty-five [. . .] [who] need not be taken very seriously'.<sup>12</sup> [. . .] In a somewhat harder-edged 'libertine comedy' interpretation, he could be 'an older (mid-thirties) Horner [. . .] [who] would come across as a glamorous libertine, more self-controlled and self-seeking than the scamp'.<sup>13</sup> Finally in a more biting, extreme 'satire,' he might be portrayed as 'a fortyish debauchee, now overweight, visibly dissipated, and inclined to leer'.<sup>14</sup> Considering that the original Horner (actor Charles Hart) often played leading male roles of the witty, alluring reprobate variety and the fact that he 'created the role at the age of forty-five,' it seems a reasonable conjecture that his portrayal was in the 'glamorous libertine' vein – mature, rather than decrepit.<sup>15</sup>

Notably, Horner's main objective as a libertine appears not to be sexual pleasure, as is the motive of his roving counterparts – rather, it is born of a desire to prove his intellectual superiority over that of his male friends by his convoluted stratagem. He tells Quack, '[s]hy husbands and keepers like old rooks are not to be cheated but by a new unpractised trick'.<sup>16</sup> In his state as a supposed eunuch, he can sift the willing women from the disinterested ones

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<sup>11</sup> Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Milhous and Hume, *Producible Interpretation*, 80, 84.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 85.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 234.

based on their reaction to his purported lack of virility: 'Women of quality are so civil, you can hardly distinguish love from good breeding and a man is often mistaken; but now I can be sure, she that shows an aversion to me loves the sport'.<sup>17</sup> As Tiffany Stern explains, 'his libertinism seems focused on outwitting husbands rather than possessing their wives'.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, as Anthony Kaufman argues, 'his pretended impotence [. . .] point[s] to his very real sterility of emotion'.<sup>19</sup> Horner's final lines seem to indicate that he is prized by women, and therefore accepts the contempt of men as a consequence. However, on closer examination, his circumstances reveal that in his pursuit of satiating his ego, he cuts himself off from any real human connection. His male friends despise him by mocking his supposed lack of sexual potency (especially evident in the raillery of Sir Jaspar) or suspecting his true libertine nature (as Pinchwife does). Meanwhile, the women either rival him in 'sexual voraciousness and libertinism,' echoing his own self-absorption (i.e. the hypocritically self-styled 'virtuous gang' of Lady Fidget, Mrs Squeamish, and Dainty Fidget), or are 'silly,' doting blindly on him to the point of foolishness (i.e. Margery, whom he addresses as 'dear idiot').<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, though he is 'the central character [. . .] [he] stands alone in his society, with no close friends or confidants, alienated and isolated, incapable of any meaningful action except repeated and unsatisfactory seduction'.<sup>21</sup> Horner is an especially complex libertine character, as literary scholars have identified, and as this chapter discusses, this makes him an especially challenging character in revivals of Wycherley's play. As I will explore, the Chichester Festival 2018 revival, performed in modern dress, offered a particularly stark portrait of his self-induced solitude via a modern-day lens.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>18</sup> Tiffany Stern, 'Introduction' to *The Country Wife* (Bloomsbury, 2014), xi.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Kaufman, 'Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and the Don Juan Character,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 9, no. 2 (1975-1976), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Stern, 'Introduction' to *The Country Wife*, xv; Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 323, 321, 337.

<sup>21</sup> Kaufman, 'Wycherley's *The Country Wife*,' 220.

## Performance History and Early Scholarship

As with other Restoration comedies, *The Country Wife* experienced censorship and a decline in performances prior to its disappearance from the stage in the eighteenth century. The last eighteenth-century record of its performance in its original state is recorded as Saturday 6 December 1735, at Drury Lane.<sup>22</sup> Thereafter two adaptations were produced: a 1765 one-act version by John Lee titled *The Country Wife* (which reduced the characters, replaced Horner with Dorilant, and avoided Margery's adultery), and David Garrick's 1766 five-act play *The Country Girl*, based on one of Wycherley's sources for the comedy, Molière's 1662 *L'École des femmes*. Significantly, Horner appeared in neither of these adaptations. The rationale given for Garrick's omission of Horner may be similarly applied to Lee, namely, that 'the usual taint of the time in which he [Wycherley] wrote had so infected the whole mass, that Mr. Garrick found himself reduced to the necessity of lopping off a limb (Horner) to save the whole from putrefaction'.<sup>23</sup> That is, presumably both playwrights were of the opinion that Horner was altogether too noxious a figure for eighteenth-century playgoers' palates. These alterations to Wycherley reflect the shifting trends in comedy, which was characterised in the eighteenth century by a sense of edification, as scholars have noted. Rose Zimbardo describes this edifying effect as 'the early eighteenth-century affective theory of emulation that entails the audience's identification with virtuous characters and the consequent modification of behavior that attends upon such identification'.<sup>24</sup> Laura Brown, meanwhile, discusses the moralising intent with which the central figures of these early eighteenth-century plays were written:

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur H. Scouten, ed., *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 3: 1729-1747*, Vol. 1 (Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), 533.

<sup>23</sup> David Garrick, *The Country Girl* ([P]rinted for the proprietors, under the direction of John Bell, British Library, Strand, 1791), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Rose A. Zimbardo, *A Mirror to Nature*, 206.

The strong internal ethical hierarchy of this drama requires the designation of an exemplary or eminently reformable central character, whose representative merit is confirmed and codified in every incident of the plot. The form is thus implicitly, and often explicitly, didactic, and the morality that it extolls is proposed as an absolute standard, universally accepted and immediately accessible.<sup>25</sup>

The central male characters in Lee's and Garrick's heavily revised adaptations plays reflect this didacticism in certain moments. Dorilant in Lee's *The Country Wife* ceases his pursuit of Margery before anything illicit occurs, to spare Pinchwife 'fresh jealousies'.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, morality is even more resoundingly emphasised in Garrick's *The Country Girl* in advice given to Belville by his uncle Harcourt (who remains Alithea's suitor and eventual husband). Belville implores his uncle's counsel in his courtship and Harcourt replies with the caution: 'Provided the girl is not married; for I never, never encourage young men to covet their neighbours [sic] wives'.<sup>27</sup> Aparna Gollapudi notes the moralising character arcs found in these comedies and the wider societal concerns they reflect:

'Reform comedy plots the enlightenment and education of its benighted protagonists, and in doing so it captures a pervasive, though multifaceted, preoccupation with moral, social, and national advancement in the early eighteenth century'.<sup>28</sup> Clearly eighteenth-century dramatists were drawn to Wycherley's play, but struggled to negotiate Horner's 'confirmed rake' character, and thus made significant changes in order to revive the play. As we will see, rather than blunt, reform, or erase Horner's character, Stafford-Clark (and to a greater degree Munby) directly confront his moral corruption in all its grim reality.

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<sup>25</sup> Laura Brown, *English Dramatic Form, 1660-1760*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> John Lee, *The Country Wife* ([P]rinted for the editor, and sold by him, at La Grange's medicinal warehouse, in New-Street, Covent-Garden, 1765), 60.

<sup>27</sup> David Garrick, *The Country Girl* (Printed for T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, in the Strand, 1766), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Aparna Gollapudi, *Moral Reform*, 5.

### ***The Country Wife*, Swan Theatre 1993 – Adapting Horner**

In Chapter Three, I examined Stafford-Clark's signature directorial style as exhibited in his 1994 productions of *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*. His approach was bleak, with a 'profoun[d] mistrus[t]' of 'glitter' and a fascination with exploring the seamy inner realities of the libertine hero's ostensibly alluring exterior.<sup>29</sup> As this chapter examines, this style likewise characterised his 1993 *Country Wife*, which served as a forerunner for the later productions. Max Stafford-Clark's RSC's 1993 production of *The Country Wife* opened on 10 August, in the Swan Theatre. By mid-1994, *The Country Wife* had transferred to the Pit Theatre, the studio space in the Barbican Theatre, the RSC's London home, opening there on 12th July 1994. Notably, as mentioned earlier, Stafford-Clark's production featured a new prologue by Stephen Jeffreys. To my knowledge, this was a departure from the usual Swan Theatre practice of retaining the various plays' original prologues and epilogues; it is certainly the only instance of a rewritten prologue in a production examined in this thesis. Other additions to Stafford-Clark's version included three interpolated songs written for the play, with music and lyrics by famed singer-songwriter Ian Dury and keyboardist Mickey Gallagher. Both the prologue and the songs were retained for the London transfer. Dury and Gallagher's penchant for forthright, ribald lyrics made their music especially apt for Stafford-Clark's production.

As with previous RSC revivals of Restoration comedy staged in the Swan, the proximity of the performers to the audience took on different nuances for various productions. For the 1993 *Country Wife*, this proximity between audience and actors suggested playgoers' complicity in the characters' various machinations. The set design and costumes were of the Restoration period, albeit with touches of contemporary costuming, particularly exemplified by 'the male costume of perukes and Lycra cycling shorts which register the smallest tremor

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<sup>29</sup> John Peter, 'Sleaze beneath the tease.'

of the gluteus maximus' and Lady Fidget's 'black see-through skirt'.<sup>30</sup> In terms of casting, the Pit transfer production featured the majority of the original Swan company, apart from a few re-cast roles, namely Tilly Blackwood as Mrs Dainty Fidget (played at the Swan by Janet Dale), Tania Levey as Mrs Squeamish (played at the Swan by Anne Lambton), and Damien Lyne as the Boy (played at the Swan by Lloyd Notice).<sup>31</sup>

Stafford-Clark's *The Country Wife* may be considered a preface to his subsequent work on *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*. As evinced by critics' reviews, the two most noteworthy factors of this revival were its bleakness and the inclusion of Dury and Gallagher's songs.<sup>32</sup> Stafford-Clark's grim view of Restoration society (also seen in *The Libertine*) was especially evident in the male characters. The male cast portrayed their characters as a libertine collective that viewed 'the women [as] mostly sexual pickings, to be treacherously won, quickly enjoyed, then callously disposed [. . .]'.<sup>33</sup> The female cast members were equally conspicuous in the performance of sexuality: various critics referred to Lady Fidget, Mrs Squeamish, and Dainty Fidget as 'rapacious,' acting 'rapaciously,' and showing 'rapacity'.<sup>34</sup> As Irving Wardle observed, 'It is that infernal machine that keeps the plot running: men and women dislike and mistrust one another, but each has something the other can't do without'.<sup>35</sup>

Another factor noted in reviews was the inclusion of the three songs by Dury and Gallagher. In the first, the younger men (Horner and his fellow libertines, apart from Sparkish who had some solo lines) vaunted their sexual prowess while exchanging insults with their older rivals (Sir Jaspar and Pinchwife) and all joined in the chorus venting their detestation of

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<sup>30</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, August 15, 1993, 932; Bernard Nightingale, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, August 12, 1993, 935.

<sup>31</sup> See cast lists in *Theatre Record* 13, 930 and *Theatre Record* 14, 868.

<sup>32</sup> John Peter, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Sunday Times*, cited in *Theatre Record* 13, 930; Jeremy Kingston, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *The Times*, cited in *Theatre Record* 14, 868.

<sup>33</sup> Nightingale, 935.

<sup>34</sup> Nightingale, 128; James Christopher, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 18 August, 1993, 931; see also David Nathan, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 20 August, 1993, 936; Jack Tinker, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 13 August, 1993, 936; Michael Billington, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 12 August, 1993, 936.

<sup>35</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 15 August, 1993, 932.

women. Similarly, the women (Lady Fidget, Mrs Squeamish, and Dainty Fidget) had a song which replaced the drinking song that Wycherley originally wrote for Lady Fidget – in it, the women together expressed their disdain for their husbands and delight in cuckolding them. Lastly, the third song was an ensemble number at the play's end in which each of the lead characters voiced his or her opinions regarding the dénouement. As evinced by critics' comments, the defining feature of these songs was their explicitly sexual nature, including coarse references to genitalia and copulation.

Notably, Stafford-Clark's production also featured literary analysis; the programme included excerpts from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1985 book *Between Men*, wherein she discusses Wycherley's comedy. Stafford-Clark excerpted these especially significant lines from Sedgwick:

[T]he fiction of male androgyny – of a symmetrical relation between men and women in which one person (a man) could place himself “halfway between” the two genders in order to view, and enjoy, them equally – is an important thematic possibility for this play, and for Horner within it. [. . .] [M]ale “androgyny” actually functions, instead, as a mask for a more efficient manipulation of women's asymmetrically marginal, subsumed, and objectified status . . .<sup>36</sup>

In response to Stafford-Clark's engagement with Sedgwick's insights into the performance of gender in the play, Barbara Kachur has argued that ‘Stafford-Clark shocked the audience with his radical depiction of the men as the weaker sex’ and ‘the females in this savage reading of Wycherley's comedy [. . .] eclipse[d] the men at every turn’.<sup>37</sup> The revival, however, seems to indicate a more balanced and subtle interpretation than Kachur allows, in which the women were collectively portrayed as being equally prone to machinations and lust as their male

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<sup>36</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘*The Country Wife*: Anatomies of Male Homosocial Desire,’ in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985), 55.

<sup>37</sup> Barbara Kachur, *Etherege and Wycherley*, 197-198.

counterparts. In this production, Horner's diminishment from lead libertine to one of the debauched group is telling, as he becomes 'marginal, subsumed, and objectified' (to borrow Sedgwick's phrasing) in Stafford-Clark's adaptation.

As the trend of in-ye-face theatre was reflected in Stafford-Clark's 1994 productions of *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*, contemporary societal issues of the 1990s were echoed in his 1993 *Country Wife*. A widespread sense of societal discontent prevailed in the early 1990s, particularly owing to the recession which lasted from 1990-1992.<sup>38</sup> In July 1993, a month prior to the opening of Stafford-Clark's revival in August, a report from MORI (Market and Opinion Research International) stated that '[i]n Britain and all across Europe there seems to be a rising tide of pessimism and unhappiness' – the deeply embittered, joyless relationships between the sexes depicted in the RSC *Country Wife* echoed this cynicism.<sup>39</sup>

According to reviews, Jeremy Northam's Horner was a more subdued rake than might have been wished; critics noted 'he lack[ed] the requisite libidinous drive,' deeming him 'a suave though slightly wilting sex symbol [. . .] missing the character's cynicism and icy detachment'.<sup>40</sup> This suggests his potential danger as libertine hero was muted, to bring his corruption into alignment with that of the other characters. In this staging, he became a lothario with a somewhat wider sphere of desires than those indicated in Wycherley. Stafford-Clark's programme citation of Sedgwick is especially telling with regards to this. In *Between Men*, Sedgwick analyses Horner and the play's other male characters via the lens of homosocial desire, suggesting that the women function as surrogates for the men's erotic desire for each another since they cannot express this affection openly.<sup>41</sup> As critics noted,

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<sup>38</sup> Larry Elliot, 'British recessions: a short history,' *The Guardian*,

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2012/dec/07/britain-recessions-history>, accessed April 16, 2026.

<sup>39</sup> 'MORI, "British Public Opinion," July 1993,' cited on *Archive of Market and Societal Research*, <https://www.amsr.org.uk/tracking-the-mood-of-the-1990s-the-mori-misery-index/>, accessed April 16, 2026.

<sup>40</sup> Carole Woddis, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 18 August, 1993, 935;

Nicholas de Jongh, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 11 August, 1993, 932.

<sup>41</sup> Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 49-66.



there was a pronounced conviviality displayed between the male characters. '[E]very friendly exchange between the men [. . .] [was] an occasion for stopping the comedy and modulating into a tone of deep sincerity. Maybe they would be happier as all boys together; but that is not what the lines mean,' observed Irving Wardle, whilst Charles Spencer remarked that 'many of the male characters seem to prefer each other's company to the women they so ruthlessly pursue,' and Jack Tinker commented that in Margery's disguised first meeting with Horner, he 'is just as happy stealthily debauching pretty boys as satisfying the assorted society ladies'.<sup>42</sup> Critics did not comment on male homosociality in Stafford-Clark's 1994 production of *The Man of Mode*. While no recorded footage of this production exists, critical responses to the play suggest that Stafford-Clark focused on Dorimant as a central libertine figure. Dorimant is, in many ways, a less complex version of the libertine figure than Horner, meaning that Stafford-Clark's *The Country Wife* might be read as a deliberate attempt to diffuse Horner's libertine qualities across the male characters.

In Wycherley's text, Horner features prominently in both the opening and final scenes; indeed, the 'Prologue' is listed as 'spoken by Mr Hart,' that is, Charles Hart, the original Horner.<sup>43</sup> Immediately thereafter, he speaks the opening lines of the play; thus, his centrality as the libertine hero is established from the outset. However, Stafford-Clark's production subverted these established traditions. It opened with Jeffreys's prologue, delivered by actress Tania Levey, on a darkened stage.<sup>44</sup> Also, as indicated in the text of Jeffreys's prologue, Levey was garbed in a Restoration era-appropriate 'whore's costume and [. . .] vizzard [sic] mask'.<sup>45</sup> In her speech, the 'whore,' a character not found in Wycherley's play but instead Stafford-Clark's interpolation, informed the audience that in contrast to other

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<sup>42</sup> Wardle, *Theatre Record* 13, 932; Charles Spencer, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 13, 12 August, 1993, 935; Tinker, *Theatre Record* 13, 936.

<sup>43</sup> Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 231.

<sup>44</sup> Ms Levey was mentioned in the written directions in the prompt book, on the prologue page.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Jeffreys, 'Prologue,' Prompt book for *The Country Wife*, RSC, 1993, line 2.

contemporaneous productions of Wycherley's comedy this would be a straightforward version.<sup>46</sup> She likewise referenced playwrights whose works had been previously performed in the Swan, specifically Ben Jonson (*Every Man in His Humour* was staged in 1986 and *The New Inn* in 1987) and Shakespeare (*Two Noble Kinsmen* was produced in 1986 and *Titus Andronicus* in 1987). Her prologue emphasised faithfulness to Wycherley's original play:

[F]or though  
 It much the fashion on this stage has been  
 To meddle with Dead Authors' works and scenes –  
 Our rare Ben gutted, Shakespeare re-assessed  
 Mouthing opinions they ne'er professed  
 [. . .]  
 Tonight our actors scorn adapted wit  
 Speaking no line but what our author writ.<sup>47</sup>

The prologue's main import was that little had changed with regards to human frailties, especially carnality, as expressed in the following lines:

Yet you our audience, sit not at your ease  
 The vizzard mask's employed to taunt and tease.  
 Our play's accordingly a like device,  
 Curtaining virtue to discover vice:  
 Though many years from hence is flown our poet,  
 He knew you well and will proceed to show it.  
 So when we meet in tiring house or inn,  
 Be not so quick to castigate my sin.  
 I am but conjur'd to appease a thirst

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., lines 22-3.

The itch I soothe you generated first.<sup>48</sup>

The wording of her speech, rather than cajoling the audience to enjoy the performance, suggested a confrontational edge to the production, ‘discovering’ (i.e. revealing) late twentieth-century playgoers’ supposed sins. Incidentally, the term ‘itch’ underlined this discomfiting tone, evoking the double entendre of sexual urge and venereal disease, with the whore as both the fulfiller of lust and the carrier of illness. The nod to the audience’s assumed debauchery reflects the then-current societal zeitgeist summarised by Graham Saunders in his description of the milieu displayed in Mark Ravenhill’s 1999 play *Some Explicit Polaroids*: ‘hedonism and instant gratification through shopping and sex’.<sup>49</sup> However, as we will see, the promised incisive societal critique was not delivered. Instead, Stafford-Clark’s production was concerned with Horner’s place in the play, or rather, his displacement. The effect of Horner’s prologue being jettisoned and replaced with a new one spoken by an interpolated character is that he was removed from his usual centre position in the comedy. Rather than stressing his status as the central libertine hero, Stafford-Clark reduced him to an ensemble member for the sake of his directorial concept of emphasising the characters’ collective moral corruption. Thus, the whore’s promise of faithfulness to the original can be read as another instance of the adaptation’s changes.

Only at the conclusion of the whore’s prologue was Horner himself mentioned. According to the prompt book, he and the Quack entered on the line ‘be not so quick to castigate my sin’ – the book notes indicate that respectively, Horner entered downstage right, moving to the bench positioned there, whilst the Quack entered downstage left and sat on the stage left stool, setting up for the first scene.<sup>50</sup> The light cue given in the prompt book indicates a light to focus upon Horner on the word ‘trick,’ at the end of the whore’s next line:

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., lines 25-34.

<sup>49</sup> Graham Saunders, Rebecca D’Monte, eds., *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 12.

<sup>50</sup> See prompt book, ‘Prologue.’

A mask's a whore, a whore is but a trick:

Like one who's well professing to be sick:<sup>51</sup>

Finally, in the final two lines of her speech, the whore introduced Horner: 'This fellow's hale, his powers are all intact / And yet he will deny it to attract'.<sup>52</sup> Following this, the first scene (the dialogue between Horner and the Quack) began as per the play's text, with Horner's '*aside*' ('A quack is as fit for a pimp as a midwife for a bawd; they are still but in their way both helpers of nature'.)<sup>53</sup> Although Horner retained his original opening lines, the consequence of the deletion of his prologue and its replacement with Jeffreys's prologue spoken by another character framed Horner as an afterthought, 'just another character in the ensemble' (as Kachur observed), rather than the play's central figure.<sup>54</sup> Rather than reading this shift as a radical diminishment of Horner, in line with Kachur's analysis, it's possible to understand it as Stafford-Clark's efforts to contain Horner within a homosocial group, reflective of Sedgwick's insights into the performance of masculinity. Horner's containment means that his character reads less as the example of the confirmed rake, and more as the collective rakishness of the Restoration and the 1990s.

The adaptation's music affirmed this emphasis on performance. In each of the three songs, Horner was a supporting figure. He was grouped with the other young men in the first song, accompanied the women's song by tapping on a wine bottle (while sitting at their feet, further underlining his narrative insignificance in Stafford-Clark's vision), and his solo lines in the final ensembled number were woven among others' lines. The resulting implication was that Horner was merely one of the crowd as opposed to the dramatic nucleus. Additionally, because his final two couplets were omitted to make way for the song, thereby denying him the last word, his status as central libertine was fully undermined.

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<sup>51</sup> The light cue was written as 'LXQ5 GO.'; Prompt book, 'Prologue,' lines 35-36.

<sup>52</sup> Prompt book, 'Prologue,' lines 37-38.

<sup>53</sup> Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 233.

<sup>54</sup> Kachur, *Etherege and Wycherley*, 197.

In summation, the RSC's 1993 revival was marked by its focus on the male characters as a depraved collective. With Horner's libertinage no longer a focal point, immorality became democratised. Stafford-Clark's interpretation portrayed everyone as flawed, with each character depicting specific weaknesses. In this reframing of Horner, the confirmed rake becomes one player amid an array of equally iniquitous debauchees. By contrast, the 2018 modern-dress Chichester Festival Theatre production directed by Jonathan Munby provided a detailed portrait of Wycherley's rake, recentring him as the narrative focal point and presenting him as a twenty-first century libertine.

### ***The Country Wife*, Chichester Festival Theatre 2018 – Modernising Horner**

By 2018, Jonathan Munby's career included credits over a range of genres, though the greater part of his resume was composed of productions of Shakespeare's works. Precedents for his modernised reinterpretation of *The Country Wife* included his contemporary-dress productions of *Henry V* in 2007 for the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre, as well as *Julius Caesar* in 2013 and *Othello* in 2016, both for Chicago Shakespeare Company.<sup>55</sup> However *The Country Wife* was both his first venture into Restoration comedy and his first work at the Chichester Festival Theatre. In terms of design, the Minerva is a 310-seat studio theatre, with seating encircling the playing space on three sides (left, right, and downstage centre), and three downstage walkways (downstage left, right, and centre) used for entrances and exits.<sup>56</sup> Much like in the Swan Theatre, the proximity of the seats to the stage allows for an intimacy between the audience and actors. Regarding repertoire, the theatre is especially known as a home for 'world premieres alongside intimate revivals'.<sup>57</sup> Plays which premiered here have

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<sup>55</sup> For the production dates, see 'Credits' listed on Munby's page on *The Agency* website: <https://theagency.co.uk/the-clients/jonathan-munby/>, accessed April 16, 2026.

<sup>56</sup> 'What's on at Minerva Theatre,' *Theatres Online*, <https://www.theatresonline.com/theatres/chichester-theatres/minerva-theatre>, accessed April 16, 2026.

<sup>57</sup> 'What's on at Minerva Theatre.'

included Lucy Prebble's 2009 *Enron*, Mark Rylance's 2012 *I Am Shakespeare*, David Edgar's 2013 *If Only*, and Deborah Bruce's 2017 *The House They Grew Up In*. These works are all either contemporary or recently historical in their settings. The implication of reviving Wycherley's comedy in a space where these dramatic works premiered – which address topics ranging from business and politics to familial relationships – indicates Munby's vision for the play as a dramatic work that offers a trenchant societal commentary for twenty-first century audiences. Moreover, echoing Stafford-Clark's and Jeffreys's *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine* as theatrical exposés of the libertine's interior, unglamorous nature, this production's relocation of Horner's story to the present provided an incisive study of modern-day debauchery.

One of the promotional items for the Chichester production was an online audio recording of a pre-show discussion between Munby and author Kate Mosse, which took place in the theatre before one of the performances.<sup>58</sup> Particular remarks from this discussion pertain to the revival's depiction of Horner. Mosse initially asked, 'Why do you want to do a play that is that old and belongs to that period of time [the Restoration], and when you've decided to do it, how do you make it 'of now' without in any way being disrespectful to the actual story and the actual characters and the actual language?'<sup>59</sup> Munby explained his reasoning for setting the play in a twenty-first century context, citing Wycherley himself as a precedent for confronting playgoers with their own foibles:

What [Wycherley's] actually [. . .] doing, I think, is holding a mirror up to the society [. . .] of the Restoration and reflecting it back at itself. He's saying to the audience that are coming to see these plays at Drury Lane in 1675, 'This is who you are, warts and all – pox and all, I should say. This is your ugliness, this is your cruelty, this is your

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<sup>58</sup> 'The Country Wife – Pre-Show Talk – Chichester Festival Theatre,' posted to YouTube by Chichester Festival Theatre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2I-MnzjLIg&list=PLTsmL981P8qqZ0MO3tyI0YCK3taiZwonI&index=1>, accessed April 16, 2026.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, timestamp: 1:28 – 1:43.

hypocrisy, this is how you get your kicks, this is life, as we live it now [. . .] So look, coming back to your question of how and why are we interested in doing these plays now and how do we get an audience to engage with them – when I read *The Country Wife* [. . .] I was struck by how modern it felt, by the fact that in all these hundreds of years since, we haven't really changed really at all. We are still hypocrites, people still have affairs [. . .] we still try and hide our shenanigans behind our loved one's back, and I think even with the invention of social media, I think promiscuity's even more rife than it perhaps was even ten years ago. And I'm interested in that. So I'm interested in this play reflecting who we are now, and [. . .] using [it] to ask us some pretty tricky questions, I think, about [. . .] who we are, what our morality is now, and really have we changed.<sup>60</sup>

Central to Munby's audience-confronting modernisation was the character of Horner reimagined within a twenty-first century context:

Why is this man having sex with half of London – what is driving him? You know, he's addicted to sex – he's a sex addict. What is the reality of that? You know, the last couple of lines of the play are really interesting. They describe [. . .] about what it's costing [Horner] – to do what he does, he says, ends up with his male friends despising him – this man who is having sex with half of London is also pissing off his male friends – what he ends up with actually is nobody ultimately – he ends up lonely and [. . .] what I've tried to do is sort of pull the rug from under the audience's feet again to the play and ask them to [. . .] acknowledge that in some way.<sup>61</sup>

In response, Mosse remarked: '[I]t's a wonderful way that you've bookended with the scene at the beginning and the end and there is a plangency at the end and a sadness – and you feel

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., timestamp: 4:10 – 7:24.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., timestamp: 15:18 – 16:04.

also, “serves you right,” actually, is what I felt’.<sup>62</sup> To which Munby concurred: ‘Well, he’s Weinstein, you know? And [. . .] at some point, life catches up with you’.<sup>63</sup>

Tellingly, Munby’s equation of Horner with the infamous Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein elicited uneasy laughter from the audience, which was unsurprising, given the reference’s timeliness.<sup>64</sup> The viral #MeToo movement officially began in October of 2017 with the publication of Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s exposé of Weinstein’s history of sexual abuse, and the Chichester production ran, shortly after, from 13 June to 7 July of 2018.<sup>65</sup> Wycherley positions Horner’s sexual affairs as being conducted consensually, meaning that the alignment between Horner and Weinstein is neither a perfect nor tidy fit. But Horner’s rapaciousness and sexual aggression certainly aligned with the culture of sexual harassment and assault which gave rise to the #MeToo movement. It is also possible to see connections between Horner’s eventual loneliness and Weinstein’s incarceration, in that the pursuit of their selfish pleasures led both men into prison – metaphorical in the former case and literal in the latter. Munby’s 2018 revival bore the subtle-yet-evident influence of ‘call-out culture,’ defined in a *Bustle* article as ‘publicly giv[ing] feedback to someone about their potentially problematic or oppressive behavior, whether this is IRL [acronym for “in real life”] or on a Twitter thread that’s getting heated’.<sup>66</sup> The production’s signalling out of Horner amid his fellow debauchees functioned as a kind of ‘call-out’ of modern promiscuity, particularly as it occurs in sexually aggressive men. Horner’s libertine sexuality was thus rewritten as a form of sex addiction, not as an isolated symptom of the libertine hero, but as

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., timestamp: 16:05 – 16:16.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., timestamp: 16:16 – 16:23.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., timestamp: 16:18. Note: the above quotes have been condensed for clarity.

<sup>65</sup> Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, *She Said* (Penguin Random House, 2019); Julian Sancton, ‘#MeToo Five Years Later: A Timeline of Allegations, Accountability and Activism,’ *The Hollywood Reporter*, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/metoo-five-years-timeline-allegations-accountability-activism-1235228661/>, accessed April 16, 2026.

<sup>66</sup> Kyli Rodriguez-Cayro, ‘This Is What It Means To Call Someone In, Instead Of Calling Them Out,’ *Bustle*, <https://www.bustle.com/p/what-does-call-in-mean-when-call-out-culture-feels-toxic-this-method-can-be-used-instead-9056343>, accessed April 16, 2026.



reflective of a wider societal disease. Another key distinction is the fact that between 1993 and 2018, the phenomenon of social media amplified call-out culture to much greater and more visible degrees. Munby's comparison of Horner with Weinstein clearly evokes the #MeToo movement; in this scenario, Horner becomes not just a pathologically ill man, but a sexual predator. Here, we see a kinship to Rochester's soul-corroding bitterness, as examined in Chapter Three. Rather than an inveterately jaded outlook, constantly perceiving only negativity in the world, Horner is mentally and emotionally diseased.

Munby's production, in its framing of Horner as a sex addict, reflects the modern psychological understanding of such individuals. Psychotherapist Paula Hall wrote in 2013: 'The simplest and broadest definition of sex addiction would be that it's a term that describes any pattern of out-of-control sexual behaviour that causes problems in someone's life. Furthermore, it is a pattern of behaviour that cannot be stopped, or does not reliably stay stopped'.<sup>67</sup> As we will see, in Munby's production Horner's pursuit of sex was marked by a rote instinct, rather than the genuine enjoyment often attached, in the Restoration itself, to the figure of the libertine hero.

Moreover, Munby's mention of twenty-first century society's 'morality', in the interview above with Mosse, brings up the moral debate surrounding sex addiction. As Hall notes:

Unlike other questionable conditions, the argument over the existence of sex addiction often becomes a moral one, rather than an issue of health. This is undoubtedly because the focus of public and clinical attention is on the word 'sex' rather than on the word 'addiction,' which is the nub of where the problem truly lies.<sup>68</sup>

For the purposes of examining the character of Horner in depth in this production, I will consider his addiction to libertinage as a 'pathology,' rather than a moral flaw.<sup>69</sup> Horner's

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<sup>67</sup> Paula Hall, *Understanding and Treating Sex Addiction* (Routledge, 2013), 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

lifestyle as staged in Munby's modernisation reflected the twenty-first century discourse surrounding 'toxic masculinity,' a term which 'was coined in the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and '90s,' has subsequently been disseminated throughout society, and may be colloquially defined as 'a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. [. . .] Sex, in particular, is an important part of "being a man".<sup>70</sup> The need to "get" sex is all-encompassing because the more of it you have, the higher "status" you have as a man'.<sup>71</sup> Horner's obsessive focus on adding to his list of conquests at any imaginable cost may be interpreted as a variety of this warped view of manhood. Thus, Munby's adaptation stages libertinism as a disease and something to be avoided. This negotiation of libertinism clearly responds to the reckoning of the #MeToo movement, but also potentially reduces the libertine's agency and responsibility to women.

Just as Munby's production brought the libertine hero into conversation with the #MeToo movement, his staging modernised the costumes, bringing the work into dialogue with contemporary sexual mores. Aesthetically, the characters' attire was modern, with a faint air of haute couture – "Vivienne Westwood meets Made in Chelsea," as a reviewer commented, with '[l]ots of black, white, grey with pin stripes a go-go, in the stylish costuming; contemporary with a louche twist'.<sup>72</sup> The costumes thus reflected Munby's direct engagement with libertine culture. The set, on the other hand, was dominated by a revolving background piece with three separate doors which functioned as exits and entrances as needed; the background itself was rotated to indicate various changes of scene. Likewise, prominently,

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Salter, 'The Problem With a Fight Against Toxic Masculinity,' *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/02/toxic-masculinity-history/583411/>, accessed 16 April, 2026.

<sup>71</sup> Harris O' Malley, 'The Difference Between Toxic Masculinity and Being A Man,' *The Good Men Project*, June 27, 2016, <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/the-difference-between-toxic-masculinity-and-being-a-man-dg/>, accessed 16 April, 2026.

<sup>72</sup> Domenic Cavendish, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 38, 14 June 2018, 573.

from the top of the upstage proscenium, spanning between the stage left and right wings, hung a backdrop curtain, across the top of which were inscribed various evocative words and phrases from Wycherley's text, including 'play,' 'pox,' and 'cuckold,' among others.

Presumably, this near-constant visual reminder of the archaic language (the curtain was lit for the majority of the scenes) was in keeping with Munby's stated method of 'borrowing from the past and bringing it into the present,' to emphasise the work's relevance in the twenty-first century.<sup>73</sup> Wycherley's words posed an invitation to playgoers to ponder their possible meanings, and whether or not they still resonated in the modern age. The pathologisation of libertinism, via these highlighted keywords, makes sense within a #MeToo moment, since the movement was a public, primarily online condemnation of sexual abusers and predators. Thus, the set design brought the past into the present, drawing connections between the Restoration and modern-day forms of libertinage. There is no specific philosophy to modern-day libertinism, as there was in the Restoration era; contemporary libertinage focuses on sexual relationships, versus Restoration libertinage's philosophical basis. Munby's framing of Horner as a debauchee completely emotionally deadened in his routine hedonism (and consequently abandoned to any sense of moral compunction) reflects this cultural moment. Removed from their original context and clustered together, the decontextualised words displayed above the stage evoked a word cloud as well as hashtags on social media.

Various scenes in Munby's production drew forth the contemporary resonances in Horner's character, particular the first and the final scenes as cited by Mosse. In clear contrast to Stafford-Clark's de-emphasising of Horner as the central libertine hero in 1993, the 2018 Chichester revival positioned him as the pivotal central figure from the outset and this was clearly seen in the staging. The play opened with Horner (actor Lex Shrapnel) alone, lying on his sofa centre stage, in a drunken stupor from the previous night's apparent debauch

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<sup>73</sup>'The Country Wife – Pre-Show Talk,' timestamp: 11:25 – 11:28.

(suggested by the bar cart laden with glasses downstage right, and the rumpled appearance of his casual attire, namely a short-sleeved button-down shirt worn over a black t-shirt, with black trousers, and white trainers). Abruptly, he awoke with a gasp, seemingly startled by the sound of a passing emergency vehicle siren from the city street outside. In his hungover state, he let out a pained '*ohh*,' pressing his hand to his temple as he sat forward, indicating a headache. Noting a beer bottle on the floor near his feet, he let out another, shorter '*ohh*,' this time in a tone of relief, presumably pleased to find a 'hair of the dog' cure. However, his excitement was short-lived – he picked up the bottle, and upon closer inspection, finding it was nearly empty, he gave a peeved '*ohh*' (which provoked audience laughter). He paused a moment, thinking if it was worth it to finish the small amount, then raised the bottle in a solitary toast and finished the remaining beer with a grunt, his indifference again garnering laughter. He let out a quick, satisfied '*ah*,' then stood and headed to the vinyl record player located downstage left, and turned it on. As the 'libidinal rock music' (composed by Grant Olding) began, he circled the stage, returning to the sofa, where he sat, his legs spread wide, clutching the bottle, his head lolling back and his eyes closed, thoroughly at his ease, whilst the other characters peered out at him from the three doors in the background upstage.<sup>74</sup>

This prefatory scene, punctuated as it was with his moaning and grunting, together with the positioning of the upright bottle close to his groin and the ecstatic expression on his face, visually suggestive of self-pleasure, established Horner as a man wholly in thrall to his animalistic, carnal urges. Moreover, his literal physical positioning centre stage, solitary, in the play's first moments framed him as the play's central figure. In addition, the inclusion of the vinyl record player is worth touching upon. One of vinyl's chief attractions for consumers is the 'ritualistic aspect' of '[t]he act of putting a record on,' which 'is a more

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<sup>74</sup> Cavendish, 573; Ibid.

assiduous, mindful way of engaging with music'.<sup>75</sup> Conversely, Horner's use of vinyl records is, as we will see, born of apathy, forming part of his habitual dose of sensuality; when he is not engaging in sex, he deadens his mind with alcohol and in Munby's staging, the same repetitive music.

In between the opening and the parallel concluding scene, Horner, as acted by Shrapnel, exhibited a generally nonchalant, somewhat mindless approach to his wooing of his friends' wives and sisters, slightly shifting his various approaches depending on the temperament of the woman in question. In his scenes with Lady Fidget, for instance, he echoed her own forthright lasciviousness, placing her hand over his trouser fly when assuring her of his intact status, whilst with Margery, meanwhile, he adopted an air of smiling charm, leaning down to address her in her disguise as a boy for their first encounter and matching her own playful vivacity.

The opening for the second half of Munby's production brought to the forefront his notion that Horner was in fact modelled upon John Wilmot. However, there was no direct acknowledgement of this in the programme or from Munby himself apart from his mention of Wilmot in the pre-show discussion. Thus, this production cannot be read as a direct spiritual successor to Jeffreys's *The Libertine*. Whilst Horner dashed in and out of the various three upstage doors, accompanied first by Mrs Squeamish and then Dainty Fidget, passionately kissing each in turn as he entered and exited with them, implying clandestine coupling, the Boy, Horner's servant, stood centre stage, singing Olding's adaptation (set to a contemporary rock-influenced tune) of the first several stanzas of one of Wilmot's infamously explicit poems, 'The Imperfect Enjoyment'.<sup>76</sup> This musical moment in its implicit invocation of Rochester's relentless debauchery, as I discussed in Chapter Three, underlined the nature of

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<sup>75</sup> Maria Vole, 'Why is vinyl making a comeback?', *Reader's Digest*, <https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/culture/music/why-is-vinyl-making-a-comeback>, accessed 16 April, 2026.

<sup>76</sup> John Wilmot, 'The Imperfect Enjoyment,' in *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth, 37-40.

Horner's compulsion. Post-dalliance with Squeamish and Dainty, Horner exited the stage looking enervated rather than sated, indicating once again that this addiction was rooted in his constant need rather than in actual pleasure. In other words, his dependency, and by that same token his life, could both be termed 'an imperfect enjoyment'.

The final moments of the production likewise drew attention to the desperate and nihilistic ends of Horner's libertinism. First came Pinchwife's last couplet ('His honour is least safe, too late I find, / who trusts it with a foolish wife or friend') which actor John Hodgkinson imbued with a mix of heartfelt rue, desperate self-delusion regarding Margery's innocence, and fury at Horner, as he railed against his former friend. The rake in question, who stood downstage centre, gazed at the rest of the assembled characters and coolly contemplated the confusion he had wrought. Horner then stepped forward and exclaimed an interpolated line: 'Come, time for a little diversion!' The rest of the cast cried 'Huzzah!' as Horner once more turned on the record player, cueing a lively rock-infused instrumental dance track, and the '*dance of cuckolds*' indicated in Wycherley's text ensued.<sup>77</sup>

Early in the dance, Margery moved upstage, observing the rest, suggesting that although she had fulfilled her desire of sleeping with Horner, she was and would remain an outsider to the London set. During the dance, Horner produced from beneath the sofa cushions a baseball cap crowned with a fabric pair of bull's horns. The men tossed it around, until Sparkish, standing behind Sir Jaspar, placed it backwards on his head. Sir Jaspar, enraged by the others' mocking laughter, flung it back to Horner, who threw it to Harcourt, and eventually Pinchwife caught it and resignedly donned it, tilting up the brim so his face was visible, whilst the rest encircled him. Putting their index fingers to their temples to suggest bull's horns, the other characters closed in the circle, lowing in a bovine manner in increasing volume until they collectively reached Pinchwife at the centre, whereupon they broke away, pointing and

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<sup>77</sup> Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 340.

laughing in derision. Throughout this, Pinchwife stood unmoved, facing forwards, expressionless, a man fully aware that his hopes for happiness had been utterly wrecked because of his wife's infidelity, partly due to his own abuses against her. This was perhaps most strikingly exemplified during the first letter-writing scene, in which his threats with the penknife, here simply a 'knife,' were genuinely menacing.

As the other characters dispersed and exited via the upstage doors, Pinchwife removed the cap, tossing it back on the sofa, where Horner had seated himself once again. Margery, meanwhile, had remained upstage, and now moved down towards Pinchwife. He took her hand and together they hurried towards the upstage centre door, though she could not resist a backwards glance at Horner, who regarded her from the sofa, uncurling his relaxed fist to offer her his open hand as she crossed upstage, headed for the door. For a moment, she lingered in the doorway, gazing at the back of his head, until Pinchwife seized her by the shoulders, shoved her aside, and slammed the door, suggesting he would probably use her as a scapegoat for his humiliation by making his threats for domestic violence reality. Here, Margery (played by Susannah Fielding), unlike her counterpart in Stafford-Clark's production, was a 'victimized innocent,' to borrow Milhous and Hume's phrase.<sup>78</sup> Though her plight of being married to an abusive husband remained unexplored within the production, the issue of domestic violence in Restoration comedy and its relevance to contemporary society was examined in detail the following year in Philip Breen's RSC production of Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife*, as we will see.

Once the dance music ended, Horner was left sprawled across the sofa upstage centre, his legs wide; he delivered his final two couplets in a blasé tone. Finally, as in the prefatory scene, he reached for his nearby beer bottle, took a swig, stood and headed over to the vinyl record player, and turned it on once again. As the opening music commenced, he rotated his

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<sup>78</sup> Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, *Producible Interpretation*, 103.

body upstage, his back to the audience, this time staring at the other characters as they peered back at him. The physical distance between him and the rest emphasised his choice to isolate himself from his companions in his self-absorbed pursuit of pleasure. Moreover, the repetition of his movements from the earlier scene together with his utterly jaded, rote tone made abundantly evident his ingrained pathology – this was a man who had no desire to change. This circular fashion of staging with the direct parallels between Horner's opening and closing scenes (the beer bottle, the rock music, and even his costume for both scenes consisting of the same black-and-white shirt and black trousers) emphasised his lifestyle as one of deadened monotony, wherein days and nights blurred into one in his never-ending pursuit of his next pleasurable thrill.

Though Mosse observed that there was a plangency to his solitude, his demeanour, rather than evoking pity, indicated that he had brought about his own loneliness as a conscious choice and was in fact well-pleased with his state. As one reviewer expressively noted, Shrapnel's 'slick-haired Horner had the air of a drainpipe rat with a season ticket to the STI clinic'.<sup>79</sup> By making him a modern-day sex addict, someone not merely sexually active but pathologically fixated upon the act, this production restored Horner's inherent 'darkness' and 'danger,' of which Paul Taylor wrote in his review of the 2007 Haymarket revival: 'What kind of man prefers to be thought impotent by the public in order to enjoy the illicit delights in private that are the reward of his humiliating, false reputation? The answer is a sex addict of a very peculiar, not to say sociopathic, bent'.<sup>80</sup>

For the most part the production was positively received by critics, who especially praised the twenty-first century setting, suggesting in their comments that the themes which Munby strove to emphasise had been effectively conveyed. Phil Hewitt in his review for the

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<sup>79</sup> David Jays, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 38, 24 June 2018, 574. Also, the mention of STIs recalls the suggestion of venereal disease ('the itch') in the RSC production.

<sup>80</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 27, 10 October 2007, 1234.



*Chichester Observer* remarked, '[E]ven as we laugh, *The Country Wife* still leaves us uneasy. Yes, it rollicks along on its own merry-ground [sic] of sexual pleasures sought, denied and variously satisfied, but it still manages to shock with the cruelty which underpins so much of the abysmal behaviour on display here'.<sup>81</sup> David Jays, meanwhile, offered the following summation: 'Jonathan Munby's seriously funny modern-dress production locates the rancid heart of William Wycherley's 1675 play. [. . .] Performed with relish, this is a snarling comedy with no happy ending'.<sup>82</sup> Shrapnel's portrayal of the sexually addicted Horner provided a microcosm of the 'rancid,' self-absorbed contemporary society scathingly satirised in the production.

### Conclusion

Societally, it may be said (at least with a degree of reasonable hope) that between Stafford-Clark's 1993 revival and Munby's 2018 production, we have become more attuned to the innate toxicity of libertinage, and that the #MeToo movement helped to normalise the calling-out of such behaviour. As Munby's revival made compellingly clear, no matter the era, humankind is prone not only to frailty, but also to sexual predation. Horner, as the central libertine figure in a comedy which examines humanity's vices, reflects the moral state of the world around him. Thus, in Stafford-Clark's production, he and his associates pursued sex regardless of any ramifications, in keeping with an exploration (continued in *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*) of the grimy underside of human nature. In Munby's modernisation, intended, as he put it, as an examination of 'who we are, what our morality is now, and really have we changed,' Horner's habitual sociopathic debauchery became a sobering study of twenty-first century moral decay. As we shall see in the next chapter, the libertine hero's complex corruption continued to be at stake in the 2019 production of *The Provoked Wife*.

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<sup>81</sup> Phil Hewitt, 'Review: *The Country Wife*, Minerva Theatre, Chichester, until July 7' *Chichester Observer*.

<sup>82</sup> Jays, 'Review of *The Country Wife*,' 574.

## Chapter Five: *The Provoked Wife* 2019, The Royal Shakespeare Company

In this chapter I analyse the RSC's 2019 revival, directed by Philip Breen, of John Vanbrugh's 1697 comedy *The Provok'd Wife* (sometimes presented, as it was here, without apostrophe as *The Provoked Wife*).<sup>1</sup> My sources for this analysis range from the personal (my own recollections of seeing this production twice during its run in the Swan) to the public (critics' reviews collected in *Theatre Record*). These resources also include production photographs, the production prompt book, and the filmed archival footage of the production stored on the RSC's online archival recording database on the website *Vimeo*. The footage especially reveals the nuances in Breen's production, and how it drew out the contemporary resonances concerning domestic abuse implicit in Vanbrugh's text. Vanbrugh's play is the latest Restoration comedy in this study and it shows that shifting attitudes and cultural concerns surrounding the libertine hero's debaucheries remained highly topical towards the close of the seventeenth century. Importantly the play shifts these debates to consider the home and domestic relations. Vanbrugh's play is significant in its exploration of libertinage's effects within marriage and the domestic sphere. The play features two gentlemen (Constant and Heartfree) who pursue Sir John Brute's wife Lady Brute and his niece Belinda, for an illicit affair and marriage, respectively. In plays of the earlier decades, Constant and Heartfree would have been libertine heroes in the mode of Horner's confirmed rake. However, here, they act as contrasts to the behaviour of Brute, the play's libertine hero. Brute is alone among the libertine leads in this thesis to serve as an example of a libertine who has embarked upon his career of debauchery after marriage as a remedy for marital dissatisfaction due to a hastily made union. The RSC's promotional summary suggested a sly, intrigue-filled comedy: 'Lady Brute is tired of her tedious, loveless marriage and her tedious, drunk husband. When she

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<sup>1</sup> NB: In this chapter I will refer to this play as *The Provoked Wife*.

decides to spice up her love life with a younger man, scandal threatens to ruin her'.<sup>2</sup> However, as we will see, Breen's production elaborated the hints of Brute's verbal, physical, and sexual abuse of Lady Brute implicit in Vanbrugh's text. My focus in this chapter is the portrayal of Brute (played by Jonathan Slinger), and to a lesser degree, those of Constant and Heartfree (respectively played by Rufus Hound and John Hodgkinson) in Breen's production. As we shall see, Breen amplified the play's darker subtexts around the libertine's violent potential, finding in them contemporary resonances for twenty-first century audiences' concerns surrounding domestic violence and marital rape. His 2019 production shows that directors and audiences continue to be drawn to the Restoration libertine but find new meanings in the figure's complexities and dangers.

Within the framework of 'adaptation,' 'revival,' and 'modernisation,' Breen's *The Provoked Wife* follows the precedent set by the other seventeenth-century set productions analysed in this thesis. Specifically, it is most clearly an adaptation and a revival, and at the same time it drew forth the subtextual themes in Vanbrugh's text, making explicit his implicit references to domestic verbal, physical, and sexual abuse as embodied in the character of Brute in order to make Vanbrugh's play relevant and compelling to twenty-first century audiences. While it is a revival of Vanbrugh's play (as the other productions of Restoration comedy in this thesis may be classed as revivals), it is also an adaptation, although these changes were to a lesser degree than the adaptations in preceding chapters. They mostly consisted of added music in between scenes, and one new song at the play's end to replace the one which Vanbrugh wrote (as examined later in the chapter). As noted in Chapter Four, Munby's modernised production of Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, focused as it was on Horner, did not investigate in detail Margery's status as an abused wife. Breen's take on *The Provoked Wife* with its condemnation of Brute's spousal cruelty may be viewed as a

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Provoked Wife,' Royal Shakespeare Company, <https://www.rsc.org.uk/restoration-plays/the-provoked-wife>, accessed 16 April, 2026.

continuation of this dramatic conversation. While Munby condemns Horner's toxic male behaviour *The Country Wife*, Breen continues the critique of societal ills, which, although they seem exclusively modern, are revealed as perennial. In his interpretation of Vanbrugh, Breen extends the cultural discourse begun by Munby, shifting the discussion's focus from sex addiction to domestic abuse. As my analysis in Chapter Four reveals, Munby's production connected its exploration of Horner's toxicity to the twenty-first century, creating a striking, unnerving portrait of contemporary debauchery which dissected the libertine hero's self-absorption and total abandonment to perpetual hedonism. In Breen's production of Vanbrugh's comedy, we will see that Restoration comedy productions do not need to be staged in modern dress for twenty-first century audiences. In fact, revivals of these plays set in their original eras of production in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries can feel intensely immediate and engaging to twenty-first century audiences, if the production draws out the relevant nuances within the play's text.

In Vanbrugh's play, the character of Brute (as noted above) is distinct among the other libertine heroes examined in this thesis in that he embraces libertinage following marriage rather than pursuing the path prior to matrimony. In fact, he pursues his career of hedonism to escape his union with Lady Brute. Significantly, his behaviour recalls that of other libertine figures throughout the plays examined in this study. His self-seeking motivation for marriage to Lady Brute recalls Pinchwife's explanation to Horner and his fellow libertines of his decision to marry Margery, as opposed to his prior practice of keeping mistresses in his past as a libertine himself. He states his belief that marriage will preserve him from being cuckolded, whereas 'keep[ing] a whore to [himself],' as he says, inevitably resulted in his being 'jilt[ed],' to which Horner knowingly retorts: 'So, then you only married to keep a whore to yourself'.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, Brute's mistaking of his disguised wife for a sex worker

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<sup>3</sup> William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 247.

in a public garden, his ensuing unwelcome advances to her, and his later attempt to drunkenly rape her recall Willmore's drunken attempt to rape Florinda in the garden of her family home. However, in Breen's revival, the overly exuberant comedic performance and romp-style that characterised both Barton's and Ingram's *Rovers* remained largely absent. In contrast, Breen's *The Provoked Wife* provides a stark, damning portrait of the libertine hero unvarnished, 'warts and all' (to employ Munby's phrase in the preceding chapter). Here, the libertine's potential for cruelty and violence towards women was on full display, and as my analysis reveals, this potential was disturbingly realised through this production's staging choices.

### Historical Background

Vanbrugh's play represents the tenor of a certain point in the late Restoration era, specifically the 1690s and early 1700s prior to Queen Anne's death and the end of the Stuart dynasty in 1714. Two recent political events had left their imprint upon the social landscape: the Exclusion Crisis from 1679 – 1681, during which the eligibility of James, Duke of York, later James II, to be the successor to his brother Charles II was disputed, since due to James II's conversion to the Catholic faith, he was deemed by Parliament to be unfit to rule over a primarily staunchly Protestant people, and the Glorious Revolution from 1688-89, the result of which was that James II fled England, Parliament declared his departure an 'abdication,' and James II's eldest daughter Mary assumed the throne, ruling jointly with her Protestant husband, William of Orange.

Writing of this moment in time, Lisa Freeman notes that 'no matter how one might want to spin the debates on continuity and change in this period, there is no way to avoid at least two very basic facts'.<sup>4</sup> She references Alan Houston and Steve Pincus, who list these facts, the first of which is 'that a society which underwent two revolutions in less than a century was

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<sup>4</sup> Lisa Freeman, *Antitheatricality and the Body Public* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 96.

indeed undergoing some very profound changes,’ and the second of which is that ‘[b]ehind all these [late seventeenth-century] conversations was a growing acceptance of the legitimacy of public discussion of affairs of state’.<sup>5</sup> The characters (particularly the ladies) in *The Provoked Wife* serve as a theatrical example of the latter point. As Carlos J. Gómez notes, the precarious state which Lady Brute acknowledges she is in at the play’s outset (i.e. being at the mercy of a ‘tyrannical husband’) parallels the position of commoners subject to a king’s whims.<sup>6</sup> However, while revolution (in domestic terms, adultery) might result in (apparent) liberty, the reality was that the ideal outcome (i.e. divorce followed by remarriage to one’s gallant) was, in Freeman’s words, ‘mere wishful thinking’.<sup>7</sup> Wives received ‘maintenance allowances’ on the condition that they did not take lovers, and consequently, ‘[p]rivate separation [was] only economically fulfilling,’ rather than emotionally and physically fulfilling. In short, the Exclusion Crisis and the Revolution of 1688 ushered in a ‘state of political uncertainty and social flux,’ both of which aspects are reflected in the play’s ambiguities.<sup>8</sup> Prior to his dramatic career, Vanbrugh himself played a minor role in politics, as ‘an early member of the whig political and literary Kit-Cat Club,’ whose intent ‘was to secure the protestant succession against the heirs of James II.’<sup>9</sup> His acquired acumen is highlighted in *The Provoked Wife*. Lady Brute’s comparison of her marital situation to the plight of subjects ruled by a despot would doubtless have reminded Restoration audiences of the broader discourse surrounding then-current matters of state. For the late seventeenth-century public, domestic politics was a microcosm of governmental politics. As we will see, for twenty-first

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Houston and Steve Pincus, eds., *A Nation Transformed: England after the Restoration* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Carlos J. Gómez, ‘Courtship, Marriage Vows, and Political Metaphor in Vanbrugh’s “The Relapse” and “The Provoked Wife,”’ *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (2001), 98, 102.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>8</sup> Freeman, *Antitheatricality*, 99.

<sup>9</sup> Kerry Downes, ‘Vanbrugh, Sir John (1664–1726), playwright and architect,’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2008, Oxford University Press, accessed 7 August 2024, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-28059>.

century playgoers, the issue of domestic tyranny had resonances with contemporary concerns surrounding marital violence.

The second cultural context which affected Vanbrugh's work was the controversy surrounding the late-seventeenth century antitheatrical debates, especially the criticism the play received in Jeremy Collier's 1698 *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. Vanbrugh addressed Collier in his written rebuttal in which he defended both *The Provok'd Wife* and *The Relapse* as morally instructive: 'The Stage is a glass for the World to view it self in; People ought therefore to see themselves as they are; if it makes their Faces too Fair, they won't know they are Dirty, and by consequence will neglect to wash 'em.'<sup>10</sup> As we will see, Breen's 2019 production for the RSC drew out these themes, following Vanbrugh's cue to connect audiences to the moral stakes onstage.

The comedy's plot is as follows: two years into marriage, Brute and his wife Lady Brute have a fraught union, having wedded for purely ulterior motives. As Brute explains to Constant and Heartfree, his primary motivation for marrying her was lust; he 'married because [he] had a mind to lie with her, and she would not let [him]'.<sup>11</sup> In the end, Brute's cowardice overcame his desire. At the time, he feared 'being damned' for sins and 'kept [. . .] company' with like-minded (apparently morally upright) 'fellows.'<sup>12</sup> Likewise, he had an aversion to 'quarrels,' i.e. duels. He still retains this hatred of conflict, according to his monologue at the play's start in which he states to the audience that the 'one thing on earth' he despises more than his wife is 'fighting'.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, rather than force himself upon her and thereby bringing upon himself the wrath of her male relatives which would likely have involved duels, he chose to marry her. Meanwhile, Lady Brute herself is hardly

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<sup>10</sup> Sir John Vanbrugh, *A Short Vindication of The Relapse and The Provok'd Wife from Immorality and Profaneness by the author* (N. Walwyn et al., 1698), 46.

<sup>11</sup> John Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, in *The Relapse and Other Plays*, ed. Brean Hammond (Oxford University Press, 2004), 526.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid; ibid., 471.

innocent. As she confides in the audience in her first speech, prior to her marriage she wilfully ignored the advice of those who warned her of Brute's ill temper. She entered her marriage fully aware of his surliness, believing her charms were sufficient to keep him in check, and she wed him for his money rather than his person. Now she has begun to realise her self-delusion and regret her bargain.

Brute, a coward (as noted above) who is suspicious of his wife's fidelity, is prone to verbal and sometimes physical abuse of her, to the point where (her patience wholly exhausted), she begins to contemplate yielding to the desires of her husband's friend, Constant, who burns with both unrequited lust and genuine care for her. Though Constant owns his desires to his friend Heartfree, admitting that he has 'more flesh and blood than grace and self-denial,' he likewise reveals his regard to the lady herself, noting:

[S]ince you are disposed on beyond redemption to one who does not know the value of the jewel you have put into his hands, I hope you would not think him greatly wronged though it should sometimes be looked on by a friend who knows how to esteem it as he ought.<sup>14</sup>

While Constant and Lady Brute flirt with the idea of having an illicit affair, Heartfree, an inveterate cynic, falls in love with Lady Brute's niece Bellinda, much to the chagrin of Lady Fancyfull, the Brutes' neighbour, a vain woman obsessed with Heartfree.

Vanbrugh experiments with disguise across his plot, as characters adopt costumes and also cross class boundaries and social positions. Brute habitually goes on nocturnal drunken sprees with his cronies Lord Rake and Colonel Bully, wreaking havoc through the London streets and getting into fights with lower-class citizens. During one of his nights out, Lady Brute and Bellinda arrange an assignation in Spring Garden with their admirers, for the following evening. Fancyfull and her French maid Mademoiselle follow Constant and Heartfree to the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 514, 578-579.



appointed place, and the two women witness everything which follows. Lady Brute and Bellinda arrive, disguised in masks and common-looking clothes to avoid being discovered. They nearly are found out when Brute arrives, wearing a cleric's robe which he and his friends have stolen from a tailor, and attempts to claim the two women for himself. This is the first instance where Lady Brute is sexually threatened by her own husband (although as we will see, the moment was played for comedy in Breen's production). Constant and Heartfree, not recognising their ladies at first, almost hand them over, but they reveal themselves in time. The men dismiss Brute, and wooing ensues. However, things are thrown into confusion when Constant and Lady Brute, hurrying into a nearby 'arbour' to consummate their passion, encounter Fancyfull and Mademoiselle.<sup>15</sup> In fear of possible disgrace should the incident be made public, Lady Brute, Constant, Heartfree, and Bellinda depart for the Brutes' home, where they settle down to play cards. Yet again, they are interrupted by a still drunken Brute; the women's gallants conceal themselves in the closet. Lady Brute attempts to get Brute 'to go to bed'; he insists on kissing her.<sup>16</sup> She initially acquiesces, but when she expresses revulsion at his foul scent, he grows resentful, kissing her again despite her protests. Significantly, Vanbrugh's direction for the second kiss states that he '[k]isses and tumbles her'.<sup>17</sup> By the late seventeenth century, the word 'tumble,' first used in the early 1300s, had acquired various definitions; one of these was slang for sexual intercourse.<sup>18</sup> Vanbrugh's textual indications regarding the extent of this moment's activity remain ambiguous. The stage direction could be interpreted as something comparatively mild, such as forceful kissing and some disheveling of Lady Brute's hair and attire. An instance of this approach occurred in a 2014 production of the play, presented by the University of York's Department of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 645.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 655.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, "tumble (v.)," March 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8016723340>, accessed 16 April, 2026.

Theatre, Film and Television.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that Vanbrugh named his character ‘Brute,’ thereby plainly laying out the primary defining characteristic of his nature. Breen’s production focused on Lady Brute’s suffering at her husband’s hands (literally); as Jean Marsden notes, the female-centric and female-sympathetic nature of Vanbrugh’s comedy aligns it both with the ‘marriage plays with which it is commonly associated [and] also with [. . .] she-tragedies’.<sup>20</sup> Breen’s staging of Vanbrugh’s work especially highlighted its elements of she-tragedy.

As we will see, Breen mined the word ‘tumble’ for all its sexual import, imbuing the scene with a sense of violence. Rather than merely kissing his lady, Brute nearly committed marital rape. Here, the earlier suggestion of Brute’s sexual violence towards Lady Brute in Spring Garden was brought forth in all its chilling cruelty. To return to Vanbrugh’s narrative: post-kiss, Brute goes to the closet in search of his wife’s cold tea and discovers Constant and Heartfree. His suspicions are roused; however, his inebriated state prevents him from challenging them to an immediate duel; instead, they depart, and he falls asleep. As he slumbers, Lady Brute and Bellinda plot their next steps; Bellinda asserts she will take the blame – they can tell Brute that Heartfree was visiting because he has been secretly courting her for a while, and she confides in Lady Brute her intention to marry him.

The following day, the men are apprised of this scheme via a letter from the women, but Brute is still suspicious. Rasor, his valet, has overheard the ladies’ plan and informed not only his master but also Mademoiselle (for whom he lusts) and Lady Fancyfull. Brute’s misgivings regarding his wife’s fidelity are only quelled when Constant threatens him with a duel, whereupon he discards his doubts, overcome by his natural cowardice. Lady Fancyfull and Mademoiselle arrive, determined to stop Heartfree and Bellinda’s wedding, but Rasor,

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<sup>19</sup> ‘The Provoked Wife.’ *YouTube*, uploaded by TFTI, 16 Dec. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXnHB5d5IXI>, accessed 2 May 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Jean I. Marsden, *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage, 1660-1720* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 58.

undergoing a change of heart, begs mercy of his betters and unmask his co-conspirators, who depart to the others' ridicule. The play ends on a sobering, if ambiguous note. The Brutes are locked in a stalemate; Constant renounces his hopes for Lady Brute; and Bellinda and Heartfree contemplate the unfortunate example of marriage set by her aunt and uncle. Michael Cordner, noting 'the empathetic nature of Vanbrugh's writing for *Lady Brute*,' remarks that the play's 'concluding impasse [is] a calculatedly downbeat ending' since Lady Brute and Bellinda remain confined by 'societal constraints' which prevent their greater agency.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, You-me Park observes how 'the issue of body, entrapped and constrained either literally or ideologically (or both)' is central to the play.<sup>22</sup> As my research reveals, Breen's production drew out Vanbrugh's commentary on domestic abuse, framing it for a twenty-first century audience in a way which starkly reflected contemporary issues surrounding domestic violence. In this, his adaptation reflects scholarly attention to Brute's violent tendencies, evoking how previous directors also appear to echo scholarship on Rochester's libertine decay.

### ***The Provoked Wife's Origins***

As noted above, the play premiered in 1697. According to *The London Stage*, '[t]he date of the first performance is not known, but the fact that the play was advertised in the *Post Boy*, 11-13 May 1697, suggests that it was first acted about mid-April, a month before publication'.<sup>23</sup> It was staged at the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre and acted by Thomas Betterton's company – Betterton himself played Brute. *The Provoked Wife* enjoyed a robust popularity throughout the eighteenth century, from its premiere date to nearly a hundred years

<sup>21</sup> Michael Cordner, 'The Genius of John Vanbrugh,' in programme for *The Provoked Wife*, RSC 2019.

<sup>22</sup> You-me Park, 'Politicizing Sexuality/Sexualizing Politics: Body and Language in Vanbrugh's "The Provoked Wife,"' *Restoration* 18, no. 2 (1994), 104.

<sup>23</sup> Van Lennep et al., editors, *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 1: 1660-1700*, 477.

later in 1796, it was staged 273 times.<sup>24</sup> Of great significance is the performance recorded on 16 November 1744, when David Garrick, the famed actor-manager, first played the role of Brute. He repeated his portrayal frequently from then until the performance listed in *The London Stage* as 30 December 1769.<sup>25</sup> Garrick's primary contribution to the play was his memorable performance in Act IV, scene i and Act IV, scene iii. Although the revisions made to those scenes have been attributed to his invention, James L. Smith suggests that in fact these changes were made by Vanbrugh himself. In an appendix to his edition of Vanbrugh's text, Smith cites the recollections of actor Colley Cibber in his memoir. According to Cibber, in 1725, when discussions were underway for a revival of the play, there arose an issue regarding the 'loose Liberties it had formerly too justly been charged with'.<sup>26</sup> To solve this, Vanbrugh 'was prevail'd upon to substitute a new-written Scene in the place of the one in the fourth Act, where the Wantonness of his Wit and Humour had (originally) made a Rake [i.e. Brute] talk like a Rake in the borrow'd Habit of a Clergyman: To avoid which Offence, he clapt the same Debauchee into the Undress [i.e. casual attire] of a Woman of Quality'.<sup>27</sup> As Smith states, since Cibber played the part of Brute in the subsequent revival, his firsthand account holds weight.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, his description of Brute as a 'rake' follows the text's indications of Brute's libertine rapaciousness, especially as staged in Breen's production. If Cibber softened Brute's libertine hero role into a more modulated rake, Breen would go on to revive the full potential of Brute's libertine character.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid; *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 5: 1776-1800*, ed. Charles Beecher Hogan (Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 1878; 'The Provoked Wife,' *The London Stage Database, 1660-1800*, <https://www.eighteenthcenturydrama.amdigital.co.uk/LondonStage/Database>, accessed 10 April, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 3: 1729-1747*, ed. Arthur H. Scouten (Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), 1130; *The London Stage, 1660-1800, Part 4: 1747-1776*, ed. George Winchester Stone, Jr. (Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), 1445.

<sup>26</sup> Colley Cibber, qtd. in 'Appendix A: The Revised Scenes,' in John Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, ed. James L. Smith (Bloomsbury, 2003), 113.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

In the first of the two scenes in question, Brute, Lord Rake, and Colonel Bully enter on their drunken nightly rampage through town. Having just attacked a man and left him for dead, they anticipate that the man's distressed wife will alert the night watchman, whom they will likewise fight. A tailor then enters 'with a bundle under his arm,' the other men seize the parcel, and Brute dons its contents. In Vanbrugh's original text, the garment in question was 'the doctor of the parish's gown,' and Brute garbs himself in it on Lord Rake's suggestion that when the trio battle the night watchman, 'though the blows fall upon you, the scandal may light upon the church.'<sup>29</sup> The inevitable brawl ensues when the watchman and the constable appear on the scene. Brute's companions flee and he is taken into custody to be brought before the justice of the peace. The meeting with the justice occurs in Act IV scene iii, a brief exchange in which the still-inebriated Brute, whom the assembled law enforcement officers believe to be a clergyman, does indeed besmirch the church. Instances of this 'scandal' include his citing his drunkenness as an excuse to avoid 'answer[ing] directly' when questioned by the justice regarding his earlier misdemeanours, and replying to the justice's inquiry of '[h]ave you any cure?' (i.e. referring to his supposed clerical duties) with 'I have – a very good cure – for a clap.'<sup>30</sup> At the scene's conclusion, when Brute has been released since the justice does not wish to prosecute the clergy and he has vowed to avoid disorderliness he addresses the constable 'shall you and I go pick up a whore together?' The constable declines on the grounds of his marriage, whereupon Brute, exiting, retorts 'Then I'll go by myself; and you and your wife may be damned.'<sup>31</sup>

By 1744, the year of Garrick's revival, the theatrical repertoire had shifted in tone. What Jean Marsden terms 'the increased moral delicacy of early-eighteenth-century comedy'

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<sup>29</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 605.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 624.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 627.

stemmed partly from the lasting influence of Collier.<sup>32</sup> The other key factor was the societal embrace of propriety (or at least the appearance thereof) brought about by the rise of the Hanoverian dynasty, whose members were primarily characterized by their staunch Protestant beliefs and ostensible moral rectitude. As Hannah Smith writes, they gained public support because of this virtue, since the populace had grown weary of the tumult during the Stuarts' reign:

Owing to the intransigence, treachery, disability or mortality of native monarchs and their heirs, since the seventeenth century, political and religious hope in Britain came to be personified by princely Protestant foreigners who were believed to support those values which were seen as particularly, although not specifically, native to the British Isles.<sup>33</sup>

Theatre censorship and alterations to existing texts ensued and *The Provoked Wife* was not immune. Vanbrugh's changes together with Garrick's 'jaunty' performance made Brute's harshness somewhat more palatable to Georgian-era playgoers.<sup>34</sup> As Cibber recollected, to avoid any hint of anti-clericalism or 'Prophaneness' towards men of the cloth, Vanbrugh rewrote Act IV, scene i so that instead of a clergyman's gown, the tailor entered carrying Lady Brute's 'short cloak and wrapping-gown'.<sup>35</sup> With Brute now dressed as a woman, the scene (as well as the later scene with the justice and constable, which was reworked in keeping with the new plot detail) took on comedic overtones, rather than anything bordering on offence to the church. In fact, Garrick's portrayal of the disguised Brute became a popular replacement for the clerical garb in productions of the play (including Breen's, as we will

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<sup>32</sup> Jean L. Marsden, 'Nicholas Rowe and the Second Generation of She-Tragedy,' *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality, and the English Stage, 1660–1720* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 137.

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Smith, 'The Idea of a Protestant Monarchy in Britain 1714-1760,' *Past & Present* 185, no. 1 (2004), 118.

<sup>34</sup> James L. Smith, 'Introduction to *The Provoked Wife*,' xxvi.

<sup>35</sup> Colley Cibber, qtd. in Smith, 'Appendix A,' 113; Sir John Vanbrugh, qtd. in Smith, 'Appendix A,' *The Provoked Wife*, 116.

see). It bears mentioning that Brute's female disguise is a double-sided entity. On the one hand, it functions as a comic device intended to amuse, and indeed the juxtaposition of Brute (the play's libertine hero) with his feminine disguise partly undercuts both the sexual danger he poses to women and the threat of bodily harm which he poses to the night watch, thereby framing him as a figure of ridicule rather than a potential menace. On the other hand, Brute's cross-dressing also carries more sinister undertones; beneath the obvious humour, it is a travesty of womankind which personifies Brute's loathing towards his wife. In keeping with the fate of most Restoration comedies as analysed by Robert Hume and Arthur Scouten, *The Provoked Wife* vanished from the stage by 1800. However, its return to the stage in 1919, performed by the Incorporated Stage Society, planted the seed of a subsequent popularity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

### ***The Provoked Wife*, RSC 2019 – A Restoration Production**

Breen's production was staged in the Swan Theatre during the summer season of 2019, running from 2 May to 7 September. Significantly, this was its first major production in England since 1997, twenty-two years earlier. Therefore, the RSC's 2019 Swan production may be viewed as a harkening back to the principle upon which the Swan had been built, as a space for the revival of little-known plays from the sixteenth and seventeenth. Breen's production, featuring 1690s sets and costumes as well as music composed by Paddy Cuneen in a mock Baroque style, vividly evoked the Restoration period. Breen's approach to the libertine hero, as we shall see, was infused with modern day resonances about male violence, but his production, more than most in the thesis, set the play within its Restoration visual contexts. It is possible to read the Restoration set and costume design as symbolic of Breen's deep engagement with the libertine hero.

Likewise, the architecture and scale of the Swan theatre space mimicked Restoration relations between the players and theatregoers by fostering an intimacy between the actors and audience. Like the 1986 and 2016 *Rover* revivals, Breen's actors broke the fourth wall at times, interacting with the audience. One instance of this was when Constant, exulting after making his amorous addresses to Lady Brute, exclaimed 'For she gave me hope; did she not say she gave me hope?' He addressed the question to the audience and awaited a reply. At both performances I witnessed, the audience answered with murmurs of agreement, some individuals even calling out 'yes!'; the effect was that of a genuine dialogue between actors and audience members. Another moment of audience interaction was when, during Bellinda and Lady Brute's evening discourse, when their conversation turned to their habits in attending the theatre, Bellinda took a programme from one of the playgoers, and the two women used it as a prop programme in their dialogue. One might say that the act of transferring the programme from the seats to the stage functioned as both a metatheatrical commentary and a blurring of lines between the Restoration era and the present. In some ways, the Swan theatre advanced Vanbrugh's own emphasis on 'The Stage [as] a glass for the World to view it self [sic] in', thereby amplifying the implication of Breen's version of Brute's dangerous libertine behaviour.<sup>36</sup> As we will see, much like the actors themselves, certain issues inherent in Vanbrugh's text that were brought to the forefront in this revival spoke directly to modern audiences.

### ***The Provoked Wife*, RSC 2019 – Reviving Brute**

From his first scene (in fact from the play's first moments, when his offstage furious roar sent the onstage musicians scattering in fright), Slinger's Brute commanded the space, shuffling onstage in a wrinkled nightshirt and cap to complain to the audience about his vexing wife,

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<sup>36</sup> Sir John Vanbrugh, *A Short Vindication of The Relapse and The Provok'd Wife from Immorality and Prophaneness by the author* (N. Walwyn et al., 1698), 46.



that despite her many advantages, including youth, beauty, and moral integrity, he ‘hat[ed] her’.<sup>37</sup> On the entrance of Lady Brute (played by Alexandra Gilbreath), we saw her pain and desperation, as she tried to connect with him to no avail; he was terse, cruel, and entirely dismissive of her, thus effectively priming his wife to launch herself into the welcoming arms of the nearest devoted gallant, i.e. Constant.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Breen’s production tellingly drew out the revealing contrasts between Brute and his two friends and how their differences emphasised his libertine aspects. The two gallants’ first scene together (in Act 2, scene 1) effectively established their respective personalities. Hodgkison’s Heartfree was the older, inveterate cynic, his tall, imposing frame attired in a sober black suit, while Hound’s Constant was the attractive younger man-about-town, in a vibrant blue coat trimmed with gold accents and matching blue breeches. Presently Brute entered; his slovenly attire (an askew grey periwig, with a faded, well-worn brown waistcoat, matching breeches, and a scarlet coat) and his uncaring, self-absorbed replies solidified Slinger’s interpretation of him as a thoroughly detestable figure.<sup>39</sup> Constant’s confidences to Heartfree of his affection for Lady Brute (prior to Brute’s entrance) further underlined the contrast between him and Brute. Setting aside the fact that Constant’s affection is not without self-interest (tempered as his solicitude is by lust, which he acknowledges), his very name suggests an abiding love of which Brute is incapable, given his preferences for drinking, brawling, and frequenting brothels. Meanwhile, Heartfree, as we will see, contrasts with Brute in his narrative arc of cynicism towards women turned to love for Bellinda, the opposite of Brute’s desire for Lady Brute turned to cynicism.

Brute’s cruelty as a libertine in the domestic sphere was further heightened during Act 3, scene 1, when Brute, vexed by Lady Brute and Bellinda’s conversation, drove them from the

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<sup>37</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 471.

<sup>38</sup> ‘A19004 - The Provoked Wife - Swan 2019,’ *Vimeo*, uploaded by Royal Shakespeare Company, used with permission.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 523; ‘The Provoked Wife - Swan 2019.’

dining room just as Constant and Heartfree entered. In Vanbrugh's text, the directions read: *'He rises in a fury, throws his pipe at them and drives them out. As they run off, Constant and Heartfree enter. Lady Brute runs against Constant'*.<sup>40</sup> Vanbrugh's Brute never lays a hand on either of the ladies. However, in Breen's staging Brute's cruelty was heightened to stress the inherent violence of Vanbrugh's play and thus of the libertine figure. Brute grabbed the back of his wife's neck, dragging her towards the upstage left doorway as she yelled in pain and terror. Rather than running against Constant, Lady Brute was flung into his arms as Brute released her, as Constant and Heartfree had entered via the doorway in time to witness the last few seconds of the incident.<sup>41</sup> This unnerving moment served to emphasise the play's resonances with contemporary concerns surrounding domestic violence. Breen spells out what Vanbrugh only implies.

Here I pause to discuss Brute's tavern scene in Act 3 scene 2. In Vanbrugh's text, the scene only calls for Brute, Lord Rake, and Colonel Bully to be present, drinking in a tavern. However, in Breen's version, the scene included an ensemble of drunken patrons and corset-clad female sex workers. As Constant and Heartfree offer contrasts to Brute's libertinage, his drinking companions emphasise and, in a sense, embody his darker aspects as a libertine. Lord Rake (played by Carl Prekopp), with his cry of 'damn morality' and his song celebrating debauchery (with the telling lyrics 'So there's claret in store, / [i]n peace I've my whore, / [a]nd in peace I jog on to the devil') represents the libertine's hedonism and self-absorption.<sup>42</sup> Colonel Bully (played by Les Dennis), meanwhile, represents Brute's cruelty and belligerence towards others who are beneath him according to societal structure. His subsequent physical attack upon the tailor underlines this behaviour, when examined alongside his earlier

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<sup>40</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 546.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Provoked Wife - Swan 2019.'

<sup>42</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 587.

domestic violence towards of his wife. Because of Brute's cowardice, he can only engage in one-sided battles with those under him, where he is assured of the advantage.

These themes of rakishness and bullying also feature in the scenes of the night watch and Brute's subsequent interrogation by the justice of the peace (both involving his female disguise). Ostensibly, these moments were played for comedy; indeed, Michael Billington remarked in his review that it seemed Brute 'ogle[d] the Watch in a way that suggest[ed] [. . .] he [was] starting to relish his disguise.'<sup>43</sup> However, I suggest that these scenes held much darker implications, revealing the depths of Brute's hatred for women, specifically his wife, in keeping with his heretofore expressed loathing of her. Instead of 'scandalizing the clergy' in clerical robes, he 'scandaliz[ed] womankind' in his testimony to the justice, portraying his wife as a virago.<sup>44</sup> Instances of his ridicule of his wife included his mincing gait, angry bellows to indicate how Lady Brute supposedly summoned her servants, assorted punches delivered to the Watch members (who trembled, intimidated by his physical force and his ferocious yells), and his simpering demeanour, especially when the Justice inquired of the supposed Lady Brute if her husband 'used her well,' and Slinger's disguised Brute suggestively replied, 'A little upon the rough, sometimes,' implying vigorous sex, to the discomfort of the other characters and the audience's amusement.<sup>45</sup> On a deeper level, however, this line reading with its implication of Brute using his wife roughly during sex was both a harkening back to his previous physical violence towards her and a foreshadowing of his later assault attempts on her. In short, Brute's female disguise was a display of verbalised, physicalised misogyny. In a subsequent scene, still wearing the gown, he attempted to force himself upon his disguised wife (and to a somewhat lesser degree his niece) in Spring Garden,

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<sup>43</sup> Billington, 'Review of *The Provoked Wife*, *Theatre Record* 39 (2019).

<sup>44</sup> John Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, ed. Smith, 76; 'The Provoked Wife - Swan 2019'.

<sup>45</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, ed. Smith, 121.

committing a double-layered offence towards women by endeavouring to abuse them while wearing their own garb.

As we will see, this garden scene with Brute's drunken attempt on his wife recalls Willmore's attempt on Florinda, in which Willmore erroneously assumes that Florinda, alone in her family's garden at night in informal attire, is a sex worker advertising her availability. Here, Chernaik's insight into the rover subcategory of libertine hero is equally applicable to Brute, in his belief that his wife is, in fact, one of a pair of sex workers: 'It is entirely characteristic of each to mistake a virtuous woman for a whore, since to them all women are alike and no opportunity should be neglected'.<sup>46</sup> Brute's objectification of his wife and his entitled behaviour towards her person is consistent throughout the play, and was amplified by Breen's staging choices, which lent a physical outlet to Brute's sense of entitlement with various moments of manhandling. It is significant that, like the garden scene as staged in Barton's and Ingram's *Rovers*, where both interpretations of Willmore's scene with Florinda were played for comedy and staged as humorous set-pieces, Vanbrugh's garden scene was also staged for comedy. This staging choice intensified the unsettling darkness of Brute's later rape attempt on his wife in their home.

Here, Lady Brute's escape from her husband's drunken rapacity was tempered by comedy; Brute's female garb and drunken behaviour, already established as comic in his preceding scenes with the Watch and the justice, were a source of humour. Brute entered, greeting his friends with exuberant exclamations of 'What a pox! Constant! Heartfree!' to audience laughter.<sup>47</sup> He then noticed the women, who stood apart. With a leery added 'ooh' (which received more audience laughter), he continued 'and two whores egad'.<sup>48</sup> As the women tried

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<sup>46</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 631; Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, 43.

<sup>47</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 631. In the original text, the line is 'What a pox – here's Constant, Heartfree - and two whores egad'. Presumably the line was broken up to directly parallel with his corresponding line later, following the attempted rape scene, to draw out the parallels between the two scenes as instances of Brute's spousal abuse to his wife.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 632.

fruitlessly to evade his wandering hands, Constant and Heartfree began to exit; Lady Brute, stomping on her husband's foot and breaking free from his arms, rushed to Constant, who, looked at her closely and finally recognised her in her disguise. He attempted to put off Brute, exclaiming 'Hold a little, knight, she swoons,' whereupon Lady Brute performed a comedically abrupt faint in his arms and he lowered her on the ground, holding her tightly.<sup>49</sup> Brute, undeterred, replied 'I'll swoon her,' shoving Constant aside and clambering atop his wife amid her yells of fear.<sup>50</sup> Having forced this clinch, Brute rolled himself and his lady over (suggesting a prelude to sexual activity), and Constant, to prevent his proceedings, grabbed Lady Brute mid-roll as he called to Heartfree for assistance. Heartfree disentangled the trio, pulling Sir John off his lady. Apart from the moments when the women attempted to avoid Brute's lewd groping, the scene was punctuated with much audience laughter, the comedic aspects still partially veiling the horror of domestic violence at the core of the Brutes' marriage, which was later fully revealed in the attempted rape scene. The audience laughter in the garden scene implicated them in Brute's actions, making the later attempted rape scene even more shocking. Here, clad in his shirt and the skirt of the gown, both begrimed from his nightly escapades, he reached beneath the skirt to unfasten his breeches. This instance chillingly emphasised his tyrannical mastery over his lady; her clothes were his to don when he so chose, and her person was his to take his pleasure of when he so desired.

Breen continued to develop Brute's violence in later scenes. In Act 4, scene 2, Bellinda and Lady Brute had invited Constant and Heartfree to play cards with them at home. Abruptly, Brute returned, forcing the ladies to hide Constant and Heartfree in the closet in the dining room (in this production, the closet was the trapdoor entrance in the stage floor). Lady Brute endeavoured to persuade him to go to bed. Upon discovering a spare playing card from the recently ended card game sitting on a chair, Brute's suspicions were aroused. He asked a kiss

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 635.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

of her, and she gave him a brief peck, rubbing the taste of him from her lips after and murmuring an aside, 'He stinks like poison'.<sup>51</sup> Her abrupt, vexed tone drew laughter from the audience, yet the atmosphere turning chilling moments later, when he demanded another kiss of her, and at her resistance roared 'Do't, I say'.<sup>52</sup> She approached him slowly, seeing futility in resistance. Her lips met his; as they kissed, he clasped her tightly, groping her waist, neck, and hips while making closed-mouth grunts of pleasure. He released her, and they started towards the upstage doorway; just as they reached it, he stopped, blocked her way with his arm. Quietly, yet determinedly, he said 'Now, wife, you shall see my gratitude. You give me two kisses. I'll give you [. . .] two hundred'.<sup>53</sup> Grabbing the back of her neck again, as she exclaimed in fright, he dragged her to the dining room table, shoved her onto it face-forward, and began to shove up her skirts, clearly intent on rape. In an echo of the Spring Garden scene, he clambered on top of her, nuzzling her neck, as she struggled, clutching one of the candelabras on the table. She twisted around, attempting vainly to beat him with the candelabra as she shouted, 'O Lord! Pray, Sir John, be quiet. Heavens, what a pickle am I in'.<sup>54</sup> Bellinda rose from her seat upstage, giving her aside ('If I were in her pickle, I'd call my gallant out of the closet, and he should cudgel him soundly') in breathless horror.<sup>55</sup>

In response to Breen's staging, the audience remained hushed, in palpable distress at the scene before them. This was the case in both the performances I witnessed and in the recording. As Brute snarled 'So, now, you being as dirty and as nasty as myself, we may go pig together,' he reached under the skirt, unfastening his breeches, but just before proceeding with the rape, he was overcome with a wave of nausea (unlike Jeremy Irons's similar moment in Barton's *Rover* following Willmore's drunken attempt on Florinda, humour was entirely

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 655.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 655-656.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 656.

absent here).<sup>56</sup> Getting down from the table, he swallowed his vomit and went in search of his wife's cold tea in the closet, whereupon he discovered the gallants. In a stupefied tone, he tellingly repeated his greeting from the Spring Garden scene as they appeared: 'Constant'. Here was a burst of nervous audience laughter. 'Heartfree'. Another burst of nervous laughter followed this. Brute turned to the women, pointing at them as they stood silently: 'And two whores again, egad!'

Though the audience laughed at his discovery, their laughter was anxious and much more muted in comparison with the preceding scenes featuring the drunken Brute. For critics, the attempted rape proved haunting – most reviews referred to its unnerving quality.<sup>57</sup> This staging choice, shocking as it might have seemed, nuanced the play's status as a comedy, drawing out the reflectiveness inherent in later-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century plays (including those by Congreve and Farquhar as well as Vanbrugh). Such plays retain thematic aspects of the comedies of previous decades (including fraught marriages, illicit affairs, and courtship) while examining the older plays' dissipation via a critical lens. In short, the near-marital rape moment was an effective interpolation which linked the past with the present, appealing to twenty-first century concerns regarding the perennially relevant issue of violence against women via the lens of the late-seventeenth century.

Carlos J. Gómez considers the play's conclusion: '[W]hat will happen once the curtain falls and life takes over? Lady Brute may still turn her husband into a cuckold, and we cannot guarantee that the underplot story [Heartfree and Bellinda's romance] will not mirror the other in the long run'.<sup>58</sup> Regardless of the play's ambiguous dénouement, the implications for the Brutes offer a grim prospect, as Gómez continues: 'In any case, Vanbrugh's realist approach

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> For examples, see Michael Billington, 'Review of *The Provoked Wife*,' *Theatre Record* 39 (2019); Dominic Cavendish, Review of *The Provoked Wife*, *Theatre Record* 39 (2019); Sam Marlowe, *Theatre Record* 39 (2019).

<sup>58</sup> Carlos J. Gómez, 'Courtship, Marriage Vows, and Political Metaphor in Vanbrugh's "The Relapse" and "The Provoked Wife,"' *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (2001), 114.

disallows poetic justice concerning marital discord: divorce is not possible and adultery has both personal and public consequences'.<sup>59</sup> Gómez references these consequences in his commentary on the scene early on in the play wherein Brute expresses to Constant and Heartfree his desire to separate from his wife: 'To "catch her adulterating" is Sir John Brute's hope, but Heartfree reminds him husbands do pay a price: a yearly pension for the adulteress and the ignominy of cuckoldry. [. . .] [E]ventually Sir John will decide to forget about both divorce and honour, and pretend nothing has happened'.<sup>60</sup> In the end, Brute has not been cuckolded, as Constant and Heartfree assure him. Yet his verbal acceptance of his wife's innocence may be read as feigned, stemming more from his own cowardice when Constant threatens a duel to defend Lady Brute's good name than from any real belief in her fidelity. Slinger's delivery of Brute's reflective aside was spoken with a sense of longing for what had been, and regret for the prison of his own making that was his marriage. He began in frustration, musing to the audience: 'What the plague did I marry her for? I knew she did not like me; if she had, she would have lain with me'.<sup>61</sup> He looked over to her, where she and the other characters stood, apart from him, and his tone turned briefly tender as he went on, suggesting that beneath his lust Brute had once had a faint hint of real affection for his bride before they wed. With a glimmer of fondness, he finished the line: '[F]or I would have done so because I liked her'.<sup>62</sup> His tone became vexed again as he continued: 'But that's past, and I have her. And now, what shall I do with her? If I put my horns in my pocket, she'll grow insolent'.<sup>63</sup> Glancing over at Constant, he went on: 'If I don't, that goat there, that stallion, is ready to whip me through the guts'.<sup>64</sup> Staring out once again at the audience, he ended his speech in resignation: 'The debate then is reduced to this; shall I die a hero, or live a rascal?

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>61</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 694.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



Why, wiser men than I have long since concluded that a living dog is better than a dead lion'.<sup>65</sup> In a forced, somewhat begrudging tone, he turned to Constant and Heartfree, addressing them: 'Gentlemen [. . .] I must own I have never observed anything in my wife's course of life to back me in my jealousy of her: but jealousy's a mark of love; so she need not trouble her head about it, as long as I make no more words on't'.<sup>66</sup> Here, the crux of the Brutes' stalemate was definitively emphasised; both were trapped in this loveless marriage to the very end.

Finally, at the close of the play, Constant seemingly broke off his tentative affair with Lady Brute via another interpolation: a song, penned by Cunneen, entitled 'The Ballad of the Lost Woodsman,' which Rufus Hound performed to the accompaniment of the onstage ensemble and band members' instruments. The lyrics of this song are transcribed below from the prompt book (in italics, as they were written).

*I:*

*Alone amidst the ash and oak*

*I built my cordwood stack*

*When Lightning struck; the fire and smoke*

*Did blow me to my back*

*This fire sent from high above*

*Scorched all that went before*

*And lit the path to thee, my Love*

*By thee owned evermore.*

*But being more of flesh and blood*

*Than Grace and self-denial ,*

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 694-695.

*That flame, beset by time's cruel flood*

*Extinguished in the trial.*

*When kneeling at where once it stirred*

*In prayer for how to mend*

*Within its ash I read the word*

*Attend. Attend. Attend.*

*Attend. Attend. Attend.*<sup>67</sup>

Here, Constant was framed as a selfless figure, dampening his love for Lady Brute for the sake of her welfare. On the first of the final three 'attends,' he took Bellinda's hand, addressing the word to her as a command, on the second Heartfree's, likewise commanding him, and on the third he placed their hands in each other's and stepped back, as if bidding them to enjoy the happiness which he knew he himself never could. During the song, Bellinda and Heartfree, standing upstage right and left respectively, gave Constant (upstage centre) their attention. Meanwhile, during the first verse, Brute stood downstage left, staring at his lady; meanwhile Lady Brute, downstage right, gazed out over the audience, avoiding meeting her husband's eyes. However, when Constant sang the words 'my Love,' she turned upstage to face him, her attention caught; watching her, Brute did the same. As he moved into the second verse, singing of 'being more of flesh and blood than Grace and self-denial,' Bellinda and Heartfree gazed at one another, serenely. The Brutes too shared a fleeting look, perhaps remembering their own newlywed days. Tellingly, on the line about the 'flame' being 'extinguished,' Lady Brute turned her back to her husband once again, facing downstage right, recognizing whatever love they might have had was gone. Brute watched her for a few moments, then during the line 'in prayer for how to mend,' he turned back to face downstage left. Both of their countenances were solemn, suggesting regret for what might have been.

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<sup>67</sup> 'The Provoked Wife - Swan 2019'.

In the play's final moments, after Bellinda's line to Heartfree ('Take heed – the surly husband's fate you see'), they, together with Constant and Lady Brute, stared at Brute, who at first did not sense their collective gaze; then, turning, he returned it, as the lights faded to black.<sup>68</sup> Heartfree and Bellinda, representing hope for a happy union wherein they would not repeat the errors of her aunt and uncle, were near one another, while Lady Brute was distant from both her husband and her former would-be lover. These final moments soberingly stressed Brute's unresolved aspects in contrast to his fellow leading male characters. Constant's self-awareness and ultimately self-restraint marked him as a foil to Brute's selfishness, cruelty, and violent aggression. Similarly, Heartfree, having discarded his former cynicism in his love for Bellinda, represented what Brute ought to be. The lingering image, then, which the audience was left with was that of the libertine as domestic abuser.

## Conclusion

Breen's production is unique among the revivals considered in this thesis since it explicitly dealt with twenty-first century societal concerns surrounding male-female relationships while remaining in-period costume and staging. In Breen's programme note, he wrote of his experiences during the production's early rehearsals, reflecting on how Vanbrugh's play resembles modern dramas:

[T]he play has no bottom; its dive into what drives us goes deep and had sent me correspondences from the furthest, darkest edges of that dive. It made me feel like when I read Pinter's *Betrayal* for the first time, or Nina Raine's *Consent*: that sense of standing before a mirror that simultaneously draws you to it and makes you want to run away. [. . .] *The Provoked Wife* has a savage brittleness when anatomising the longing of the human heart and its single-minded often destructive pursuit of what it wants.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife*, 711.

<sup>69</sup> Philip Breen, 'And Nothing Happens,' in programme for *The Provoked Wife*, RSC 2019.

Breen's reference to Raine's *Consent* is telling considering the emphasis his staging gave to Brute's marital rapacity. By portraying his deep-seated cruelty and cynicism, born of his single-minded self-absorption in his own pleasures to escape the confines of his hastily made marriage (a prison of his own creation), Breen's production revealed the darkest recesses of Brute's heart. Moreover, Breen here shows us how it's possible to thoroughly modernise a Restoration comedy in such a way that its moral themes are as palpable as those in more recent works like *Betrayal* and *Consent*, while keeping the play in its period setting.

In contrast to both *Rovers*' colourful escapism and *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*'s grim portrait of the Restoration era, this *Provoked Wife* may be viewed as a companion piece to Chichester Festival Theatre's modernised *The Country Wife*, as both were undergirded by similar social commentaries. Lex Shrapnel's present-day Horner, a debauched sex addict, was depicted as a superficially charming yet ultimately repellent figure. His perniciousness was particularly evident within the ongoing #MeToo cultural discourse, which created a forum in which to condemn toxic masculinity. Meanwhile, Slinger's Brute exhibited similar toxicities, especially in his sexual rapacity and physical cruelty. The contemporary resonances were not lost on the audience; indeed, at the conclusion of the first performance I attended, a woman sitting next to me remarked upon the assault scene, solemnly observing something to the effect of 'marital rape was as big a problem then as it is now'. Indeed, data published by the Office for National Statistics in November of 2019 offered the sobering statistic that '[i]n the year ending March 2019, an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16 to 74 years experienced domestic abuse [. . .] (1.6 million women and 786,000 men)'.<sup>70</sup> In light of this, it raises the question of whether this play can still be considered a comedy. I argue that it can, since it follows the established tropes of the genre and is tonally comparable to the reflective later-

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<sup>70</sup> Meghan Elkin, 'Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2019,' *Office for National Statistics*, 25 November 2019, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2019>, accessed 16 April, 2026.

seventeenth and early-eighteenth century comedies which examine the past decades' dissipation through a critical lens (notable examples include Vanbrugh's own 1696 *The Relapse* and Congreve's 1700 *The Way of the World*).

Much in the same way Munby's *The Country Wife* vividly reflected twenty-first century mores surrounding sexual license, Breen's *The Provoked Wife* provided a sobering portrait of the ongoing issue of domestic abuse. Here, the libertine hero is not the alluring-yet - problematic-and-complex rover wooing and winning a spirited heroine (like Willmore), or the glamorous-yet-inwardly-corrupt rake seducing his friends' wives and sisters (like Horner). Rather, he is stripped of his surface-level appeal, revealed as a domestic tyrant. In the final moments before the lights descended, Heartfree, Bellinda, Constant, and Lady Brute's collective stare of contempt at Brute served as a powerful image of the perennial problem of domestic violence against women. In the Brutes' fraught home life, Restoration audiences possibly noted reverberations of wider political issues (i.e. tyranny), as suggested by Freeman. Meanwhile, modern playgoers were reminded of contemporary sexual politics (specifically in this case the ever-present spectre of spousal abuse). In its forthrightness, Breen's revival surmounted the limits of Restoration comedy itself, presenting Vanbrugh as a forerunner of modern dramatists.

### **Conclusion: The Restoration Libertine on Stage**

This thesis has shown the challenges that contemporary directors and actors face when reviving Restoration comedies today, specifically concerning interpretations of the libertine hero. In many ways, the libertine hero has not aged well, yet the interest in reviving Restoration drama suggests this complex figure still has lessons, both entertaining and cautionary, to impart to audiences today. As this study hopes to suggest, the libertine hero's connections to the Restoration's political and philosophical contexts and debates make him a compelling figure for adaptation, revival, reinterpretation, and modernisation. My first two chapters explored interpretations of Willmore in two distinct RSC productions of Aphra Behn's 1677 comedy *The Rover*. Chapter One focused on John Barton's 1986 version, and Chapter Two considered Loveday Ingram's 2016 revival. Chapter Three offered a study of Max Stafford-Clark's 1994 revival of George Etherege's 1676 *The Man of Mode* for The Royal Court Theatre, cross-cast and performed in repertory with the premiere of Stephen Jeffreys' play *The Libertine*, depicting John Wilmot's infamous career and eventual decline. Chapter Four looked at Stafford-Clark's 1993 RSC production of William Wycherley's 1675 *The Country Wife* and Jonathan Munby's 2018 Chichester Festival Theatre production. Lastly, Chapter Five analysed Philip Breen's 2019 RSC production of John Vanbrugh's 1697 *The Provoked Wife*. Each of these produced interpretations experimented with period or contemporary staging and variously interpreted the sexuality and linked dangers of the libertine hero.

Each of these productions shows different ways of engaging with the libertine hero. In my introduction, I addressed the key frameworks as 'modernisation,' 'adaptation,' and 'revival'. Modernisation is the practice of updating aspects of a classic theatrical work (such as the text, costuming, etc.) to reflect contemporary details of the period in which the production is staged. This method is commonly employed by directors to draw out aspects of the work

which they interpret as relevant to the present day, to make a classic text more immediate to contemporary audiences who may be unfamiliar with the play, as shown in modern dress productions of Shakespeare, for example Nicholas Hytner's 2013 production of *Othello* for the National Theatre. Adaptation (drawing on the research of Linda Hutcheon) is '[a]n acknowledged' creative reinterpretation of an existing work.<sup>1</sup> This encompasses both adaptations into different mediums (for instance, novels adapted for the screen) and adaptations within the same medium (as in the case of plays which are adaptations of older plays). Respective examples include the 1981 miniseries adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited* and Amy Freed's 2005 play *Restoration Comedy*, a combination of Colley Cibber's 1696 *Love's Last Shift* and Vanbrugh's 1696 *The Relapse*. Lastly, revival (drawing on the research of Gilli Bush-Bailey and Jacky Bratton) is a process whereby 'an old - normally a classic - [play or other drama-relevant] text' is reanimated and brought into interaction with the present.<sup>2</sup> The aim of a revival, as Bush-Bailey and Bratton explain, is 'to connect with the past through present consciousness,' presenting the classic text in such a way that it feels current and compelling to audiences. Within my thesis, this approach is shown most prominently in Breen's production of *The Provoked Wife*.

Since this thesis has covered past productions of Restoration comedy which have engaged the libertine hero in various ways, it may be said that my study has focused on produced interpretations rather than 'producible interpretations' as examined by Judith Milhous and Robert Hume in their book of the same name.<sup>3</sup> These produced interpretations show us how staging the libertine has changed over the past forty years. Directors' treatments of these libertine figures have spanned a range of approaches, including light-hearted romanticisation, gritty anti-romanticism, and striking modernisation. These changes show evolving attitudes to

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Davis et al., 'Researching Theatre History and Historiography,' in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, *Producible Interpretation* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

the libertine hero. In 1986, Barton's *The Rover* romanticised Willmore, and by extension the figure of the libertine hero. His staging (paired with Jeremy Irons's portrayal of Behn's libertine hero as a sly, witty charmer) subverted Willmore's potential for sexual violence (and thus subverted his complexity as a character) for the sake of comedy. Then in 2016, Ingram's *The Rover* expanded upon Barton's romanticisation, turning the libertine hero into an apparently irresistible rogue. Her staging intensified the romp element of Barton's version, highlighting and augmenting the bawdiness in Behn's play to an excessive degree. Here, Willmore (as played by Joseph Millson) was a 'leather-trousered and lavishly bearded, raffish and whisky tongued' libertine hero who enticed women with his raw animal magnetism.<sup>4</sup> Once again, the issue of Willmore's potential for rape was ignored for comedy's sake and in order to not undermine his attractiveness as the dashing leading man.

By contrast, in 1994, Stafford-Clark's *The Man of Mode* paired with Jeffreys's *The Libertine* took the gritty anti-romantic, confrontational approach, eschewing the emphasis on the libertine hero's exterior allure as seen in Barton's *The Rover*. Instead, Stafford-Clark questioned this romanticisation, choosing instead to explore the unglamorous realities of the libertine hero's lifestyle and highlight his exploitation of others. David Westhead's chilling portrayal of Dorimant (cross-cast with Dorimant's supposed real-life inspiration, Rochester, in *The Libertine*) emphasised the libertine hero's self-absorption and potential for cruelty. While Stafford-Clark's 1993 *The Country Wife* framed Horner (played as a generic roué by Jeremy Northam) as a member of a debauched ensemble (a forerunner of his bleak interpretation of *The Man of Mode*), Munby's 2018 *The Country Wife*, to an extent, echoed the confrontational aspect of Stafford-Clark's 1994 *The Man of Mode/The Libertine* in its unflinching treatment of Horner. However, unlike Stafford-Clark, who simply staged the libertine figures of Horner and later Dorimant without any moral commentary, Munby took an

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<sup>4</sup> Tripney, 'Review of "The Rover,"' 1030.



explicitly condemnatory approach to the libertine hero. His modernised 2018 *The Country Wife* delved into the darkest, most unsettling extremes of libertinage. In the decadent contemporary metropolitan setting of Munby's production, Lex Shrapnel's Horner was a twenty-first century sex addict in total thrall to his urges. However, Munby's uncompromising staging did not use Horner's addiction to excuse his exploitation of others; here, we saw a libertine hero completely deadened to any sense of moral responsibility. Finally, in 2019, Breen's *The Provoked Wife* offered the most damning critique of the libertine figure in its portrayal of Brute as a domestic tyrant and would-be marital rapist. Jonathan Slinger's boorish, sneering, intensely repellent characterisation laid bare the libertine hero's potential for sexual violence, misogyny, and verbal and physical abuse. Tellingly, Breen's treatment of Vanbrugh's text — setting the play in period in the late 1690s yet staging it in such a way that Brute's cruelty towards his wife was charged with present-day resonances for a twenty-first century audience — made explicit what Vanbrugh himself left implicit. This resulted in a production which mined the text for its incisive, perennially relevant societal commentary.

Overall, this study represents an arc of directorial responses to the libertine hero. Beginning with swashbuckling romps as exemplified in Barton's and later Ingram's *Rovers*, directorial approaches shift to gritty interpretations which question the libertine hero's exterior charms (Stafford-Clark's *The Man of Mode* staged with *The Libertine*) and modernisations which emphasise and morally criticise his darker aspects (Munby's *The Country Wife*). Finally, the directorial approach trajectory concludes with forthright denunciation of the libertine hero's abuses in Breen's *The Provoked Wife*. In short, this arc may be summarised as a journey from a simplification of the libertine hero's character (softening his sharper edges for the sake of comedy and to ensure his maximum appeal for audiences) to a detailed analysis of all his various attributes, regardless of how unattractive his negative traits may be. At present, there seems to be a directorial awareness of the

libertine hero's complexities, including his potential for sexual abuse and violence towards women, and directors seem willing to engage with this figure in all his facets, including his problematic aspects.

Certain theatre productions considered throughout my thesis have been influenced to various degrees by trends in theatre directing and staging, particularly Stafford-Clark's 1993 revival of *The Country Wife* and his 1994 repertory productions of *The Man of Mode* and *The Libertine*, and Munby's 2018 *The Country Wife*. Stafford-Clark's gritty, cynical productions bore the confrontational influence of in-her-face theatre, then in vogue. Meanwhile Munby's framing of *The Country Wife* as a commentary on twenty-first century sexual mores echoed the conventions of contemporary dramas, staged as it was in the Minerva Theatre, a space where such works have been frequently produced. As we have seen, different revivals explore different angles of the libertine hero figure. Previous iterations of Restoration comedy, like Barton's and Ingram's *Rovers*, have made the libertine hero's sexuality the central part of their productions, framing his libidinousness as unequivocally attractive. Whether Willmore is portrayed as a sly, charming rogue, full of witty banter and knowing glances or a swashbuckling, raffish reprobate, productions that frame him as little more than a titillating leading man diminish his cultural and political complexity. Such romp-style productions which emphasise the libertine hero's sexuality as purely alluring do draw audiences, and the ongoing production of these plays is of vital importance for scholars who examine theatre in performance.

However, these light-hearted versions not only present a limited version of the libertine hero – they also skirt his potential for sexual violence and abuse towards women, muting this possible danger for the sake of entertainment. Although Stafford-Clark's productions may be read as a bitter antidote which cuts through the romanticisation of the libertine hero in feel-good romp-style revivals, his bleak approach is not without oversights either. In his 1993 *The*

*Country Wife* and his 1994 *The Man of Mode*, Horner is a member of a debauched group and Dorimant is a calculating, cynical rake. Here, the character trait which is emphasised is his potential for cruelty. Stafford-Clark's productions represent the mode of staging Restoration comedy wherein the libertine hero's darker nature (rather than his sexuality) is the focal point, and he is depicted as unlovely, embittered, and joyless, in a matter-of-fact way, with no further commentary on the relevance these plays could have for audiences. However, as noted above, Munby's *The Country Wife* and Breen's *The Provoked Wife* reflect a more nuanced approach. Rather than portraying the libertine hero's sexuality as desirable or stressing his serpentine deviousness without deeper interpretation, these revivals reflect an approach which acknowledges the libertine hero's complexities, addresses them in detail, and draws forth their relevance.

Similar to the wide range of directorial approaches covered in this thesis, further research developments in the field of Restoration and eighteenth-century theatre revivals could encompass a variety of topics. Some of these issues were ones I could not examine in detail within the scope of this thesis, but which could nevertheless prove beneficial. Initially, I had intended to include interviews with actors who had performed in the various Restoration comedy revivals in my thesis; however, I jettisoned the plan later due to constraints of the pandemic and because I came to realise my arguments would carry more weight if they were based firmly upon my own analyses. An extended study centred on insights from actors who have starred in these plays (perhaps in the same vein of Judith Cook's 1980 book *Women in Shakespeare* and its 1983 sequel *Shakespeare's Players*, as well as the interviews with actors included in *This Golden Round*) could be enlightening with regards to the practical application of these texts in performance.

Additionally, I planned for my study to include analyses of Restoration-related history plays, besides Jeffreys's *The Libertine* (examples of which include Liz Duffy Adams' 2009

*Or*, and Jeffrey Hatcher's 1999 *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*), which I chose to omit as my focus became more specific. A detailed comparative analysis of these plays and their representations of Restoration society in general (including the theatre) could be of interest to scholars. Although subsidised, repertory theatre companies' interest in producing Restoration comedy might seem to be relatively scant, the Restoration theatre has proved to be a major attraction to contemporary playwrights in the form of history plays set in and around the milieu of Restoration theatre, presumably due in some measure to theatrical developments in the Restoration era (including the rise of actresses and female playwrights and the playwrights' markedly forthright treatments of sexuality which have the potential to appeal to twenty-first century audiences). Another potential study might be an examination of how these plays adapt themes, stock characters, and plot devices found in Restoration theatre. History plays set in the Restoration and Georgian eras could generate other compelling studies, including an analysis of their depictions of early actresses and female playwrights, a consideration of the sexual politics of the Restoration era as filtered through the twentieth and twenty-first century lenses of these newer plays, and a comparison of the Restoration-set historical plays from the early nineteenth century with more recent plays set in the same era and how they depict historical individuals (for instance, an entire study could be centred on stage portrayals of Nell Gwyn in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries).

Lastly, I had intended to analyse later Stuart and Georgian comedies (including such titles as *The Recruiting Officer* and *She Stoops to Conquer*) along with relevant twentieth and twenty-first century Restoration and Georgian history plays (for instance, Timberlake Wertenbaker's 1988 *Our Country's Good* and April De Angelis' 2002 *A Laughing Matter*) which I likewise cut when my thesis's focus narrowed. Additionally, I had intended to analyse plays inspired by seventeenth and eighteenth-century women's lives (including Helen Edmundson's 2005 *Coram Boy* and her 2015 *Queen Anne*). Potential studies which could

arise from this area include a broader examination of the libertine hero as he evolves throughout Restoration and Georgian comedies as seen in twentieth-century and twenty-first century revivals of these plays, a study of women's stories as depicted in history plays set in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and an analysis of April De Angelis' corpus of plays set in the long eighteenth century (including such titles both the 1993 and 1997 versions of *Playhouse Creatures*, 1991's *The Life and Times of Fanny Hill*, and 2021's *Gin Craze!*).

Throughout my study, I have employed a range of written, visual, and audio-visual archival sources. These sources include production photographs, production prompt books, filmed archival recordings of performances, and critics' reviews of productions. By reading across these sources, comparing prompt book notes with the resulting staging choices as seen in the footage and in photos, and reading critics' commentary to ascertain what aspects of various productions were deemed significant, it is possible for theatre scholars to succeed (insofar as it is possible given the ephemeral nature of their subject) in recapturing the essence of produced interpretations. With this study, I was able to reconstruct these productions in order to analyse in detail how each one distinctly framed the libertine hero figure.

The relationship between literary criticism of these plays and their production onstage is symbiotic. These plays have not been neglected by scholars, and certain productions covered in this thesis implicitly reflect scholarly interpretations within the profuse field of literary criticism surrounding the libertine hero. For instance, Stafford-Clark's hard-edged revival of *The Man of Mode* was characterised by its probing of the libertine hero's exterior appeal and its revelation of his potential for cruelty and the abuse of others. While this 1994 production did not owe an explicit debt to any particular existing scholarly criticism, later criticism seems to thematically echo Stafford-Clark's interpretation, particularly Deborah Payne Fisk's 2005 commentary on how Etherege's play, concentrated in the figure of Dorimant, treads the fine line between depicting the libertine hero's external 'allure' and displaying his possible

savagery.<sup>5</sup> While this is an instance of a production overlapping with literary criticism, other productions in this thesis do not reflect scholarship on the plays in question. Specifically, Barton's and Ingram's *Rovers* both appear to have avoided the scholarship surrounding Willmore's potential for rape, choosing instead to glamourise his character, resulting in his portrayal as a roguish charmer. However, there is potential for literary criticism to directly shape produced interpretations. As literary critics can draw upon directors' interpretive choices, directors can avail themselves of literary scholarship to inform their stagings of libertine heroes in these characters' full complexity.

While some scholars might contend that it is enough to simply read Restoration comedies as literary texts or 'dead theatre,' that is, a collection of curiosities from a bygone age, my thesis reveals otherwise. As the range of production interpretations covered in this thesis indicates, these plays continue to engage directors, who find various ways to stage and interpret the comedies' sexual politics. The changes in portrayals of the libertine hero reflect this as well, from romanticisation to more nuanced interpretations which acknowledge and condemn the libertine hero's problematic aspects. Whether a Restoration comedy production is set in the seventeenth century or updated to the present day, the most significant detail is the complexity in its characterisation of the libertine hero. The final two productions considered in this thesis are evidence of this. In 2018, Munby's modernised *The Country Wife* offered a trenchant, bracing denunciation of libertinage in the twenty-first century. The following year, Breen's production of *The Provoked Wife*, set in the Restoration era, proved equally incisive and unsettling through its forthright address of Brute's domestic abuse of his wife, drawing out the play's themes of spousal cruelty and marital rape in a way which spoke to contemporary concerns surrounding those issues. In short, these plays continue to captivate

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<sup>5</sup> Deborah Payne Fisk, 'Introduction,' xxxi.

directors' inventiveness and audiences' attention in their perennial relevance to complexities of the human condition.

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