

Symbols: The Rover

Carnival

Italian cities such as Venice and Naples (where *The Rover* takes place) were famed for their Carnivals, huge, city-wide festivals during which many of the rules of ordinary life were temporarily suspended. Within the play, Carnival symbolizes a world of inverted values and freedom in which noblewomen can roam the streets and impoverished cavaliers can court them and win their hands. Yet the world of the Carnival—a world without consequences—is not without its dark side. Predators such as Willmore and Blunt take advantage of the free-for-all atmosphere in order to accost and even assault women, while belligerent men often end up dueling each other on the streets. In depicting both the positive and dark sides of Carnival, Behn is displaying both the comic and the troubling aspects of the topsy-turvy, consequence-free genre of Restoration Comedy.

Masks

Hellena, Florinda, and the cavaliers all use masks and disguises in order to plan and carry out their various liaisons. On a deeper level, however, masks represent the confusion of identity that takes place within this play. Willmore and Hellena fall in love without even knowing each other's names. Belvile, meanwhile, repeatedly does not recognize Florinda even when she is right in front of him. Masks, therefore, are emblems of confusion and deception, and proof that identity is not as stable or singular as it seems.

Angelica's Picture

Every day, Angelica commands her servants to display pictures of herself in front of her house, so all the citizens of Naples can admire her beauty. Once she falls in love with Willmore, however, she ceases to do so. These pictures represent not only her vanity, but also her sense of self. The courtesan stops displaying them because she has fully given herself to Willmore and so is no longer "giving herself" to anyone else—a disastrous decision, as she soon learns. Her picture being insulted by Willmore is symbolic of the fate she is going to meet in her affair with Willmore.

Swords

Throughout *The Rover*, swords are associated with masculinity, virility, and power. Belvile is a true man in part because of his skill with a sword. Much of Blunt's humiliation comes from being robbed of his sword, and then being forced to wear a rusty one. At one point the cavaliers and Don Pedro draw their swords, and much is made of the fact that Pedro's Spanish blade is longer than their English swords. Willmore, in particular, often uses swordplay as a metaphor for intercourse. The connection between masculinity and violence is a traditional but disturbing one, and Behn takes care to show the consequences of such a belligerent and dangerous atmosphere.