

Prologue (The Rover – Aphra Behn)

Written by a Person of Quality.

WITS, like Physicians, never can agree,
When of a different Society;
And Rabel's Drops were never more cry'd down
By all the Learned Doctors of the Town,
Than a new Play, whose author is unknown:
Nor can those Doctors with more
Malice sue (And powerful Purses) the dissenting Few,
Than those with an insulting Pride do rail
At all who are not of their own Cabal.
If a Young Poet hit your Humour right,
You judge him then out of Revenge and Spite;
So amongst Men there are ridiculous Elves,
Who Monkeys hate for being too like themselves:
So that the Reason of the Grand Debate,
Why Wit so oft is damn'd, when good Plays take,
Is, that you censure as you love or hate.
Thus, like a learned Conclave, Poets sit
Catholick Judges both of Sense and Wit,
And damn or save, as they themselves think fit.
Yet those who to others Faults are so severe,
Are not so perfect, but themselves may err.
Some write correct indeed, but then the whole (Bating their own dull Stuff i'th' Play) is stole:
As Bees do suck from Flowers their Honey-dew,
So they rob others, striving to please you.
Some write their Characters genteel and fine,
But then they do so toil for every Line,
That what to you does easy seem, and plain,
Is the hard issue of their labouring Brain.
And some th' Effects of all their Pains we see,
Is but to mimick good Extempore.
Others by long Converse about the Town,
Have Wit enough to write a leud Lampoon,
But their chief Skill lies in a Baudy Song.
In short, the only Wit that's now in Fashion
Is but the Gleanings of good Conversation?
As for the Author of this coming Play,
I ask'd him what he thought fit I should say,
In thanks for your good Company to day:
He call'd me Fool, and said it was well known,
You came not here for our sakes, but your own.
New Plays are stuffed with Wits, and with Debauches,
That croud and sweat like Cits in May-day Coaches.

Summary¹

¹ <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rover/prologue>

The author analyzes the state of modern drama, asserting that this new play is going to be judged harshly by audiences and fellow playwrights alike. She goes on to say that the playwrights who judge her work actually have been stealing their witty material from mothers. She reminds her audience that wit takes work, and that even a play that seems easy and effortless is actually the product of hard work on the part of the playwright. She ends by poking fun at those who watch her play, saying that they have come in order to see reflections of their own antics and debauchery on the stage.

Analysis

Audiences (who were mostly the nobility) during the Restoration period in which the Rover was written understood that they would be seeing an over-exaggerated parody of their own extravagant behavior. They expected wit and comedy rather than plot or strong emotions. With this prologue, Behn is assuring audience members that her play will be clever, bold, and merciless in its mockery of modern society