

TRUE LOVE TRIUMPHS IN THE END: A READING OF
THE CHARACTER OF FLORINDA IN BEHN'S THE
ROVER

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Abstract

It can be said that Behn's *The Rover* consists of many sub-plots, yet they are all running together in a magnificent display of coalescence. However, the play opens with the two sisters Florinda and Hellena discussing their conditions. Florinda refuses to marry according to the wishes of her father and brother. Her father wants her to marry an old landowner, and her brother wants her to marry his friend, Antonio. Florinda is the victim of the play since she is about to be raped three times. Yet, her true love to Belvile enables her to surpass all the obstacles and then being married to him.

Keywords: Behn, Florinda, Rape, Love, Marriage

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Introduction

This article attempts to narrate the story of Florinda in the form of literary analysis with ascertaining that she is a victim in the world of men and a victor in the field of love. Though Behn gives much consideration to the theme of love in *The Rover*, it is considered a minor theme when compared to the other themes like arranged marriage, sex, wealth, etc. Behn intends to discuss the issue of love as a salient plot, yet her interest in discussing Willmore's sexual role takes the largest part of the play. In other words, the theme of love fades away behind the major events that take place. Nevertheless, love is still important especially the love affair between Belvile and Florinda which is worth to be noticed. Pat Gill assures that Behn's play focuses on "problems of incompatible marriage and contending claims of love and money" (194).

The Two Sisters

Love in *The Rover* has special meaning especially when it clashes with the desires of the parents. Florinda knows the real meaning of love which enables her to overcome all obstacles put in her way to marry her lover Belvile. At the very beginning of the play, she discusses with her sister Hellena the value of love. When Hellena starts interpreting love, Florinda asks her, "When you're a lover, I'll think you fit for a secret of that nature" (1.1.7). Florinda believes that she is the only one who falls in love. According to Florinda, her sister Hellena is still young and does not know the real meaning of love. Yet she surprises to hear Hellena expressing her feeling and opinion about love. Hellena states:

'Tis true, I never was a lover yet – but I begin to have a shrewd guess what it is to be so, and fancy it every pretty to sigh, and sing, and blush, and wish, and dream, and wish, and long and wish to see the man, and when I do, look. Pale and tremble.... (1.1.8-11)

To make a comparison between the two sisters Florinda and Hellena, it seems that Hellena has been ranked as the major character while Florinda as minor though she has a large role to play. In addition, most of the analysis, criticism and satire circle around Florinda and her role in the play. Undoubtedly, Florinda is regarded as an important character who holds the attention of the audience, readers and scholars. If she is excluded from the play, the play becomes just a narrative. Prakash gives another example of the importance of Florinda's presence in the play, "At one level, we cannot overlook Florinda's own privileged position of the eldest daughter because of which she voices the clichéd dictum of the family . . ." (176). On the other hand, the play would remain a play to some extent if the role of Hellena was excluded, yet

it would be without wit and humour. Nonetheless, Florinda is not the main heroine. The answer for this lies in Hellena's self-confidence, wit, prominent and eloquent speech and initiative. All these features rank Hellena as the first main female character in the play. Prakash narrates some features of Hellena's personality, "Hellena is young, attractive, talkative and innocent. She does not have, being young, that fund of knowledge and experience which could press upon her the necessity to circumspect" (174).

Exposed to Rape

In reality, every female character in *The Rover* has her own trouble, but Florinda undeservedly has the lion's share of injustice. From the beginning to nearly the end of the play, Florinda is exposed to the risk of being raped. She is subjected to three rape attempts. Before the serious incidents of the play have to follow, she reveals her past story that a group of soldiers attempted to rape her, but the intervention of Belvile prevented the happening. She reveals that she could not defend herself, it was only Belvile who saved her at the right time. In the second time, Florinda is about to be raped in the garden when she keeps waiting for Belvile. Willmore attacks her, believing her to be a whore. However, she is rescued by Belvile. The third near-rape that Florinda faced is in Blunt's chamber. Frederick intends to join Blunt in raping Florinda, but they postpone the rape until they make sure of her identity and then Florinda is being saved by Valeria.

Behn concerns much about sexual violation and female victimization. Hence, her plays contain excessive discussion of rape. Rape was almost an essential aspect of Restoration drama, yet many male dramatists did not discuss its social consequences in their plays, but they presented it as a sexual issue. Pearson considers 'rape' as the most heinous crime perpetrated by men against women, "All kinds of dangers threaten to disrupt the typical lives of women in drama of the period, dangers of poverty, forced marriage, and sexual harassment. But the danger felt to be most theatrically appealing was rape . . ." (95-96). Millett interprets the issue of rape in the light of the concept of sexuality:

In rape, the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt, and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately appropriate to sexual politics. Patriarchal societies typically link feelings of cruelty with sexuality, the latter often equated both with evil and with power. (529)

In turn, Jocelyn Catty considers “the act of rape” as “an extreme expression of the power relation between men and women.” Catty adds, “. . . despite social sanctions against it, it is and has been an intrinsic part of Western society’s subjection of women. Literature, along with the visual arts, inscribes this violence in culture” (2).

Behn uses Florinda as a tool to show the barbarous treatment and the arrogance of men towards women. Florinda is a respectable woman as per the audience, yet she has been incurred to rape more than once. She has tried to do her best to keep her chastity and to get her normal freedom, but all men stand against her, including the close friends of her lover who have tried to rape her. Thus, she tolerates all kinds of sufferings by men as near-rape, beatings, insults, defamation, etc. The attempts of the main male characters to rape her including her brother depict men as monsters in which they consider women as creatures who were born only to satisfy their sexual desires. At the time when women try to resist, men use force. Griffin points out that “In the spectrum of male behaviour, rape . . . is the penultimate act. Erotic pleasure cannot be separated from culture, and in our culture male eroticism is wedded to power” (287). In this sense, it can be said in a metaphorical comparison that men are barbarous and they behave like animals. In short, Florinda’s severe hardship depicts men as misogynists. Hence, Kelly argues that the earlier feminist writers, one of them was Behn, had a certain agenda in their writings, “The immediate aim of these feminist theorists was to oppose the mistreatment of women. Their concern was for women, that they might have the knowledge and confidence to reject misogynist claims . . .” (67).

In this regard, Florinda has been exposed to rape while she is waiting for her lover Belvile in the garden. Willmore interprets her alone sitting at night and in night dress as a direct invitation to him to have sex. When she refuses to let him have sex, he tries to rape her. He forcibly grabs her and murmurs that he would be a “wicked man” if he “saw those eyes of thine” without having an affair (3.5.44-45). Boebel states that male motivation for rape in Behn’s plays is an expression of misogyny and not because of the beauty of a woman:

Behn’s rapists are not aroused by the beauty of their victim; drunken, in the dark, they may not even see her very clearly. Rape, far from being an expression of uncontrollable sexual desire, may be an act of violence to punish, for the crime of being female. (64)

Marsden believes that the motivation for rape is a male appetite for sex:

The origin of these rapes, however, is male sexual appetite, a characteristic most visible in Restoration serious drama, where rape is portrayed as a simple matter of evil versus good, and where 'bad' sexual desire results in sexual violence. (187)

Remarkably, Willmore hands Florinda his pistol when he is trying to rape her. He offers his pistol in order to reassure her that he would be a peaceful man. By giving her the pistol, he intends to give her a sign that he would not harm her but would have sex by rape if necessary. He does not think about the negative results of the crime of rape. To rape her means to ruin her honour, future, feeling and her life in general. Rape is worse than murder in such cases. It is important to note Florinda's reaction here. She does not take the advantage of the opportunity of obtaining a pistol and make herself in a strong position. There would not be any better chance than this. If she did so, Willmore would never dare to think to rape her. In short, Florinda moves from bad to the worst.

Again, when Florinda meets Willmore in the street, she escapes and seeks refuge from his chase in Blunt's chamber. By doing so, she endangers herself. To be in the hands of Willmore is more merciful than to be in Blunt's hands. After his trick, Blunt is upset and angry for what he has faced, so he decides to take revenge on the first woman he will meet. His wrong decision to take revenge ". . . on one whore for the sins of another" has been quickly achieved (4.5.52). It is something unexpected to find a woman entering his chamber, so he instantly considers her a whore. He does not take even a minute to make sure of her personality whether she is a noble woman or a prostitute.

Indeed, Florinda finds no way to defend herself from the chase of Willmore except to commit a mistake by entering a man's chamber. If carefully thought out, she would use some other ways as exposing her chaser in front of other people rather than seeking refuge in a chamber without thinking whether the chamber would be safe or dangerous. Certainly, if she remained among other people, Willmore would not dare to rape her.

Some may argue that she does not like to expose herself to her brother, but even in this regard, it becomes another example of her inability to take an apt decision. Her brother would not harm her. In the worst probability, he would only blame her for her presence. Then it would become her responsibility to justify her presence. But she misjudges the situation and thinks that there is ". . . nothing can be worse than to fall into his hands" (4.4.3-4). Whatever her justifications, she commits a mistake by leaving a group of people into a separate chamber. Her

wrong decision lets even her brother consider her a prostitute. When she is locked in Blunt's chamber, her brother desires to have sex in his own way without knowing the fact that the locked girl is his sister. Her brother is of the opinion that a girl who goes to men's chambers is a prostitute. He states, "Come, pray be kind; I know you mean to be so when you entered her . . ." (5.1.111-12).

Florinda's Passive Reaction towards Blunt's Sexual Attack

In Blunt's chamber, Florinda tries her best to defend herself and protect her chastity. Nevertheless, her self-defence is not as strong as it should be. Her words with him are not strict enough to put an end to his assault. When Blunt steps forwards to catch her, she whispers, "I beseech you, as you seem a gentleman, pity a harmless virgin that takes your house for sanctuary" (4.5.38-40). Her words seem to be much alluring than defending. Therefore, Blunt continues to assault her. Pacheco states, "Indeed, any resistance that Florinda makes will serve merely to condemn her as a tease who arouses male desire only to frustrate it" (330). Nevertheless, he cleverly reverses the situation. He regards himself as a victim and she as an attacker. He awfully exclaims, "Can I not be safe in my house for you, not in my chamber, nay, even being naked too cannot secure me; this is an impudence greater than has invaded me yet – come, no resistance" (4.5.43-46). This is one of the tricks of men when they alter the situation in their favour even if they become liars like Blunt who lies many times to defend his crime against Florinda. In fact, he accuses Florinda and other women in general of many despicable acts just because they are women. He considers them as "a generation of damned hypocrites," and "Dissembling witches" (4.5.62-64). However, it is he who has conveyed these bad spots. Later, he narrates the story of the unknown whore Florinda to his friends in a way as if she was the attacker who intended to assault and rape him, ". . . she assault me here in my own lodgings, and had doubtless committed a rape upon me . . ." (5.1.66-67). Ironically, it was he who assaulted her and tried to rape her. However, his claim itself is an evidence of his guilt, but he would never be banished by the dominant world of men. Prakash proclaims, "Aphra Behn's criticism of the ways of the world (of her time) is largely informed by an anguish and a helplessness that particular women experienced during the Restoration period in their confrontation with power-wielding males" (186).

As mentioned above, Blunt accuses Florinda of the attack and then he goes on to rape her and pulls her rudely, but she exclaims, "Dare you be cruel" (4.5.47). This statement seems to be

seductive at the time of intending to rape a woman. She seems to be confused in her defence to the degree that she cannot find other words to defend herself. In addition, the defending words that she uses are regarded as a woman's natural coquetry; therefore, Blunt gets excited to see her in this critical situation. He threatens her:

I will kiss and beat thee all over . . . thou shalt lie with me too . . . I will smile and deceive thee, flatter thee, and beat thee, kiss and swear, and lye to thee, embrace thee and rob thee, as she did me, fawn on thee, and strip thee stark naked, then hang thee out at my window by the heels, with a paper of scurvy verses fastened to thy breast, in praise of damnable women- come, come along. (4.5.48-57)

Even though the torment is intolerable, she remains passive in front of these threats. Anderson states the conflict between Florinda and Blunt and attributes the reason to Blunt who represents Whigs. Anderson asserts:

The comic event reverses the power dynamic between Florinda and Blunt: a woman takes her revenge on two men not because she makes no distinctions between men (as Blunt refuses to distinguish between women) but because they are the wrong men who seek her out as a general sexual commodity. Their beatings, a standard punishment for Whigs in Behn's plays, brings them back to the immediacy of the body even as it exiles them from the world of sexual pleasure. (87)

Blunt does not see Florinda as a human being who has feelings, honour, etc. Unfortunately, he thinks only about how to take revenge on women to compensate himself of the trick that he had faced with Lucetta, so he sees Florinda as a target. Hutner states, "Behn suggests that Blunt finds it necessary to master a woman because he cannot master himself. In order for the duped Blunt to regain his manly authority, he attacks a woman – any woman" (110). Nevertheless, Florinda keeps silent towards Blunt's abuse, waiting to put his words into action.

In this critical situation, she implores him to leave her since it is irrational to be punished for a crime that she did not commit but committed by another woman. She tells him, "Alas, sir, must I be sacrificed for the crimes of the most infamous of my sex?" (4.5.58-659). So far, her excuse and her argument regarding her case falls on deaf ears and they seem to be not strong enough to block his attempts. Unbelievable action floats on the surface when Blunt boasts of his barbarity in front of his friend Frederick by saying, "I am glad thou art come to be a witness of

my dire revenge” (4.5.69-70). Since Blunt is a man without mercy, he is delighted by torturing her, “. . . no prayers or tears shall mitigate my rage; therefore prepare for both my pleasure of enjoyment and revenge, for I am resolved to make up my loss here on thy body, I’ll take it out in kindness and in beating” (4.5.77-80). She does not react positively to these threats, instead of crying, fighting or trying to leave the house, she remains there and provokes him, “I think he will not – dares not – be so barbarous” (4.5.82). Hutner states, “Despite Florinda’s traditionally feminine passive nature, she is ultimately subject to the same verbal and physical abuse and condemnation by the masculinist ideology of her culture as Hellena and Angellica . . .” (110).

Behn actually renders the brutality of men in its most hideous form when Frederick decides to join Blunt in raping Florinda instead of protecting this scared and trembling woman. She tells them about the reason for her presence and beseeches them to leave her to go out, but her petition touches deaf ears. Frederick firmly threatens her, “for we are fellows not to be caught twice in the same trap” (4.5.95-96). Moreover, Frederick confirms that Blunt has the right to take revenge. He reprimands Florinda as if she is responsible for what has happened to Blunt, “See how a female picaroon of this island of rogues has shattered him, and canst thou hope for any mercy?” (4.5.98-99). It is unthinkable to see the two men try to rape Florinda at the same time when one is watching the other. This crime indeed confirms the brutality of men especially when they desire to see her suffer. Blunt assures Frederick, “we’ll both lie with her, and then let me alone to bang her” (4.5.101-02). Frederick replies, “I’m ready to serve you in matters of revenge that has a double pleasure in’t” (4.5.103-04). Paradoxically, Frederick sympathises with Blunt for being tricked by Lucetta, but he does not sympathise or be human with Florinda, instead they insist on defaming her reputation and violating her honour. It is immoral to see Frederick helping the attacker against the victim. Yet it seems that both men are diagnosed with a wrong notion that Blunt has the right to rape Florinda since he was tricked by Lucetta.

Florinda finds no way to resist except to use the reputation of Belvile, her fiancé, “Stay, sir; I have seen you with Belvile, an English cavalier for his sake use me kindly; you know him, Sir” (4.5.108-09). Then, she adds, “Sir if you have any esteem for that Belvile, I conjure you to treat me with more gentleness; he’ll thank you for the justice” (4.5.114-15). This is, in fact, another example that Florinda cannot defend herself and she is waiting for a man to protect her. When she talks about Belvile, they stop their assault for a while to discuss the matter, this encourages Florinda to use the reputation of Belvile more. She tells them, “Sir if you find me not

worth Belvile's care, use me as you please, and that you may think I merit better treatment than you threaten" (4.5.117-19). When Florinda gives them a ring to hand it over to Belvile, they decide to postpone the rape until finding out whether this is really a woman of high reputation or just a whore. Unfortunately, Frederick needs a proof to believe her and this is regarded as an immoral spot in his character. On hearing the name of Belvile, they decide to lock her up in a room until they make sure of her identity from Belvile. Strangely enough, Florinda's existence as a human being becomes useless while just the reputation of a man – only the reputation – is effective and powerful enough to stop the assault. In fact, Frederick's behaviour with Florinda is immoral for the reason that he should have stopped Blunt from committing the crime of rape. Surprisingly, he himself is about to share the crime of committing a rape believing her to be a harlot.

Florinda's verbal resentment makes one argue that she fails to defend herself as it should have, and this is clear in her soft argument with them. All her words and statements do not convey any strictness and ferocity. Her repetition of 'sir' and some other soft words are regarded to be normal women's foreplay to stir men's sexual instincts. The audience expects her, at least, to weep, yet it does not happen. Her statements, for example, 'use me kindly,' 'treat me with more gentleness' and 'use me as you please' seem to be an indirect invitation for Blunt and Frederick to do what they like.

In contrast, Florinda argues well with her brother especially about her arranged marriage, so audiences are satisfied with her performance. She, for example, tells him, "... I would not have a man so dear to me as my brother follow the ill customs of our country, and make a slave of his sister" (1.1.59-61). However, she does not remain the same in her argument with the attackers – Blunt and Fredrick. Her argument with them is more tempting than convincing and does not have any seriousness and strictness though they are about to rape her.

Love Affair between Florinda and Belvile

Florinda falls in love with the chivalrous cavalier, Belvile, who once endangered his life to save her and protect her honour from the attackers in the siege of Pamplona. So, she loves him for his magnanimity. She narrates her story with him as "... he was then a colonel of French horse; who when the town was ransacked nobly treated my brother and myself, preserving us from all insolences" (1.1.45-57). Therefore, she rebukes her brother for not estimating Belvile's feat when he "threw himself into all dangers to save my honour, and will you not allow him my esteem?" (1.1.70-71). In this context, some believe that Florinda's marriage with Belvile seems

to be more like a kind of gratitude than of mutual love. It seems as if Florinda cannot survive in society without Belvile (Dasgupta 141). In fact, they deeply love each other, and all their roles in the play indicate this fact.

Florinda intends to mention her long-ago story with Belvile in order to remind her brother Pedro of his wrong decision. Pedro decides to marry her to Antonio, the man who runs after prostitutes, instead of Belvile, the man who saved her honour. Unfortunately, her brother does not care for her honour as he only cares for getting wealth and fame. Both Pedro and Antonio are rich and belong to the same country – Spain. Antonio is also the son of Viceroy. So, Pedro wants to be close to him by the way of getting his sister married to him. In this regard, Pedro puts forth two options for Florinda either to choose Don Vincentian, the old man who has been chosen by her father or Don Antonio, his friend. However, he urges her to choose Antonio: “...but mine is that you would love Antonio” (1.1.146). Then, he decides to hasten her marriage by appointing the next day: “...you must do tomorrow” (1.1.149). She refuses both, but he justifies his resolution that “Tomorrow, or ’twill be to late - ’t’s not my friendship to Antonio which makes me urge this, but love to thee and hatred to Vincentio” (1.1.151-52). Here it can be said that if Pedro really loves Florinda as he claims, he has to help her to choose her partner rather than to force her to get married to his friend.

In turn, Belvile “might be made the happiest man the sun shines on” (1.2.238) simply for receiving a letter from Florinda informing him to meet her “At ten at night – at the garden gate” (1.2.255). Belvile thinks of nothing except of his sweetheart Florinda. His heart is closed in front of other women. He is also opposite to Willmore as he is able to control his sexual desire. He only thinks about his sweetheart and leaves out all other silly things. Therefore, Florinda prefers to marry him instead of Antonio though Antonio has no defect. She states, “I’ve no defence against Antonio’s love, / For he has all the advantages of nature, / The moving arguments of youth and fortune” (1.1.159-62).

Indeed, Antonio is richer than Belvile, he is the son of the Viceroy, and he is the friend of her brother; nonetheless, he cannot win Florinda’s heart. Belvile confesses that Antonio has got more advantage than him. He says, “Tis so, to make way for a powerful rival, the Viceroy’s son, who has the advantage of me in being a man of fortune, a Spaniard, and her brother’s friend” (1.2.25-27). So, the advantages which Belvile talks about are enough to make Antonio a

powerful rival against the man who has only true love. To consider the above speech of Florinda and Belvile, it seems that Florinda would prefer Antonio for he is the best.

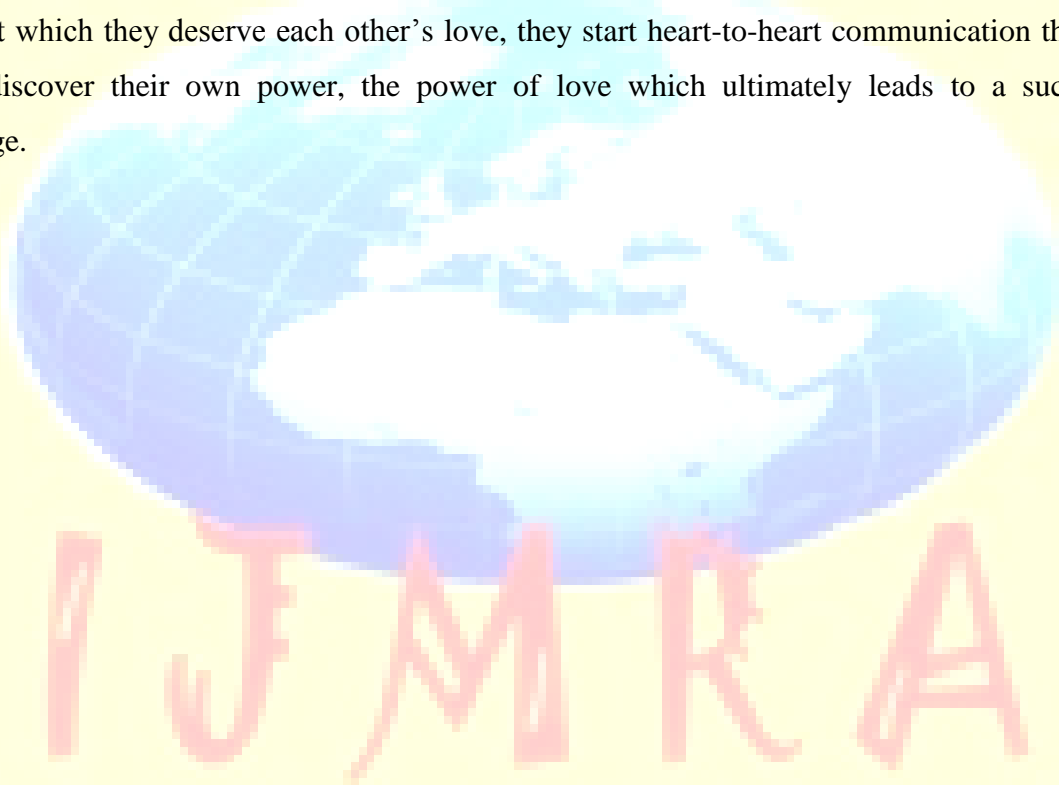
To think as to who would succeed in marrying Florinda, the man with all these features or the man with true love, it is surely the man of true love would win in the end. True love surpasses all earthly features. Thus, no force in earth can vanquish sincere and genuine love between couple. The couple may leave each other by force, but their hearts would spiritually and passionately remain linked. Belvile loves Florinda even if he remains away from her. He says, "... I have recourse only to letters and distant looks from her window, which are so soft and kind as those which heaven sends down on penitents" (1.2.28-30). Blunt assures that Belvile would never betray Florinda since he is in real love with her. He observes, "I warrant he would not touch another women if he might have her for nothing" (1.2.40-41). However, Belvile appears at the beginning in a state of melancholy because Pedro refuses to marry him Florinda. Frederick clarifies Belvile's unhappiness when he asks him, "Why what the devil ails the colonel? In a time when all the world is gay, to look like mere Lent thus?" (1.2.1-2). Frederick also guesses that he is melancholic because of "the want of money" (1.1.8). Blunt interprets Belvile's melancholy as a kind of "the want of a wench" (1.1.10). In fact, Belvile does not think about "money" or about a "wench," but thinks too much about Florinda.

Furthermore, Belvile does not commit perjury in order to have sex like that of Willmore. It can be seen in his reaction to Florinda's test. Florinda plays a trick to test his loyalty with the help of her niece, but Belvile does not get tempted. In reality, he does not know that the girl who wants to seduce him is Florinda, so he wonderingly asks her, "Madam, why am I chose out of all mankind to be object of your bounty?" (3.1.209-210), then he confesses, "You tempt me strangely, madam, very way" (3.1.219). In spite of all the temptations, he remains firm in his love to Florinda, he affirms, "and but for a vow I've made to a very fair lady..." (3.1.221). If Willmore would have been tested in the same way as Belvile, he might have cast himself on her bosom and would have given her vows as a pledge of his sincerity.

Furthermore, Belvile's true love to Florinda is clear in his statement: "I'll now plant myself under Florinda's window, and if find no comfort there, I'll die" (3.5.45-64). His speech shows that he cannot live without her, and this is the summit of love and faithfulness. His true love for Florinda can also be seen in his fight with Pedro. Pedro and Antonio decide to fight duel. Belvile will have to fight Pedro instead of Antonio. Pedro does not know that he is duelling with

Belvile since Belvile is in disguise. Florinda who does not also recognize Belvile adjures him to stop fighting and requests him, “By all you hold most dear, by her you love, / I do conjure you, touch him not” (4.2.44-45). Belvile responds: “By her I love! / See – I obey – and at your feet resign / The useless trophy of my victory” (4.2.46-48). In deference to her desire, he throws away his sword without harming Pedro since the one who asks him to stop harming Pedro is Florinda.

In brief, Florinda and Belvile face bravely all the problems that surround them and surpass the obstacles that stand in their way of getting married. Their good-natured character and their similar values and interests make them suitable for each other, and toward a maturity, the point at which they deserve each other’s love, they start heart-to-heart communication that help them discover their own power, the power of love which ultimately leads to a successful marriage.



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