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Sharesh Ranjan
Assist. Professor
Dept. of English
Maharaja college, Ara.

Character-sketch of 'Willmore'

Willmore is one of the finest characters in the portrait gallery of Aphra Behn. He is the protagonist of the play "The Rover" written by Aphra Behn in 1677. He is a poor but charming and witty sea-captain. He is a rover, which means that he travels from place to place on board a ship. During the action of the play, he takes a few days in Naples to enjoy Carnival and then plans to again board the ship to lead his itinerant life. In the words of Belville, "The fellow is mad for a wench!" when he lands in Naples during the Carnival, he states: "Love and mirth are my business in Naples." He is fascinated by the men and the women in masking habits as they parade up and down the streets of Naples and comments:

"I like their sober grave way; tis a kind of legal authorized fornication, where the men are not chid for't, not the women despiz'd, as amongst our dull English."

He resents Blunt's being led away by the jilt Lucetta and when he comes across Hellena in the guise of a gipsy, he tells her without mincing any words:

"... I am come from the sea, child, and Venus not being propitious to me in her own element, I have a world of love in store. Would you be good-natured and take some on't off my hands?"

When Hellena tells him that she is ordained for a life in the nunnery, he exclaims,

"A nun! Oh, now I love thee for't! There is no sinner like a young saint. Nay, now there is no denying me; the old law had no curse to a woman like dying a maid."

He pursues her relentlessly and admits that he can't get the "little gipsy" out of his head. He prays that she turn out to be "damnable ugly" so that he doesn't have to pursue her any further.

Meanwhile, Willmore woos and makes love to the high priced courtesan, Angellica Bianca, who is not only smitten by his charms and pays him for his sexual favours, she becomes so possessive and jealous that she is ready to shoot him dead for falling in love with Hellena. A drunk Willmore has another escapade in the garden with Hellena's sister, Florinda. By mistake he considers her a common prostitute and nearly rapes her despite all her pleas that she is a virtuous "woman of quality". Willmore mistakes her pleading as the tricks of a professional prostitute for raising her price and tells her plainly:

"So now, now she would be wheedling for more! What, you will not take it then? You are resolved you will not! Come, come, take it or I'll put it up again, for look ye, I never give more. Why, how now, mistress, are you so high i'th mouth a pistole won't down with you?"

But Willmore eventually falls for Hellena, who pursues him through the streets of Naples and finds all out about his haunts and sexual escapades. He can't get the pretty, little, prattling gipsy out of his head, and when he finally confronts her he is ready to jump in to bed without the formalities of marriage which Hellena insists upon:

"Hold, hold, no long words, child. Priest and Hymen? Pri thee add a hangman to 'em to make up the consort. No, no, we'll have no vows but love, child, nor witness but the lover: the kind deity enjoins

taught but love and enjoy. Hymen and priest Marriage is as certain a bane to love as lending money is to friendship."

Hellera, brings up all his sins in his banter and for once Willmore has to concede: "Egad, I was never clawed away with broadsides from any female before." He ultimately swears constancy and is married to her, with Hellera bringing to him her legacy of three thousand crowns left to her by her uncle. The Rover thus emerges as the luckiest character in the play.

In order to justify his rakishness, Willmore does not spare even religion. He gives the example of Jephtha's daughter whose sacrifice was not accepted because she was a virgin. In the final analysis, we find that Willmore is largely devoid of what are traditionally the essential ingredients of love - sentiment and feeling. Modelled on one of her father's own lovers, Rochester, the court wit, Willmore represents the typical Restoration hero for whom man-woman relationship is an aggressive physical act. He arouses passion even in a hardened courtesan like Angellica Bianca but cannot anticipate what the bond of love enjoins upon him. He meets his match in Hellera, who largely responds to his call for spontaneity and unbridled passion but insists on matrimony in order to legalise their sensual union, making him discard the love-lorn Angellica who has been "quite spoiled" by her old general.

Willmore is frank and honest about his motives with Angellica. He condemns her for selling her wares, her youth and beauty which are nature's bounties. He tells her that he does not feel Cupid's shaft for her and accuses her of vanity. Deriding her talk of her "virgin heart" which she has given to him, he tells her, "Honour! I tell you, I hate it in you sex." But he is reduced to a passive position in the intrigue manipulated against him by the witty and ebullient Hellera. However to quote Katherine Rogers -

"Willmore, the Rover, presented as the most attractive male in the play, is a bully, a drunkard, and an

unabashed exploiter of women. But Behn suggests no criticism of his behaviour and rewards him with Hellena... Though Behn asserts the rights of women as well as men to win the people they love, she seems to accept men's emotional domination as natural and proper."

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