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# Plays and Punks; Or, Aphra Behn and the Restoration Woman

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“Plays and Punks; Or, Aphra Behn and the Restoration Woman”

By

Amanda J. Thompson

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

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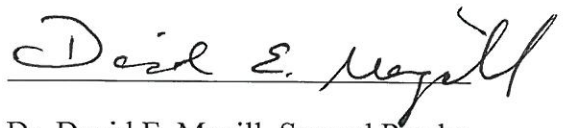
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## Introduction:

## Aphra Behn: The Punk-Poetess

In her essay, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) proclaims that “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously, but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey” (71). According to Woolf, Aphra Behn (1640-1689) “earned” women the “right to speak their minds” and to write for an income (71). While Woolf notes that Jane Austen is specifically indebted to Fanny Burney and George Eliot to “Eliza” Carter, *every* woman is indebted to Aphra Behn because she proved that a woman *could* be a successful writer (71). In her essay, Woolf creates a fictional sister of William Shakespeare, Judith, who, though just as gifted as William, is discouraged from reading or using her talents beyond household chores. She commits suicide and never has her talent as a writer recognized, all for a simple reason: she is a woman (50-53). To Woolf, Behn made it possible for future “Judiths” to live remarkably different lives.

Behn’s tomb in Westminster Abbey is in the company of noteworthy Restoration playwrights like William Congreve (1670-1729) and John Dryden (1631-700), as well as such reverential figures as Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and John Milton (1608-1674). The fact that Behn’s tomb is in Westminster Abbey alongside such important English writers is indicative of her significance as a writer. Though little is known about Behn, as Woolf mentions, she did not rely on a male alias to publish, and did not let her position as a woman deter her from using her “wits” to make money. According to Mary O’Donnell, Behn “spoke to her late seventeenth century audiences with power and vigour...that is her major

accomplishment”(10). She was the first woman “to make her living by the pen,” and only second to Dryden in the number of plays to be performed on the Restoration stage (Lowenthal 397).

The drama of the Restoration Period in England (1660-1700), while still dominated by male writers and concerns, nevertheless made particular advancements with respect to women and women’s issues. During the Restoration, women appeared on the public stage for the first time instead of having a young boy (or man) dress as a woman to perform female roles. Actresses like Elizabeth Barry (1658-1713), Nell Gwyn (1650-1687), and Anne Bracegirdle (1671-1748) became famous, often being in high demand and having roles written specifically for them to perform. The roles were often reflective of their personal lives, frequently depicting them as prostitutes—which some, in fact, were due to the meager pay of stage actresses (Young 20-21). By 1670, “Restoration audiences had become familiar with seeing women as stage performers,” possibly making them “more inclined” to attend a play written by a woman (Young 21). While the Restoration stage may have been relatively open to women writers, the “cutthroat” nature of the theatre did not make it easy for women to be successful (Hughes 29). For a woman writer, like Behn, to place herself in “direct competition with her male counterparts” contradicted the social expectation for women to “be modest about their literary endeavors” (Young 21). For Behn to become a playwright with “aggressiveness uncharacteristic of her sex” was a threat to male competitors who assumed—and sometimes publicly insisted—that women did not have the intelligence to write a good play (Young 22).

The presence of women in the theatre also fed another important aspect of Restoration drama: its keen interest in sexuality. Following the Interregnum (1649-1660), artistic expressions of sexuality became a mechanism to distinguish royalists from the “puritanical followers” of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), who had closed the theatres and made performances illegal while in power (Novak 56). The ritualistic “participation of actor and audience” made drama a sinister imitation of worship that Puritans believed would encourage “dangerous temptation to wickedness,” particularly in regards to sexual indiscretions (Heinemann 20). Within Puritan ideology, sexuality was understood as a “human necessity and marriage the only proper supply for it,” which contrasted with the sexual openness of Charles II’s court and the playhouses (“Puritans and Sex” 593). Puritans also worried that a man dressing in a woman’s clothing would promote sexual deviance, and that allowing women on the stage promoted a form of “whoredom” which was “no more tolerable” than sodomy (Morgan 342).

When the monarchy was restored in 1660, Charles II gave patents to two theatres, named the King’s and the Duke’s after Charles II and his brother, the Duke of York (Canfield ix). By the end of the seventeenth century there were five prominent theatres: Vere Street (1660), Lincoln’s Inn Fields (1661), Bridges Street (1663), Dorset Garden (1671), and Drury Lane (1674) (Langhans 3). Playhouses like Vere Street and Lincoln’s Inn Fields were converted into theatres from tennis courts, resulting in a smaller stage and limiting the audience to about four hundred people (Langhans 3). Indeed, the smaller, roofed theatre became the consistent trait of Restoration playhouses, in contrast to the larger, roofless theatre of Elizabethan times (e.g., The Globe). While plays by Shakespeare and John Fletcher were regularly revived for the new theatres and



adapted for modern audiences, the need for new plays reflective of the changing values saw a “remarkable” number of new plays produced “in the space of forty years” (Langhans 3-4). Theatres were run by supporters of the monarchy, and the plays were expected to “inculcate into their audiences the ideology that attempted to naturalize the right of the monarchists to rule” (Canfield ix).

With the restoration of the monarchy, libertinism emerged as a way to rebel against the puritanical rule of the Commonwealth. Libertinism “made the senses a primary source of knowledge,” and challenged “conventional morality” through “ritualistic fornication, drunkenness, and adultery” (Staves 20). According to libertine ideology, “Life was to be experienced as much through the senses as through the mind, and the pleasures of the body taught far more truth than learning promulgated by the universities” (Novak 55). John Wilmot, the Second Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), emphasizes precisely this ideal in his poem “A Satire Against Reason and Mankind,” which ridicules the reverence for “reason” over natural senses. Wilmot refers to man as a “vain animal” for inventing a “sixth” sense “to contradict the other five” (Wilmot 6-11). Wilmot was hardly alone in praising libertine ideology. The prominence of the libertine in Restoration England was reflected in the drama the period produced, with noted Restoration playwrights like William Wycherley (1641-1716), John Dryden, George Etherege (1636-1692), and Aphra Behn all depicting libertine heroes whose philosophies challenged the social norms by displaying ceaseless interest in physicality, especially as expressed through sexual conquest.

Depictions of masculinity, particular in relation to male sexuality, were a consistent subject on the Restoration stage. George Etherege’s *The Man of Mode; Or, Sir*

*Fopling Flutter* follows Dorimant, a libertine, as he tries to win the affections of Harriet, a wealthy heiress new to town. When he learns of Harriet's arrival, he is writing a false billet-doux to Ms. Loveit, his current mistress, in hopes she will end their relationship. His interest in Harriet motivates Dorimant to break up with Ms. Loveit, but he is also having an affair with her friend, Bellinda. Dorimant also encourages Young Bellair to marry Emilia so that he may have a better chance of sleeping with her. Not unlike Wycherley's Horner, for Dorimant, sexual conquest is a game, and as much about power over his friend as the women he seduces; as he puts it, "there is no charm so infallibly makes me fall in love with a woman as my knowing a friend loves her" (3.2 174-176). While in this instance his interest in cuckolding Young Bellair is indicative of Sedgwick's homosocial bonding, for Dorimant, the conquest of the woman is ultimately more important than dominance over his friends.

While Restoration drama regularly depicts women who consent to their seducers, rape or attempted rape is also a frequent occurrence. In Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676), Manly seeks revenge on Olivia by tricking her into having sex with him after she has lied to him about being married in order to keep him away. He promises Fidelity (who is disguised as a man) that he will not threaten her life; his revenge "shall only be upon her honour" (4.2 55). Manly successfully deceives and then rapes the hypocritical Olivia—all, according to contemporary accounts, while the audience laughs at her come-uppance. Indeed, rape or attempted rape was quite common on the Restoration stage. In her monograph, *The Ravishing Restoration: Aphra Behn, Violence, and Comedy* (2010), Ann Marie Stewart points to more than thirty Restoration plays depicting rape, attempted rape, or rape parody (119-123). In Wycherley's play alone, for

instance, along with Manly's rape of Olivia, Fidelity escapes rape due to a servant's interruption. When she tells Varnish she is a woman, not a man, he removes her man's wig and gropes her breasts, promising he will let her go "when you have satisfied me" (4.2 370). Fidelity's protests fall on deaf ears (4.2 381-385); as Varnish sees it, since she has duped him with her disguise, the proper repayment is rape. Fidelity fortunately escapes assault. Though she is not an egregious hypocrite like Olivia, in the world of Restoration comedy, rape (or, as here, attempted rape) of a woman is frequently considered a justifiable punishment that a man can administer a woman as a way to overpower her.

While sexual conquest of a woman brings its own satisfaction to libertine men, the opportunity to cuckold another man emerges in these plays as an equally powerful incentive. As Eve Sedgwick points out, to "cuckold" is "by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man" (49). To successfully cuckold another man is thus "definitive" of masculinity (50). William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) was one of the most popular plays of the Restoration, and it was "almost immediately" controversial for its bawdiness (Thompson 92). It was controversial, in part, for scenes like the infamous "china scene." In this particular episode, Horner, the libertine-hero of the play, has sex with Lady Fidget in the china closet while her husband, Sir Jasper, is outside the door. Horner tells Sir Jasper that she is "rifling" through his things, and then memorably adds, "but I'll get into her the back way and so rifle her for it" (4.3 l.139-140). Much to Horner's satisfaction (and the audience's amusement), Sir Jasper does not recognize the double entendre, telling Lady Fidget "he is coming into you the back way," to which she replies, "Let him come, and welcome, which way he will" (4.3 144-146).

In this scene, Horner takes pleasure in having sex with Lady Fidget, but he is equally delighted by the fact he has succeeded in cuckolding Sir Jasper *while describing to him in real time exactly what he is doing with his wife*.

Not unlike her male contemporaries, Behn frequently addresses issues of sexuality in her works, but her concern, perhaps not surprisingly, is in how *women* negotiate relationships with men; unlike Wycherley, and Etherege, she is primarily concerned with female sexuality rather than homosocial relationships amongst men. Throughout her work, women express their sexuality openly. For instance, in her best known play, *The Rover* (1677), Behn introduces Hellena and Florinda, two young women who disguise themselves as gypsies in order to flirt with sexual liberation (if not actually to *engage in* explicitly sexual activity). Familiarity with Behn's poetic output reveals that Hellena and Florinda's interest in sex is a familiar subject in Behn works. Her poem, "The Disappointment" follows Cloris, a woman "with a charming languishment" who is disappointed by her would be lover's impotency (l. 13). Throughout the poem, Behn clearly depicts Cloris as an equally willing (and perhaps *more* willing) participant in the affair. The same can be said for "The Golden Age," which laments the loss of free sexuality when "nymphs were free, no nice, no coy disdain / denied their joys" (l. 98-99). In short, throughout her various works, Behn depicts women with a level of sexual awareness—and sexual interest—like unto that ascribed to the male rakes by authors such as Wycherley and Etherege.

But could a woman also be a libertine? On one level, Behn clearly found libertinism appealing (Staves 12). She was "attracted" to the "revival of Epicurean hedonism" that considered marriage a "betrayal of the good" (Staves 21). Behn depicts

women in her plays with an interest in life beyond marriage as well as an awareness of their own sexuality. Florinda vehemently opposes the thought of marrying someone she does not love, but perhaps even more aware of her sexuality is the younger Hellena. She is disgusted that her brother thinks her fit for a convent, asking Florinda, “What dost thou see about me that is unfit for love? Have I not a world of youth?...a vigor desirable?...and sense enough to know how all these ought to be employed to the best advantage?” (*The Rover* 1.1 49-53). Hellena wants to live freely and engage her sexuality in ways she would precisely *not* be permitted to in a nunnery. As a result of Florinda and Hellena’s dissatisfaction with their circumstances, they disguise themselves as gypsies in hopes of experiencing a taste of the liberation otherwise unavailable to them.

But however much Behn is invested in the idea of the female libertine, she does not seem to believe she can realistically exist. In the first place, according to libertinism, women are designed “by nature for men’s pleasure,” even if that pleasure requires the use of sexual violence (Staves 21). As in plays by men like Wycherley, Behn’s plays *The Amorous Prince* (1671), *The Revenge* (1680) *The City Heiress* (1682), and *The Lucky Chance* (1686) all depict women being raped or nearly raped (Stewart 10). In *The Rover*, in fact, Florinda is nearly raped by the ostensible “hero” of the play, Willmore. Nor is sexual violence all women had to fear. While in disguise, Hellena flirts with Willmore, but rejects his advances because she understands the risks for a woman attempting to live as a libertine. “Why must we be either guilty of fornication or murder if we converse with you men,” she complains to Willmore, “And is there no difference between leave to love me, and leave to lie with me?” (1.2 229-230). For all her stated interest in sex, Hellena maintains her guardedness and her chastity until the end of the play, for fear of

being left with “a cradle full of noise and mischief, with a pack of repentance at my back” (5.1 495-497). By the end of *The Rover*, Hellena is on the way to marrying Willmore rather than living the life of a female libertine. Indeed, there seems to be no “single life” available to her at all—at least not one Behn can imagine.

For all her interest in sexual freedom, Behn is well aware that marriage provides social and financial security for women. Even if, as Staves sees it, Behn considered forced marriage “virtual prostitution,” such an arrangement nevertheless pointed to the financial dimensions of marriage for women (Staves 16). For Behn, “A husband had a sacred duty to love and support his wife, the wife a sacred duty to love and obey her husband” (Staves 13). A purely financial marriage would violate this mandate as well as encourage adultery. However, the acknowledgment of the financial gain Florinda would have acquired through her marriage to Don Vincentio is indicative of the fact that Behn is “exceptionally alert to the economic dilemmas of women who lack money to live at what to them is an acceptable social standard” (Staves 19). As much as Behn hates the necessity of marriage, particularly forced marriage, she recognizes the economic advantages of marriage for women.

Perhaps Behn’s largest point of contention regarding marriage is the way women are frequently given no choice other than to marry. Behn regularly depicts women being forced into marriage by “parents, uncles, brothers or guardians, often for financial reasons” (Staves 18). Most notably, perhaps, in *The Rover*, Florinda is betrothed to Don Vincentio against her wishes. Her father expects her to marry him because he is wealthy. Her brother, Don Pedro, also follows their father’s orders, asking Florinda not to “despise him, a man of so vast a fortune” (*The Rover* 1.1 71-73). Florinda

replies with evident vitrol, “I hate Vincentio, sir, and 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 75-78). She wants to marry Belvile, but he is not wealthy like Don Vincentio, who comes with a “jointure,” which will grant her financial stability should she outlive him (1.1 91). Behn “vehemently attacks the immorality of forced marriages and her heroines vigorously express the loathsomeness of being forced to marry a rich old man as no better than rape” (Staves 19).

Of course, there is a way for a woman to make money and explore her sexuality without being married—by way of what is often called the world’s oldest profession. Prostitution is a recurring theme in Behn’s writing, with plays like *The Rover*, *The Rover Part Two* (1677), and *The Feigned Courtesans* all depicting prostitutes or women masquerading as prostitutes. It is no mistake that women in Behn’s plays frequently disguise themselves as prostitutes because it is seemingly the only occupation that allows a woman to control both her economic viability and her sexual availability. As Marcella says to Fillamour, “to women of our profession there’s no rhetoric like ready money” (*The Feigned Courtesans* 2.1 276-277). The language Marcella and Cornelia use is not unlike Angellica Bianca’s, an actual courtesan, who proclaims “nothing but gold shall charm my heart” because she has “no time for love” (*The Rover* 2.1 171-172). Angellica Bianca, the former mistress of a General, is wealthy and requires a high price. Through Angellica Bianca, Behn could be insinuating that prostitution is a viable option for women because she is able to be single and independent, unlike a married woman who is expected to be subservient to her husband.

Yet Behn was keenly aware of the dark irony of adducing prostitution as a path to liberation: to escape the domination of men by way of prostitution is to move from one bad situation to another. While some prostitutes like Nell Gwyn benefitted from being a prostitute and actress through her relationship with Charles II (as his mistress), prostitutes were ultimately marginalized and frequent victims of sexual violence, both in the real world and in the world of Behn's plays. Even as a famous courtesan, Angellica Bianca is taken advantage of when Willmore proclaims false adoration for her so that he can have sex with her for free. A prostitute still relies on men in order to maintain financial stability, and because she is a prostitute she must remove emotional attachments. As a woman whose sexuality is commodified, she places herself even more at risk for sexual violence. Behn's depiction of Florinda's near rape by Willmore demonstrates the dangerous nature of a woman who sells sex to men. He claims he tried to rape her because he did not realize who she was, assuming she was "an arrant harlot" (3.6 26). By default, according to Willmore's logic, Florinda, as a woman dressed as she was, is in no position to deny a sexual advance.

Behn was second only to Dryden in the number of plays she produced for the stage, but her depiction of sexuality was highly controversial with her contemporaries. She was celebrated by John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, Thomas Otway, and Nahum Tate. (O'Donnell 9). John Dryden wrote the prologue and epilogue to her play, *The Widow Ranter*, praising Behn's ability to "portray love" in her plays (O'Donnell 9). Though praised by many, the fact that she used writing for an income was considered vulgar for a woman. William Wycherley, author of *The Country Wife* (which is considered one of the most bawdy plays of the Restoration), dismissed Behn's writing for



being too lewd (Thompson 92). Her critics referred to her as the “punk-poetess,” or “prostitute-poet” because of the sexuality in her writing as well as the fact that she was a woman writing for money. Behn was highly aware of the double standards. As a response to the hypocritical ridicule, in her preface to *The Lucky Chance*, Behn states that her writing “must be criminal because a woman’s” and had her plays been written by a man, she would not have been accused of vulgar, “masculine strokes” (188-190). Regardless of the reception from her contemporaries, Behn was highly successful during her lifetime, as well as for “about fifteen years after her death” which saw “posthumous productions, posthumous publications, memoirs, collected editions of her novels, and later of her plays” (Spencer 84).

By the eighteenth century commentary on Behn “took a sharp turn to the unfavorable” as “hostile comments increased” (Spencer 85). Behn became the “bye-word for lewdness and dissipation” because of her work’s combination of “Restoration excess and femaleness” (Todd 1). Scenes like Hellena and Willmore’s sexually charged flirtation—he proclaims it would make him a “good Christian” to prevent Hellena from dying a “maid” (*The Rover* 1.2 180-182)—did not translate with the shift towards moralism and sentiment. Negative reception of Behn “intensified” during the Victorian era because the sexuality in her writing conflicted with conservative ideals in nineteenth century. To the Victorian audience, Behn’s writing was “unfeminine and monstrous” (Todd 3).

Current scholarship on Behn is divided in its response to Behn’s treatment of female sexuality. Some critics maintain that Behn’s writing is highly concerned with the treatment of women in society and their limited, or complete lack of, autonomy. On this

view, Behn's consistent return to subjects of forced marriage, prostitution, and female coercion indicates clear interest in sexual inequality. According to Ann Marie Stewart, Behn "appears both a feminist in her compassion for the powerless" and as "a voice for the powerless" (9). Behn "permits her female characters to talk quite freely on stage" as a way to raise awareness for the limitations women were up against (Altaba-Artal 118). She is highly aware of the lack of options available to women and how much the options ultimately fail women because of the lack of freedom they are granted from the different roles.

As much as she wants for Hellena and Florinda, or Marcella and Cornelia, to experience liberation, they all ultimately get married. Behn's "conclusions re-inscribe the system that she had previously turned to chaos" because she struggles to find viable alternatives (Stewart 9). She cannot fully commit to the idea prostitution as a tenable option because of the violence and marginalization a prostitute endures. Likewise, a female libertine could not exist within a patriarchal ideology that does not grant women the same sexual freedom (if any at all). As indicated through Lady Galliard in *The City Heiress*, not even a wealthy single widow can safely express her sexuality without physical or social risk. Behn seems to want women to be sexually liberated and independent, but she never depicts a reality where a single woman is successfully independent.

For other scholars, the sexuality in Behn's plays is actually a cover for discussing political concerns. According to Melinda Zook, Behn's writing is indicative of her concern over "bitter partisan politics and religious crises" rather than "the treatment of women" (99). Janet Todd writes that Aphra Behn favored "divine-right

monarchy and elitist aristocratic culture” and expressed “nothing but contempt” for democracy (5). In her article “Sexual Politics and Party Politics in Behn’s Drama, 1678-83,” Susan J. Owen states that Behn should be considered as a “Tory dramatist” because her conservatism further explains the complicated values depicted in her writing (Owen 15).

Behn was not alone in her political conservatism and social liberalism. At first, Aphra Behn and Mary Astell seem to be on opposite sides of the social and political spectrum, but scholarship frequently links them together as “early feminists and ardent Tories,” making them the “prototype ‘Tory Feminists’” (Zook 99). Behn considered marriage based in a financial agreement “virtual prostitution” (Staves 16). For Astell, if a woman wanted to be free, she “must remain single—a married woman has a religious duty to be obedient to her husband, just as a political subject owes allegiance to the Monarch, just as a human being is responsible to God” (Taylor 69). For women who remain single, Astell proposes “all-female religious academies” where they can take on academic pursuits without being repressed through marriage (Taylor 94). Astell’s proposal for constructing an all-female academy was rejected for being too reminiscent of nunneries at a time when England “condemned” anything with “just the hint of papist associations” (Perry 134). Astell, like Behn, thus found herself stuck with a theoretical idea for female empowerment that she could not bring to fruition in practice.

Interestingly enough, Behn, like Astell, did not seem to consider her position as a working female writer as a viable option for women. She explores the good and bad experience women have as wives, prostitutes, or libertines, but the female working writer is not something she ever addresses. Although she was writing in a time “when the stage

was evidently quite open to women writers,” Behn still received plenty of harsh criticisms for her writing *because* she was a woman, with accusations of bawdry, and criticism for her “masculine strokes” (Hughes 29, Behn 190). Behn absolutely experienced hardship as a female playwright in an occupation dominated by men, often being likened to a prostitute, unlike her male peers (Greer 795). Behn also was not as financially secure as her male contemporaries, often using her money to pay debts; though a successful writer, Behn was hardly “earning a living by one’s pen,” as she was not wealthy and died nearly destitute (Greer 795). Perhaps Behn understood too well what it meant to scrape by as a writer to offer it as an aspirational alternative to women.

This thesis will investigate the way Aphra Behn negotiates the limited roles available to contemporary English women. A woman could be a wife and was expected to *want* to get married, but with the inequality and oppression women face when they marry, Behn wants an alternative. Likewise, Behn cannot accept the role of a prostitute for women because she knows that prostitutes are not any less controlled by men than wives. While both of these options have productive economic qualities for women, the problematic aspects seem to overrule Behn’s ability to identify these options as ideal for women. Her interest in libertine ideology provokes the question of whether a woman, too, could be a libertine. However, a woman’s place in a masculine ideology like libertinism is anything but safe. Behn, as a feminist and conservative does not commit to any of these possibilities because while they all have advantages for women, they are all inherently flawed. Through analysis of Behn’s plays alongside her biography, this thesis will investigate how Behn negotiates the options available to women only to inevitably arrive at the conclusion that there is not a satisfying place for women to consider that

would grant them the independence Behn desires not only for other women, but herself as well.

## Chapter One:

“Oh, how fatal are forced marriages!”: Forced Marriages in Aphra Behn’s *The Lucky Chance, The Rover, and The Feigned Courtesans*.

Though little is actually known about Aphra Behn’s personal life, from what we do know, Behn had a complicated perspective on marriage. According to Maureen Duffy, Behn “does reveal her private emotional life” in her writing (11-12). She may have been married to a “Mr. Behn,” whose origins have “less substance than any character she invented” (Duffy 48). Mr. Behn, sometimes named “Johan” or “John” Behn, may have been a merchant of Dutch descent (O’Donnell 3). Behn may have married him when she returned from Surinam (Duffy 49). Behn is widely reported to have lived as a widow, but there is no indication of how any husband she may have had died (Duffy 51). If he did die, it is likely he died of plague in the mid-1660s (O’Donnell 3). Other speculation surrounding Behn’s romantic life suggests she could have been a lover to John Wilmot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester as well as John Hoyle. However, like her alleged marriage and marital status, there is no certain evidence she was ever the mistress to either Hoyle or the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester (Johnson 248).

Behn’s ambiguous personal life mirrors her seemingly complicated view of marriage customs of the Restoration. Throughout the Restoration women were “bound up in an economic system which defines them as commodities to be exchanged between families through the marriage contract” (Dominguez 98). According to Susan Staves, Behn vehemently opposed the economic, often forced, marriages of the aristocracy which reinforced women’s status as commodities to exchange. Behn’s disdain for marriage customs like forced marriages is consistent throughout her plays. To make a woman

marry for financial gain is “virtual prostitution” (Staves 16). Behn is “clearly denouncing a traditional socioeconomic arrangement that allowed parents to decide upon their daughter’s future husband. Their choice was always based on economic grounds, regardless of the girl’s preferences” (Altaba-Artal 118). Behn frequently depicts arranged marriages in her plays when “parents, uncles, brothers or guardians” attempt to force female children into marriage with someone she “strenuously dislikes” (Staves 18). For Behn, a woman contracted into a marriage against her will finds herself in a predicament “no better than rape” (Staves 19).

Once a woman married she became the financial and physical property of her husband with which he might do as he pleased. As Lawrence Stone notes, “all the wife’s property which had not been previously conveyed to trustees passed to the husband” (18). Her husband took all financial control, and could “do what he liked with the personal estate” (18). Just as he could sell her jewelry or real estate, a husband could—literally—sell his wife (Stone 18, 41). Though an “unusual” occurrence, if a man tired of his wife, or if she were unfaithful, he could “put her up for auction” (43). A wife, however, could not sell her husband or have free access to their ostensibly shared finances. Though theologically “marriage was a spiritual union and a fundamental unit of God’s plan” to maintain social order, the financial aspect of marriage frequently overruled marriage as a religious mandate (Staves 15). Women were used for “the transmission and increase of family property” (15).

A woman was expected to be docile and obedient in submitting to her husband’s ownership. She had to accept that her needs were secondary to those of her husband: “his needs were always paramount, his opinions like unchallengeable laws within the

household” (Furtado 14). A wife was expected to be submissive. Inferiority of women had been “drilled into every member of society by clerical sermons, state regulations, marital handbooks, and both elite and popular culture” (Stone 37). While a wife could be taken to court for infidelity, “male philandering” was “accepted as normal” during the seventeenth century (Stone 39). Even if a woman tried to leave her husband for his infidelity, it was highly unlikely she would be successful (37).

Behn has consistently depicted the complex issue of forced and economic marriages by depicting her female characters with open disdain. *The Rover* (1677) begins with Hellena and Florinda expressing anxieties about their predicament, with Hellena forced to go to a convent, and Florinda to marry an older, wealthy man; each, as Staves puts it, is subject to the “power of patriarchal legal and economic systems” that dominates “women’s desires” (Staves 19). To “undermine power and stress emotions, Behn permits her female characters to talk quite freely on stage” (Altaba-Artal 118). The freedom of their discourse is clear in most of Hellena and Florinda’s private conversations, especially when Florinda expresses her distaste for her forced betrothal to Don Vincentio:

HELLENA: Why do you blush again?

FLORINDA: With indignation, and how near soever my father  
 thinks I am to marrying that hated object, I shall  
 let him see I understand better what’s due to my  
 beauty, birth and fortune, and more to my soul,  
 than to obey those unjust commands. (1.1 23-28)



Behn gives her women being forced to marry the chance to confess frustration with their circumstances. There is no subtlety to Florinda's anger about being forced to marry Don Vincentio, whom she refers to as a "hated object." Fittingly, Florinda lessens Don Vincentio to an object, not unlike the way she herself is about to be exchanged as a commodity.

Similarly, in *The Feigned Courtesans* (1679), Behn presents the audience with women who openly *discuss* their anger regarding marriage contract. Laura Lucretia and Marcella are contracted to men they did not choose while they love other men, but their contracts cannot be broken except by the men in question. Behn is "clearly denouncing a traditional socioeconomic arrangement that allowed parents to decide upon their daughter's future husband. Their choice was always based on economic grounds, regardless of the girl's preferences" (Altaba-Artal 118). When it came to marriage, "most decent people were inclined" to believe that a daughter was obligated to take her parent's advice, but the parent's or their daughter "ought to have a right to veto an unacceptable suitor" (Staves 13). Though a daughter "ought" to have the right to reject a suitor, if she was expected to obey her parents, her personal rejection of a suitor may not be necessarily possible, leaving her stuck with the marriage. As Marcella contemplates the ideas of "wealth" and "honour" in marriage, Cornelia retorts:

None half so powerful as love, in my opinion: 'life, sister, thou art beautiful, and hast a fortune too, which before I would lay out upon so shameful a purchase, as such a bedfellow for life as Octavio, I would turn arrant keeping courtesan, and buy my better fortune. (2.1 62-67)

Marcella's awareness of wealth and honor through marriage is not invalid, but Cornelia's disdain for her sister's marriage to Octavio is clear. Because "the legal system is likely to give more weight to patriarchal economic interests than to the desires of the woman," Marcella and Cornelia, as well as Hellena and Florinda, do not appear to have a choice (Staves 17).

Despite Behn finding forced marriages despicable, the fact that both *The Rover* and *The Feigned Courtesans* include references to the financial benefits of marriage is no mistake. As much as Behn disdains forced marriages, she cannot completely disregard the financial realities of her day. As much as a woman in a forced marriage is treated like a commodity, she will benefit from financial security. Marcella is not wrong, in other words, to consider the "wealth" that can come from marriage. Marriage gives women financial security, and if a husband dies before his wife, she could become self-supporting through her "widow's jointure," which provided a widow with enough land or money to make her "self-supporting" (Staves 17). Florinda lets her brother, Don Pedro, know her feelings regarding Belvile, whom she says is a "criminal for my sake" because he "threw himself into all dangers to save my honor. And will you not allow him my esteem?" (I.I 87-89). To which Don Pedro tellingly replies, "pay him what you will in honor, but you must consider Don Vincentio's fortune and the jointure he'll make you" (I.I 90-93). Don Pedro (sensibly, to his mind) prioritizes the financial benefit over Florinda's preference for love. While Behn's plays ultimately sympathize with women's concerns about entering into a marriage for money, she cannot dismiss the financial benefits women inherit through marriage.

The anxieties of the women in Behn's previous plays are validated in *The Lucky Chance* (1686) through her depiction of a forced marriage. While *The Rover* and *The Feigned Courtesans* demonstrate the anxieties about pending marriages, *The Lucky Chance* gives a glimpse into the bitter reality of what a wife in a forced marriage has to endure. As the play begins, Lady Julia Fulbank has been contracted to marry the wealthy, much older Sir Cautious Fulbank rather than Mr. Gayman, whom she actually loves. Julia confesses early on her displeasure regarding her forced marriage. After receiving a love letter from Gayman, who has put himself into debt buying her gifts as he grieves her impending nuptials, Lady Fulbank proclaims to her servant, Pert, and to Bredwell, the apprentice to Sir Cautious, "Oh, how fatal are forced marriages! How many ruins one such match pulls on: Had I but kept my sacred vows to Gayman, How happy had I been, how prosperous he!" (1.2 32-33). She wishes she were with Gayman, rather than languishing "in a loathed embrace" where she will, as she laments, "Pine out my life with age, consumptuous coughs" (1.2 36-37). Lady Fulbank's marriage to someone she does not love distresses her, especially knowing that Gayman puts himself into financial instability because of her. However, because of her honor, she refuses to ever have an affair with Gayman.

Lady Fulbank rejects the submissiveness a wife is expected to maintain, consistently making her displeasure known to Sir Cautious Fulbank. As he says in reaction to the politeness of Leticia, who proclaims to be "all obedience," "A most judicious lady; would my Julia had a little of her modesty; but my lady's a wit" (1.3 42-43). Like Julia, Leticia is stuck in a marriage with a much older man, but she seldom makes her displeasure known to her husband, the aptly named Sir Feeble. Julia, on the

contrary, does not hide her displeasure from Sir Cautious. When he says she would “rather have a young fellow,” Lady Fulbank replies “if forty years were taken from your age, ‘twould render you something more agreeable to my bed, I confess” (5.4 7-11). However, Lady Fulbank takes offense to his insinuation that her displeasure with their marriage will lead her to be unfaithful:

SIR CAUTIOUS. Aye, but you’re wondrous free, methinks, sometimes,  
which gives shrewd suspicions.

LADY FULBANK. What, because I cannot simper, look demure, and  
justify my honor when none questions it?  
Cry ‘fie,’ and ‘out upon the naughty women,’  
Because they please themselves?—and so would I.

SIR CAUTIOUS. How, would; what, cuckold me?

LADY FULBANK. Yes, if it pleased me better than virtue, sir.  
But I’ll not change my freedom and my humour,  
To purchase the dull fame of being honest. (5.4 18-28)

Lady Fulbank openly admits to her husband that she is dissatisfied and unhappy with the arrangement, rejecting the insistence for wives to be obedient and docile (Stone 37).

However, her virtue keeps her from adultery. As much as “male philandering” may have been the norm, an adulterous woman would be forced to endure social ostracism that a man would not (Stone 39).

As there was no law prohibiting a husband from essentially prostituting his wife, Sir Cautious gambles his wedding night with Lady Fulbank. As Lawrence Stone documents, a husband had control over a wife’s money, jewelry, and any other estate she

arrived with (18). Gambling sex with Lady Fulbank for money is no different than if he put jewelry on the table. While gambling with Gayman and Sir Feeble, Sir Cautious tells Gayman he wishes he “had anything but ready money to stake” (4.1 376-377). In response, Gayman proposes that Sir Cautious *does* have something other than money, suggesting he gamble Lady Fulbank:

GAYMAN. You have moveables sir, goods; commodities—

SIR CAUTIOUS. That’s all one, sir; that’s money’s worth, sir, but if I  
had anything that were worth nothing—

GAYMAN. —You would venture it; I thank you, sir. I would your lady  
were worth nothing.

SIR CAUTIOUS. Why so, sir?

GAYMAN. Wife, sir; aye, your wife.

SIR CAUTIOUS. Hum, my wife against three hundred pounds? What,  
all my wife, sir?

GAYMAN. All your wife? Why, sir, some part of her would serve my  
turn. (4.1 379-391)

Sir Cautious initially disapproves but quickly begins weighing the option, saying “we take money to marry our wives, but very seldom part with ‘em, and by bargain her money” (4.1 402-403). Sir Cautious agrees to wager a night with Lady Fulbank to avoid the public humiliation of cuckoldry; if he executes it himself and maintains the discretion he will gain money and avoid embarrassment, comparing himself to Cato, “a wiser man than I,” who lends his wife to Hortensius (4.1 217-219). When Sir Cautious loses, he must either allow Gayman to have sex with Lady Fulbank or lose three hundred pounds.

Because Lady Fulbank is devoted to her honor, Gayman and Sir Cautious orchestrate a plan for Gayman to have sex with Fulbank while she thinks it is her husband. Sir Cautious makes Julia think he wants to consummate their marriage. Before they retreat to their bedchambers, a large chest is delivered to Sir Cautious, which he says must be “prohibited goods” from Sir Nicholas smuggle, but which is actually delivering Gayman into Julia’s bedroom (5.4 63). Sir Cautious tells Gayman, “you’ll not speak a word, but let her think ‘tis I” (5.5 105-106) and leads him into Julia’s dark bedroom.

Lady Fulbank discovers she has been duped the next morning, appearing in front of Sir Cautious in her underclothes, with Gayman “*half undressed, upon his knees, following her, holding her gown.*” Lady Fulbank knows of the entire scheme—and she is furious:

GAYMAN. Can you be angry, Julia?

Because I only seized by my right of love.

LADY FULBANK. And must my honour be the price of it?

Could nothing but my fame reward your passion?

What, make me a base prostitute, a foul adulteress?

Oh, be gone, be gone, dear robber of my quiet. (*Weeping*) (5.7 18-

23)

As a result of her husband’s deceit, as well as Gayman’s rape, she dismisses both men. She vows to never see Gayman again, dismissively telling him “A canvas bag of wooden ladles were a better bed-fellow” (5.7 185-186). But she is even more enraged that Sir Cautious, as her husband, “left my honour unguarded” (5.7 43). She cannot believe her “wise husband” would resort to such a betrayal (5.7 52). When she asks Gayman “What

fondness in my conduct had he seen, / To take so shameful and so base revenge?"

Gayman replies:

GAYMAN: None: 'twas filthy avarice seduced him to't.

LADY FULBANK: If he could be so barbarous to expose me,  
 Could you who loved me be so cruel too?

GAYMAN: What, to possess thee when the bliss was offered,  
 Possess thee, too, without a crime to thee?  
 Charge not my soul with so remiss a flame,  
 So dull a sense of virtue, to refuse it.

LADY FULBANK: I am convinced the fault was all my husband's;  
 (*Kneels*) And here I vow, by all things just and sacred,  
 To separate forever from his bed. (5.7 55-64)

*The Lucky Chance* concludes with Lady Fulbank abandoning her connections with Gayman and Sir Cautious, but the outcome of her choice remains opaque. Divorce? Separation? Reconciliation? Regardless of Lady Fulbank's intentions, a woman could not leave her husband without social scorn or the risk of destitution (Stone 37). Even if a wife was victim to "gross physical cruelty" because of her husband, a divorce was nearly impossible, especially when requested by a wife (Stone 40).

Fulbank rejects the expected docility of a wife *and* punishes Gayman and Cautious through abandonment, but since England was "not a divorcing society" or "a separating society," Fulbank's liberation from her husband is unlikely (Stone 36). She may achieve "freedom from an abusive husband," but she would still be "subject to the pressures and judgments of a patriarchal society" (Stewart 10). Lady Fulbank is also a

woman with reverence for her virtue and reputation; leaving her husband could never be done discretely, as affluent divorces were public (Stone 38). While the hope for liberation from an oppressive situation exists in Behn's vague ending, the reality is that women could not end a marriage without putting herself at social and economic risk.

*The Lucky Chance*, however, is a comedy. But what becomes of Lady Fulbank is ambiguous. Unlike *The Rover* and *The Feigned Courtesans*, *The Lucky Chance* does not end with marriage. On one hand, Lady Fulbank emancipates herself from the patriarchal system that allows Sir Cautious to gamble her, but "without a husband or father to protect her, one wonders how Lady Fulbank will survive in the world, or if her rejection of Gayman is only a temporary punishment" (Stewart 117). We can guess what becomes of Lady Fulbank because of social mores of the Restoration, but there is really no way to know what Behn intends for her. Ann Marie Stewart believes that "abandonment" is the only way Lady Fulbank can really punish Sir Cautious and Gayman (115). It may well be that, of all Behn's comedic female characters, Lady Fulbank comes closest to liberation outside of marriage. The fact that Behn leaves her fate uncertain, however, is a bleak statement about the possibility of female independence itself. Perhaps the ending of *The Lucky Chance* is more tragic than comic.



## Chapter Two:

“A noble title?”: Prostitution in *The Rover* and *The Feigned Courtesans*

Prostitution during the Restoration, while morally impermissible, was prominent particularly in its relation to the theatre. Before 1661, English women were prohibited from performing on the public stage (Fisk 69). Because women from “good” families were only allowed to perform “in private household entertainments” most actresses were of the lower classes (Fisk 69). Many of the actresses also doubled as prostitutes because neither occupation on its own rendered a woman financial stability. While not all actresses were prostitutes, noted actresses like Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Barry did indeed work as prostitutes before becoming two of the most successful actresses of the Restoration. Nell Gwyn began as an orange woman before becoming the mistress to playwright Charles Hart, and eventually to Charles II himself. Gwyn went from prostitution to becoming one of the most famous actresses of the Restoration, having roles written specifically for her (Ditmore 10). Likewise, Elizabeth Barry moved from prostitution to a renowned actress and benefitted from the “social status” and “financial security” that was offered from male patrons of the theatre (Ditmore 10). Such prominent cases, of course, only further perpetuated the idea that actresses and prostitutes were synonymous.

Not only were some actresses literally prostitutes off-stage; frequently enough, they acted the figure of the prostitute or courtesan while on stage. Aphra Behn depicts prostitution in *The Rover*, *The Rover: Part Two*, and *The Feigned Courtesans*, but she was not unique to feature them in her plays. Often one of the “stock figures” in Restoration comedy, the prostitute offered a straightforward means of titillating the

audience (Novak 56). Part of that titillation came from the immediate controversy regarding prostitutes during the period. According to Laura J. Rosenthal, prostitution was “one of the most talked-about and written-about social issues of the Restoration and eighteenth century” (105). The presence of the prostitute in the theatre led “Jeremy Collier and others in the late seventeenth century” to “attack the theatre as immoral” in part because the “seductiveness of actresses” came from the possibility that the actresses depicting prostitutes were also prostitutes offstage (105).

Behn regularly explores prostitution through the perspectives of her aristocratic young women who are contracted to marry against their will, and desperate for a liberating alternative. As a prostitute, a woman could acquire her own wealth without the bonds of marriage as well as embrace her sexuality within the constraints of marriage. For women stuck in marriage contracts the occupation of a courtesan represented a potentially liberating, lucrative and prestigious alternative to the bondage of a forced marriage. If one’s body is to be sold for money, why not sell it oneself?

In *The Feigned Courtesans*, the women provocatively consider prostitution a viable alternative to the limited options available to women. Because neither Marcella nor Cornelia desire their expected roles (Marcella is contracted to marry a wealthy man, Cornelia to a convent), Cornelia encourages Marcella to run away with her and become a courtesan. Marcella is initially apprehensive, telling Cornelia that the title of courtesan “startles” her (2.1 68). Her apprehension is understandable enough, given the stakes, but Cornelia is quick to dismiss her concerns about becoming a courtesan:

MARCELLA. That word, too, startles me.

CORNELIA. What, courtesan! Why, ‘tis a noble title, and has more

votaries than religion; there's no merchandise like ours, that of love, my sister; and can you be frighted with the vizard which you yourself put on?

MARCELLA. 'Twas the only disguise that could secure us from the Search of my uncle and Octavio. (2.1 68-74)

Cornelia also refers to the patrons of courtesans as “votaries,” implying the devout, almost religious nature of the way men desire their services. Along with the copious amount of money they will make, Cornelia proclaims that to be a courtesan is a “noble title” to invalidate Marcella’s concerns. To be a “courtesan” is to be a “court-mistress” (*OED*). As Elizabeth S. Cohen writes in her article, “‘Courtesans’ and ‘Whores’: Words and Behavior in Roman Streets,” a courtesan was the most revered of prostitutes, frequently “hobnobbing elegantly with the cultural and political elite” (202). Italian courtesans did not face “moral stigma” for their occupation and regularly lived independently in affluent neighborhoods (Cohen 205); by setting her play in Italy, Behn is thus able to imply a level of social acceptability that would be out of place in an English context. As apprehensive as Marcella may be about the occupation, Cornelia makes a strong case for becoming courtesans. When she asks Marcella, “can you be frighted with the vizard which you yourself put on?” Cornelia negates Marcella’s uncertainty. Even if Marcella is wary, she was not wary enough to refuse the disguise, insinuating that despite her anxiety about being a courtesan, Marcella sees the money they will make and that their honor will not be compromised.

Marcella and Cornelia set out to become courtesans with particular attention to their ability to make their own living. Regardless of her prior apprehensions, Marcella

nevertheless disguises herself as a courtesan along with Cornelia with the hope of making money. Because they have run away from home, they have emancipated themselves from their family's income—for better or worse. Cornelia reminds Marcella, “our money's all gone, and without a miracle can hold out no longer honestly,” to which Marcella suggests, “Then we must sell our jewels!” (*The Feigned Courtesans* 2.1 107-109). However, Cornelia does not see this as an easy solution because eventually their jewelry will run out; “When they are gone, what jewel will you part with next?” she asks (2.1 110). There is, of course, one “jewel” that can be sold again and again. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a “jewel” as a figurative word “Applied to a thing or person of great worth, or highly prized.” If they work as courtesans, they can prevent the threat of destitution or loss of all of their material belongings—selling their one figurative “jewel” can obviate the need to part with their remaining literal jewels. Furthermore, the sooner they begin to make an income, the less likely it will be that they must return home to “ask the old gentleman pardon” for running away; they could easily keep their pride while providing their own finances because courtesans are highly coveted, making the occupation ideal for Marcella and Cornelia (2.1 112).

Cornelia's insistence that courtesans' desirability will make them wealthy is reflected in Galliard's infatuation with the courtesan, Silvianetta (the name both Laura Lucretia and Cornelia adapt while in disguise). Behn depicts Galliard as a man who is even more enticed by courtesans because of their status; he is not at all revolted by a courtesan. For Galliard, courtesans exist for men's pleasure, as he says to Fillamour when they see Cornelia and Marcella disguised as Silvianetta and Euphemia: “Women! and by their garb for our purpose, too. They're courtesans; let's follow 'em” (2.1 118-

119). Galliard may consider them women for his “purpose,” but that purpose is not always sex. A courtesan was not limited to the “crude exchange of cash for sexual service” (Cohen 206). Courtesans did have sex with select customers, but men also went to them for entertainment like “conversation, games,” “music,” or “poetry” (206). A courtesan, to Galliard, is a woman for men because they are sexually available, but they also offered entertainment and companionship with their male clients (Cohen 206). When Galliard realizes one of the courtesans is the famous Silvianetta, Galliard is even more excited that they have found courtesans, proclaiming to Fillamour, “‘Tis she, ‘tis Silvianetta! Prithee advance, that thou mayst behold her and renounce all honest women, since in that one young sinner there are charms that would excuse, even to thee, all frailty” (2.1 193-196). Galliard validates Cornelia’s belief that men will desire a courtesan over an “honest” woman. The “charms” and friendly companionship they provide are preferable to that of a woman they are contracted to marry because of the limited economic obligations.

Though the women of *The Feigned Courtesans* fortuitously make it to the end of the play without physical threat, *The Rover* reveals the darker reality of what it means for a woman to be a prostitute. Even with the limits Behn places on her characters as they *pretend* to be sexually open prostitutes, they are still not immune to the dangers that a prostitute consistently faces. In *The Rover*, Florinda is nearly raped *three* times because of her clothing and being a woman out at night alone. Indeed, the only attempted rapes in *The Rover* “are committed against Florinda, the most chaste, respectable woman in the play” (Stewart 86). In the first instance, Florinda is alone when a drunken Willmore encounters her. A woman of quality would not, or should not, be out alone at night

(Stewart 90). Drunkenly, Willmore proclaims, “I’m a dog if it be not a very wench!”  
 (*The Rover* 3.5 19-20). Florinda tries to fight him off, but because she is a woman alone  
 at night, by Willmore’s logic she is not in a position to deny him:

FLORINDA. I’ll cry murder! rape! or anything! if you do not  
 instantly let me go.

WILLMORE. A rape! Come, come, you lie, you baggage, you lie.  
 What, I’ll warrant you would fain have the world  
 believe now that you are not so forward as I. No,  
 not you. Why, at this time of night, was your  
 cobweb door set open, dear spider—but to catch  
 flies? Hah—come—or I shall be damnably angry.  
 Why, what a coil is here—.(*The Rover* 3.5 60-68)

Essentially, by Willmore’s logic, Florinda is asking for it. As a woman dressed as she is,  
 unaccompanied at night, there is no way she could be uninterested on his advances. And  
 as a prostitute, Florinda cannot be raped, Willmore insists, and thus she is not in a  
 position to say no. He accuses her of being just as forward as him, likening her to a  
 spider looking to ensnare a fly. Perhaps what makes this scene even more disturbing is  
 Willmore’s threat of anger that would surely be taken out on Florinda had Belvile and  
 Frederick not entered the room. When a horrified Belvile ridicules Willmore for  
 attacking Florinda, Willmore says “By this light, I took her for an arrant harlot” (*The  
 Rover* 3.5 26). Willmore, like those around him, knows that an actual prostitute cannot  
 be violated.

The social division between prostitutes and respectable women is reaffirmed when Florinda is nearly gang raped. Still in her prostitute's disguise, Florinda is nearly raped by Blunt, who is seeking revenge after he has been robbed by Lucetta and her pimp. When Frederick enters the room, he joins in with Blunt in the prospect of raping Florinda, saying there will be "double pleasure" in both of them assaulting her (*The Rover* 4.5 129). To save herself, Florinda tries showing them the ring Belvile gave her, which makes Frederick pause. Blunt remains bitter, however, stating that "there's more persuasive rhetoric in't than all her sex can utter," and insisting that it makes no difference whether she is a woman of quality or a prostitute (4.5 151-152). As Ann-Marie Stewart writes, Blunt's lack of concern regarding the woman he is assaulting is misguided by his need for revenge on Lucetta:

Frederick (while deliberating whether or not to assault Florinda) makes the argument that rape is determined not by the act itself, but by the quality of the woman. His comrade Blunt considered the demarcation worthless—for him, whores and virgins are interchangeable merchandise (Hunter 1993, 110). However, in the dramatic world of *The Rover*, and in the real seventeenth-century culture existing beyond the stage, this differentiation matters a great deal (Stewart 86).

As Frederick points out, "'twould anger us vilely to be trussed up for a rape upon a maid of quality, when we only believe we ruffle a harlot" (4.5 153-155). On one hand, Frederick validates rape if the woman is a prostitute, but he also does not want to face legal punishment if he rapes a woman of status. Inevitably, their fear of punishment saves Florinda; "It is not sympathy that saves her, but class privilege" (Stewart 93).

Through the various threats of assault against Florinda, Behn reveals the darker aspect of sexual desire for women. For women in *The Rover* and *The Feigned Courtesans*, to pretend to be courtesans is to risk actually having sex through rape.

By the end of *The Feigned Courtesans* Cornelia and Marcella are married despite the freedom the life of a courtesan seemed to offer them. Through Cornelia and Marcella, Behn inadvertently blurs the line between marriage and prostitution. Galliard and Fillamour go from being potential patrons to future husbands. Behn's betrothed virgins maintain their virginity by the end of the play and marry someone of their own choosing. Their quickness to marry rather than attempt to live as actual courtesans reveals that perhaps they did not actually want to become courtesans. Ultimately Cornelia and Marcella's perception of the liberated courtesan is one that is superficial at best. Cornelia and Marcella adapt different clothing, as well as change their names, but their failure to *actually* exchange sex for money is indicative of Behn's inability to recognize the life of a courtesan as entirely safe or liberating.

But what about a successful prostitute, one relatively immune from sexual violence and firmly in control of her body and finances? Initially, Behn depicts *The Rover's* Angellica Bianca as an ideal independent woman. However, Behn's humanization of Angellica Bianca reveals yet another problem with prostitution: they cannot fall in love. As prostitution is an occupation in which women commodify their own bodies, romantic relationships are not possible. Behn demonstrates through Angellica Bianca that a courtesan cannot fall in love *and* successfully maintain herself as a businesswoman.



The bitter reality of the courtesan is recognized in Angellica Bianca, who initially seems to understand that she cannot experience love the way other women can. She is unmarried and a wealthy, the result of her affair with a deceased General. As Willmore, Blunt, and Frederick gather outside of her window, they complain about the large sum of money she requires which none of them can afford. One of her admirers is Don Pedro, who Moretta tells her “is the likeliest man to give your price” (*The Rover* 2.1 157-158). However, Angellica Bianca fully understands Don Pedro’s personality and motivations, and she will not allow herself to be duped by his inconsistent devotion:

ANGELLICA. The man is brave and generous, but of an humor  
 so uneasy and inconstant, that the victory over his  
 heart is as soon lost as won, a slave that can add little  
 to the triumph of the conqueror. But inconstancy’s  
 the sin of all mankind; therefore I’m resolved that  
 nothing but gold shall charm my heart. (*The Rover* 2.1 159-164)

Angellica Bianca cannot use “victory over” hearts as the motivation behind her role as a courtesan. She knows that her occupation prohibits romance; love, she claims, is a “disease” that would impede her ability to make money (2.1 167). As she proclaims to Moretta, “I have no time for love” (2.1 170-171). To fall in love would hinder her “trade” as well as cause her emotional despair (2.1 174). Through Angellica Bianca’s strong oppositions, Behn signals to the audience a drawback to the life of a courtesan: she cannot fall in love even if it is her natural inclination.

Angellica Bianca’s attempt at maintaining her role as a courtesan *while* falling in love backfires through her relationship with Willmore. He behaves in accordance with

her station and bargains his way into sex with her through flattery. He cannot afford the high price Angellica Bianca requires so he must negotiate until he can get her to agree to sleep with him for free. Willmore uses his excessive, ineloquent flattery, telling her she tempts “poor amorous mortals with so much excellence,” and criticizes her for putting a “price on sin” (*The Rover* 2.2 3-15). Angellica Bianca falls for his flattery and reaffirms the problem of prostitution as a viable option. As a prostitute, she cannot fall in love because her business will suffer. Angellica Bianca initially professes having no use for romance, but her outward convictions do not stand up to her desire for love, as her aside indicates when she says “His words go through me to the very soul” (2.2 82).

Unfortunately as a courtesan Angellica Bianca cannot maintain a romantic relationship, so when Willmore moves on, it is not treated as a grave injustice. A prostitute is not allowed to be broken-hearted and jealous—but Angellica is somehow both. When she learns he has promised himself to Hellena, she laments over his absence after never returning to her again after they have had sex once:

ANGELLICA BIANCA. He will not see me now though oft invited,  
 And broke his word last night—false perjured man!  
 He that but yesterday fought for my favors  
 And would have made his life a sacrifice  
 To've gained one night with me  
 Must now be hired and courted to my arms.  
 (*The Rover* 4.2 144-149)

Courtesans cannot be upset that the men they have sex with never return to see them again. Still, because Angellica Bianca is a human, she cannot help but feel heartbroken.

Unfortunately, Angellica Bianca now knows what Moretta cautioned against, as well as what Behn allows the audience to know regarding Willmore's intentions. In that moment, Willmore loved her, but ultimately, "prostitutes are objects of desire," and they "cease to hold a man's interest after being possessed. Whores can never achieve power with a man because a woman's only power lies in *withholding* sex" (Stewart 87).

Willmore has behaved as a customer is expected to act by having sexing with her and then leaving. He got what he wanted from Angellica Bianca, for free, so he has no need to pursue her anymore, or court her like a potential wife.

Angellica Bianca promises to Willmore that she "shall be revenged" for ultimately breaking her heart (*The Rover* 4.2 175). In the final scene of *The Rover* she pulls a pistol on him, calling him a "traitor," and asking if "guilty blood run shivering through thy veins?" (5.1 242-244). The remorseless Willmore says his "blood keeps its old ebbs and flows still," and he cannot resist the opportunity to try and seduce her once again (5.1 246-247). Regardless of the prices and rules Angellica Bianca creates for herself as a courtesan, she is no less immune to a broken heart than any other woman. Behn makes Angellica Bianca a sympathetic character through her broken heart, but she also uncovers the bleak reality that prostitutes can have many things—but not love.

As much as Behn's women recognize the financial aspect of prostitution, it is still a male-dominated sphere, not unlike marriage. Once a woman married, she was expected to obey her husband. Not unlike a married woman, a prostitute still has to answer to a man with more control over her circumstances than she has; prostitution does not grant female autonomy in the way that Marcella and Cornelia, as well as Florinda and Hellena, initially seem to believe it does. Behn cannot commit to prostitution as a viable

option for women because of the physical dangers they will risk *even more* as prostitutes; they may be able to control having sex, but there's still the risk of sex through rape. They also must remain emotionally detached from men because a romantic life will hinder business. As Behn illustrates through Angellica Bianca, she may have wealth, but if she wants to maintain her wealth, she cannot fall in love with anyone or even *consider* marriage as Behn's acting courtesans do. Angellica Bianca's higher social status and wealth are fragile, and can easily be lost if she fails to disregard her desire for love.

## Chapter Three:

## But Can a Woman be a Libertine?

By definition, a libertine is “A person (typically a man) who is not restrained by morality, especially with regard to sexual relations; a person of dissolute or promiscuous habits” (*OED*). Though “typically” a man by one of the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definitions, during the Restoration a libertine was consistently a man and synonymous with masculinity. On the stage, the libertine, or rake-hero, became a stock figure; William Wycherley (1641-1716), George Etherege (1636-1692), John Dryden (1631-1700), and William Congreve (1670-1729) all depict male rake-heroes throughout the Restoration. Aphra Behn herself presents male rakes Gayman from *The Lucky Chance* (1686), Wilding from *The City Heiress* (1682), and, most notably, Willmore from *The Rover: Part One and Two* (1677, 1681). Each playwright, different intentions aside, depicts the rake-hero through very specific traits: he is vehemently opposed to marriage, and expresses philosophy reflecting the libertine idea that “Life was to be experienced as much through the senses as through the mind, and the pleasures of the body taught far more truths than learning promulgated by the universities” (Novak 55).

But can a woman be a libertine? Behn’s plays frequently explore the possibility of a female libertine who resisted marriage. Susan Staves writes that “the ideology to which Behn was most attracted was that of libertinism,” particularly in its emphasis on physical experience and the libertine aversion to marriage (20). Libertinism notoriously opposes marriage and considers the institution “just another burdensome, ill-conceived practice to be avoided at all costs” (Novak 55). Marriage would hinder the libertine pursuit of knowledge through “pleasures of the body” (Novak 55). As discussed in

Chapter One, Behn takes issue with the institution of marriage because it limits women's ability to have autonomy, particularly when they are forced into marriage. Instead of being stuck in an oppressive marriage, a libertine expresses the right for people to "flaunt their sexual powers as superior to the puritanical followers of Cromwell," who maintained that marriage was the only space for sexuality (Novak 56). Libertines could "shock these religious zealots" while simultaneously experiencing "the exhilaration of feeling that they belonged to a group of men and women who could assert, by their actions, their true sense of freedom from the conventions of society" (Novak 56). Libertinism would thus seem to be a useful ideology for women uninterested in marriage. They could have their secure independence and enjoy sex freely without waiting for marriage or becoming a prostitute.

Restoration plays, however, never created the stock character of a "female libertine" or "rake-heroine." While female roles like wives, widows, or prostitutes were prominent fixtures in Restoration drama, there is not a specifically labeled rake-heroine to counterpoint the rake-hero. By definition a "rake" is "a fashionable or stylish man of dissolute or promiscuous habits," or "a woman of similar character" (*OED*). Given the conventions of Restoration drama, Behn has to create female libertines from female stock characters with libertine values—they were not available for her to "find" alongside a male rake or fop.

Perhaps one of the closest instances of a female libertine is Lady Galliard in *The City Heiress* (1682). As a widow, Lady Galliard occupies a precarious and unique space. Lady Galliard is "strong, independent, pragmatic, witty, and unfortunately somewhat controlled by the opinions and standards of upper class society" (Stewart 78). She is

sexually experienced from her marriage and independently wealthy because of her widow's jointure. She does not need to marry for financial security like a woman who has never married, or a woman from a lower social class. Lady Galliard does not have an overbearing husband making her decisions, or a father as a virgin heiress. Like many libertines, Lady Galliard is a wealthy woman by her "birthright" and the money from her marriage (Stewart 79). Not unlike a libertine man, as a widow, Lady Galliard's sexual experience is known, but she is not considered ruined for her lack of virginity.

Unlike other women in Behn's plays, Lady Galliard is not expected or being forced to marry anyone. She is allowed to socialize and flirt as she wants with men who are interested in her. She is in love with Wilding, a libertine who claims to love her as well, but who keeps a mistress while also entertaining marriage with Charlot, a young heiress. Marriage, in short, is not necessarily a desired or an anticipated outcome of her relationship with Wilding. As one might expect, Lady Galliard thinks less of Wilding for his sexual dalliances. Even though she loves him, and Wilding claims to reciprocate, Lady Galliard is skeptical about marrying him because of what marrying a notorious Lothario would do for her reputation. As a widow, she occupies a complicated social status in society because she wants to maintain her honor while also enjoying the benefits of being a rich, single woman:

Galliard is able to act freely. With that power, she pursues the man of her choice, Wilding, a handsome, libertine rake hero. However, her desire for Wilding is curbed by his social status, for he is without inheritance, and worse, he maintains another lover, Diana. . . . For Galliard, Wilding is both appealing and revolting, and she grapples with the public libertine

image of Wilding versus the private man she loves, the public image of herself as the widow and private woman who embraces sexual freedom.

(Stewart 79)

Galliard has sexual openness a non-married woman cannot possess, and she does *not* have the influence of parents forcing her into any particular direction. However, her skepticism toward Wilding is indicative of the seemingly free, but complicated social space that Lady Galliard occupies as a sexually experienced woman who must preserve her reputation.

Behn is aware that the liberation from Lady Galliard's widowhood is limited. As a widow, though she has less value than a virgin heiress, her immense wealth leaves her vulnerable to aggressive male pursuit. Lady Galliard is "without a husband to protect her" from men hunting for fortune (Stewart 79). As a married woman, her wealth would not make her a financial asset to men other than her husband. But because she is a single woman with a large sum of money, she is not safe or secure in her status. On one hand, her status as a widow gives her sexual liberties other women do not. On the other, she represents a considerable financial asset to any single man with whom she chooses to have a sexual relationship.

Men throughout the play recognize the precarious social position of Lady Galliard's widowhood, and often resort to commodifying her. Wilding may love Lady Galliard in some manner, but even he is aware that a widow is a less respectable bride than a virgin heiress. While discussing Lady Galliard with Sir Charles Meriwell, Sir Charles expresses his frustrations with his attraction to a sexually experienced woman who nevertheless expresses pride in her place in society:



SIR CHARLES. Whilst I am laboring another's good, I quite  
 neglect my own. This cursed, proud disdainful Lady  
*Galliard*, is ever in my Head; she's now at Church, I'm  
 sure, not for Devotion, but to shew her Charms, and throw  
 her Darts amongst the gazing Croud; and grows more  
 vain by Conquest. (*The City Heiress* 1.1 150-155)

Sir Charles Meriwell's attraction to Lady Galliard is indicative of the social stigmas a widow faces. He views her independence as "proud" and "disdainful," as if her proud confidence is unfeminine or inappropriate for a woman of her status. Wilding does not defend Lady Galliard; instead he reminds Sir Charles that she is beautiful and rich in an attempt to divert his attention from Charlot, the titular City Heiress who has fallen in love with Wilding. Under the impression that Wilding loves Lady Galliard, Charles tells him she "shou'd prove a good Income" (1.1 195). However, he prefers Charlot for a wife. According to Wilding, Charlot "is the most charming pretty thing in nature fallen in love with this Person of mine, a rich City-Heiress, *Charles*, and I have her in possession" (1.1 198-200). Wilding makes clear in this instance that a virginal heiress is preferable to a wealthy, prideful widow, even if he confesses his love to Lady Galliard in private.

Though a sexually experienced woman, the fact Lady Galliard had sex with her husband is much less socially disgraceful than sex outside of marriage. Throughout the play, she struggles with her public reputation as an honorable widow and "the private woman who embraces sexual freedom" (Stewart 79). Fearing a loss of her "virtue," Lady Galliard initially refuses to have sex with Wilding, opting to love him but to refrain from acting on her feelings. Wilding accuses her of being "false" in her claims to love him;

coupled with this accusation, he uses “libertine ideology” while trying to persuade her (Stewart 80):

WILDING: All the desires of mutual Love are virtuous.

Can Heav'n or Man be angry that you please

Your self, and men, when it does wrong to none?

Why rave you then on things that ne'er can be?

Besides, are we not alone, and private? who can know it? (*The City*

*Heiress* 4.1 194-198)

Wilding appeals to both aspects of Lady Galliard: he assures her of their privacy and speaks to her own libertine sexuality. She can have sex with him without cheapening her virtue, while they maintain their discretion. The fact that they love each other would make the consummation of their relationship inherently virtuous. Lady Galliard eagerly consents.

It is telling that the same night she agrees to Wilding's proposition, Lady Galliard experiences rape and blackmail. Later in the evening, Sir Charles Meriwell drunkenly appears at Lady Galliard's home. He intends to “woo the widow,” bringing Sir Anthony Meriwell to witness his proposal (*The City Heiress* 4.2 47). Lady Galliard makes Wilding leave when she realizes Sir Charles has come over unannounced. As she tries to ask Sir Charles to leave, claiming he has interrupted her “Hours of Prayer,” he does not believe her:

SIR CHARLES. Prayer! No more of that, Sweetheart; for

let me tell you, your Prayers are heard. A Widow of your

Youth and Complexion can be praying for nothing so late,

but a good Husband...Come, Widow, let's to Bed [*Pulls her, she is angry*]. (4.2 205-215)

As a beautiful and young widow, believe Lady Galliard could pray for nothing other than another husband, Sir Charles assumes. How could she want anything other than to be remarried? His consideration of her youth and widowhood signals as well Sir Charles' awareness of her sexual experience from her marriage; by his logic, a widowed woman presumably deprived of sex now that her husband has died would want to get married. That she *just did have sex* with the man of her choosing does not, at first, occur to him.

When Sir Charles Meriwell does become aware that Lady Galliard had a sexual encounter just before he arrived, his aggression and anger at her indiscretion becomes violent. Throughout this scene of intrusion, Behn's stage directions foreshadow the violent rape about to be committed against Lady Galliard, as Sir Charles "*pulls her*" and Lady Galliard "*flings*" herself from his grasp (4.2 215-257). Even more forward, Sir Charles begins to undress himself. Knowing that she has had a man with her he refers to her as a "hypocritical widow" whom he will possess "by force" (4.2 199). Considering she is a sexually experienced widow who *just* had a sexual encounter, by Sir Charles' logic, she cannot refuse him, and she deserves the punishment he will administer. He suggests she should "get down on her knees" in order to "physically demonstrate her shame and submission" (Stewart 82). He "punishes" Lady Galliard for her sexuality through raping her; the rape also signals "a mark of ownership of Galliard's body" (Stewart 82). Libertine women, unlike libertine men, are severely punished.

As a woman who still must maintain her honor and reputation, Lady Galliard is given no choice but to accept when Sir Charles blackmails her into marriage. In an

effort to make him leave, Lady Galliard agrees to marry him, thinking he will not remember proposing because of his drunkenness. Though inebriated, Sir Charles is still very aware that, as a woman, Lady Galliard's public reputation is at risk and he can make her the source of public disgrace not only for her sexual encounter with Wilding, but also for potentially rejecting his proposal. In hopes that he will leave and not remember her proposal once he becomes sober, Lady Galliard agrees. Without realizing Sir Anthony Meriwell has been "leering vicariously at them" throughout her rape and marriage proposal, her agreement becomes a "binding verbal contract" (Stewart 82). Verbal agreement to marriage was considered binding and "married in the eyes of God" as long as there was a witness present (Stone 10). Lady Galliard, to save her reputation yet again, agrees to marry Sir Charles in order to "save face" (Stewart 83). For Lady Galliard, marriage to Sir Charles is a punishment for exhibiting libertine characteristics as a woman: independent, witty, wealthy, and sexually active without the bondage of a marriage contract.

Though Wilding is heartbroken and "bitter" that Lady Galliard married Sir Charles, unlike her, he receives no punishment in any way for his rakish behavior (Stewart 83). He marries the heiress, Charlot, without consequence or social condemnation for any sort by the end of the play, demonstrating the double standard a woman faces who exudes libertine qualities. Wilding goes on to marry the heiress he has been linked to all along, while Lady Galliard is blackmailed into marriage by her rapist. The contrasting outcomes for their sexual encounter indicate the double standard Behn finds within libertine culture. Wilding, though promiscuous, is still able to marry Charlot without any damage to his reputation or physical assault because libertinism prioritizes

male sexuality. Lady Galliard, as a woman, has to be put in her place for her free sexuality. She cannot have sex only when she wants to like a man. Unlike a libertine man, her sexual availability and experience must have an end point (Stewart 79). Behn very clearly establishes through her that a female libertine would struggle to exist without persecution, if she could safely exist at all.

As demonstrated through *The City Heiress*, a woman's place within libertinism is not safe or secure as it is for a man. Libertinism, according to Staves, "authorized women's free enjoyment of sexual pleasure," but it is ultimately a "masculinist ideology" (21). Though its opposition to marriage is relevant to Behn's disdain for forced marriage, as Susan Staves writes, Behn is painfully aware that the physical threats to women make female libertinism impossible:

It was hostile to marriage or any other long-term commitment, typically figured women as provided by nature for men's pleasure, and sometimes did not scruple to resort to violence to gratify male desire... In glorifying present sexual pleasure, it countenanced sexual practices that had fewer problematic consequences for men than for women. (Barring the non-trivial threats of venereal disease, social disgrace, or even criminal prosecution for sodomy or rape). (21)

Libertinism had no concern for the physical safety of women. It also had no concern for any hypocritical social consequences women would face, something Behn takes issue with in her plays (21). While libertinism became the ideal for many Royalist *men*, a libertine *woman* lacks any leverage within a culture in which violence against women was "endemic" and seldom had a consequence (Staves 21).

Along with libertinism's double standards regarding sexuality, another point of contention for Behn is that women, unfortunately, often need the physical and social protection that a husband would (ideally) grant his wife. Libertinism's vehement disdain for marriage complements Behn's, but unlike the ideology of the libertine, Behn is aware that a single, sexually open woman is unlikely to be in position to provide for herself. As much as she disdains economical marriages, she cannot deny that women often need to marry for financial and physical protection. One way Behn reconciles this is through her rakes agreeing to marry by the conclusion of the plays and her women not consenting to sex until the man will marry her.

Behn ridicules the double-standards and flaws of libertinism through Willmore in *The Rover*. Willmore exemplifies all of the aspects of libertine culture that women cannot partake in, but Behn deliberately presents him as a character to easily ridicule. For Behn, the biggest problem with libertine philosophy is that it does not create a space for women to be as sexually open as men without social disgrace. Easily her most successful play, Behn's *The Rover* gives the audience Willmore, a rake who gets to pursue and have sex whenever he wants, and with whomever he wants without consequence. Unlike the rake-heroes of her contemporaries, Willmore is ineloquent, with his intentions minimally disguised, as indicated in his interaction with courtesans:

BELVILE. They are, or would have you think, they're  
 courtesans, who here in Naples, are to be hired by  
 the month.

WILLMORE. Kind and obliging to inform us. Pray, where  
 do these roses grow? I would fain plant some of 'em

in a bed of mine.

WOMEN. Beware such roses, sir.

WILLMORE. A pox of fear: I'll be baked with thee between a pair  
of sheets, and that's they proper still; so I might but  
strew such roses over me, and under me.—Fair one,  
would you would give me leave to gather at your  
bush this idle month; I would go near to make some  
body smell of it all the year after. (*The Rover* 1.2 97-109)

Willmore's sexual innuendos are thinly veiled and lacking the eloquence often attributed to libertines. Derek Hughes describes Willmore as a "woman's-eye view of the Dorimant-figure" which could contribute to his lack of ambiguity and blunt pursuit of sex (33). Hughes goes on to describe Willmore as "glamorous" and "bone-headed," but his manipulative schemes do not completely fail him and he still drinks and successfully seduces women as excessively as he wants (35). As a man, Willmore's antics do not make him disgraceful or unsuccessful.

In contrast to Willmore, Behn presents Hellena as a character who, though similar to Willmore, exposes the double standards of his libertine ideals. Susan J. Owen describes Willmore as "intensely desirable, but the presentation of his character is not entirely positive. Willmore is an ambiguous figure, sexy and witty, but always in danger of becoming the mocked rather than the mocker" (72). Owen's description of Willmore is also applicable to Hellena as a woman who exhibits a proudness of her sexuality that bares traits of libertinism. Not unlike Willmore, Hellena is highly aware of her sexuality, and within the first scene of the play, Hellena's interest in sex is clear:

HELLENA. Prithee, tell me, what dost thou  
 see about me that is unfit for love? Have I not a  
 world of youth? a humor gay? A beauty passable? A  
 vigor desirable? well shaped? clean limbed? sweet  
 breathed? and sense enough to know how all these  
 ought to be employed to the best advantage? (*The Rover* 1.1 48-53)

Hellena's is aware of her desirability, not unlike Willmore. Though Hellena and Willmore have similarities, perhaps their most significant differences rest in the way they can address their sexuality. As much as Hellena professes her awareness and flirts with Willmore while she is disguised as a gypsy, Hellena still reflects Behn's apprehensions about female libertinism.

Behn presents Hellena as clearly smarter than Willmore as she exposes the double standards in his urgency for sex. Within their first encounter, Willmore is already pleading for Hellena to have sex with him, but Hellena is far too aware of the repercussions she would risk if she did consent:

WILLMORE. Oh, I long to come first to the banquet of  
 love! And such a swingeing appetite I bring—oh,  
 I'm impatient—thy lodging, sweetheart, thy  
 lodging, or I'm a dead man!

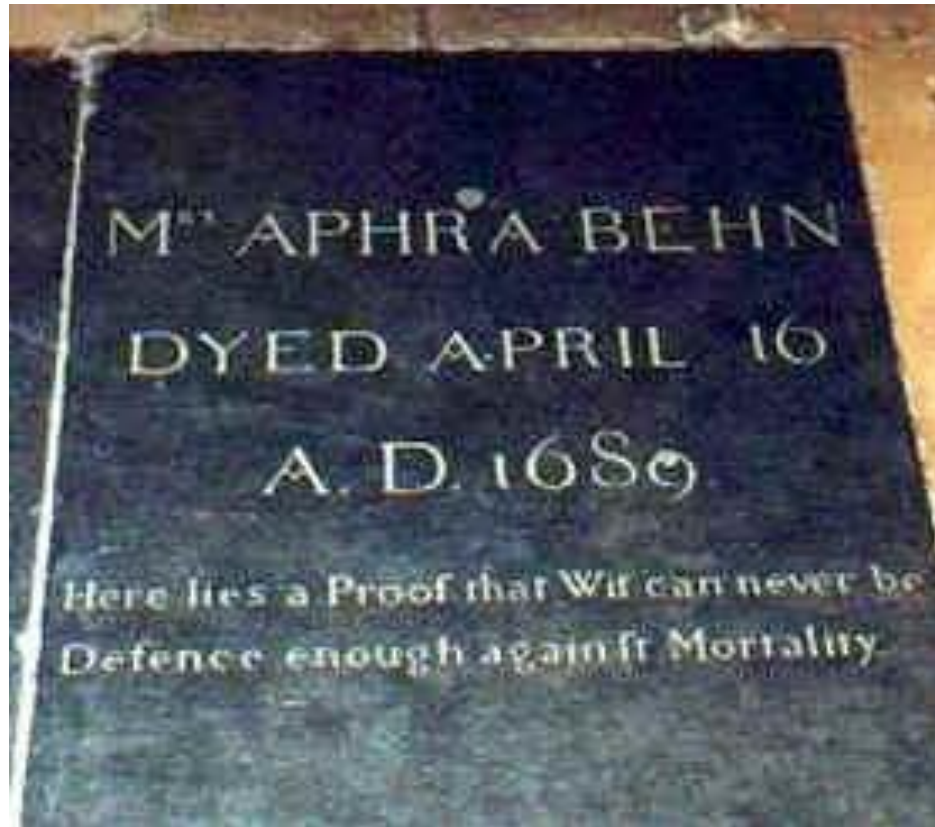
HELLENA. Why must we be either guilty of fornication or  
 murder if we converse with you men? And is there  
 no difference between leave to love me, and leave  
 to lie with me? (*The Rover* 1.2 223-230).



Hellena knows if she submits to sex without marriage, she runs the risk of becoming the mocked, socially scorned woman, unlike Willmore whose sexuality does disgrace him. Though similar to Willmore in her embraced sexuality, Hellena consistently challenges his ideals. Willmore is “ridiculous” to Hellena as she “mocks the familiar libertine motif that a man will die if the woman doesn’t relieve his desire, and exposes the rake’s discourse of love as crude sexual appetite” (Owen 72). The voracious sexuality of libertine ideology seems to be the part that Behn finds the most problematic because it does not apply to women, who risk pregnancy and social disgrace, as well as abandonment from the man, by having sex outside of marriage. Ultimately, though similar in ideologies and their sexual awareness of themselves, Hellena cannot act upon sexual impulses the way Willmore can.

By the end of *The Rover*, Hellena and Willmore are planning to marry, seemingly willing to put libertinism aside for marriage and acknowledging the unfortunate necessity of marriage. However, when *The Second Part of The Rover* begins, Hellena is dead. Willmore has “wasted her inheritance” and reverts back to his rakish ways (Owen 73). Behn’s killing of Hellena seems to signify throughout her writing career that the sexually liberated woman, like Hellena or Lady Galliard, cannot exist shamelessly like a libertine man. Willmore is openly sexual and financially unstable, but his status does not alter as it would for a destitute woman, or a woman having sex beyond the confines of marriage. Likewise, his typical libertine opposition to marriage is never criticized by anyone other than Hellena. Willmore’s return to seducing without shame suggests that his disdain for marriage has not changed. Unlike Behn’s depiction of Lady Galliard, who has to choose her honor or social condemnation, Willmore has options.

Through Lady Galliard and Hellena, Behn depicts the impossibility for a woman to be a libertine while at the same time ridiculing libertinism for its exclusion of women. For a woman to embrace her sexuality by libertine standards threatens her honor, something Lady Galliard and Hellena are highly aware that they risk. The closest woman Behn allows to experience libertinism is Lady Galliard, who suffers rape and blackmail as a result, unlike Willmore who can do exactly as he desires without reprimand. Even though he is ostensibly less intelligent than Lady Galliard, or Hellena, as a man within the social structure of libertinism, he can embrace hedonism without the consequence of social persecution or death, nor is he perceived as less of a desirable spouse for his hedonism. The fact that Behn's only female characters who come close to experiencing libertinism are dead, raped, or blackmailed into a marriage as a form of punishment reveals the way libertinism fails to be a safe or viable option for women as it is for men.



#### Conclusion:

#### The Libertine, Wife, Widow, Punk-Poetess: Aphra Behn's Biographical Connection to Her Plays

By the time Aphra Behn died in 1689, she was deep in debt and near destitution. Around the time of her death, Behn began to experience a decrease in royal patronage for her writing, and her dwindling health proved “expensive and constraining” (Todd, ch. 28). The decline in her health could have been attributed to syphilis or a carriage accident which sprained her “writing hand” (Duffy 232). Heidi Hutner writes in the introduction to *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory and Criticism* (1993), “Until very recently, the vast majority of critical studies on Behn have been dominated by the premise that understanding her biography is a surefire means to understanding her work”

even though there is little we know about her (Hutner 3). Still, as Janet Todd writes in *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, Behn is “not so much a woman to be unmasked as an unending combination of masks” (1). Though what we know and do not know about Aphra Behn is widely debated in Behn scholarship, what we do know is that Behn’s personal life, mysterious as it may have been, may shed light on why she focused on particular subjects in her writing. Her consideration for the place of women in society is not merely an intellectual exercise because these existential questions pertained directly to her own life.

There is no clear answer whether Behn’s (possible) marriage by Mr. Behn (possibly) ended because of death, divorce, or infidelity. In fact, it is not entirely clear that Mr. Behn existed at all. According to Maureen Duffy’s biography, *The Passionate Shepherdess* (1979), “It has been suggested that there never was a Mr. Behn... This is the kind of fiction that had built up around her” (17).

Behn has occupied (or been accused of) all three categories of women most prominent in her plays: married, sexually liberated, and reliant upon “herself” in a way framed by her detractors as a form of prostitution. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf claims Behn began to write as a way to support herself after her husband’s death (68-69). Mr. Behn was reportedly a “London merchant of Dutch extraction,” but there is no indication of his financial status, making it unlikely she was left with financial security of her fictional widow, Lady Galliard of *The City Heiress*. If Mr. Behn died, it is likely he died from plague which was “prevalent in England through the mid-1660s” (O’Donnell 3). Along with the expectation for a wife to rely on her husband for financial stability, Behn would have understood the public perception of a widow as “a second

class citizen as a woman in a patriarchal society” (Stewart 78). Like Lady Galliard, Behn would be “neither a virgin or a wife” which would contribute to Behn’s own complicated social status (Stewart 78-79).

Had Behn’s marriage ended in divorce, she would have known the social disgrace as well as financial turmoil of a divorced woman. England was “not a divorcing society” if she got a divorce, she would have become rapidly familiar with the consequences that exclusively impacted women (Stone 36). Divorce granted women a “near-certainty of severe financial hardship and, if poor, the probability of destitution” (Stone 37). Likewise, a divorce was not a private affair, with the intimate details of a divorce trial being public knowledge (Stone 39). Not unlike a widow, a divorced woman would be “neither a virgin or a wife” (Stewart 78-79). Coupled with financial instability, a divorced woman would struggle to gain personal autonomy..

As a single woman working to grant her own financial security, Behn was regularly likened to a prostitute. Behn’s apparent sympathy for prostitutes can easily be traced to her critics referring to her as a “punk-poetess” because she wrote for money (Stapleton 26). According to Catherine Gallagher, Behn “introduced to the world of English letters the professional woman writer as a newfangled whore” by making writing “a woman’s version of sexual conquest” (66-67). Gallagher goes on to write that “the poetess like the prostitute is she who ‘stands out,’ as the etymology of the word *prostitute* implies, but it is also she who is masked” (68-69). As a playwright, she stages “sexual desire” to an audience of men who pay to see Behn’s plays (68). Still, like the common prostitute, the life of a female-writer was hardly lucrative or without criticism for Behn. Because she was a woman writing publicly rather than privately, Behn frequently faced

“charges of bawdry” (O’Donnell 8). Robert Gould, a contemporary satirist, likened her to a prostitute or a “punk” for her writing because he “objected to women who wrote dirty plays” (Hughes 30).

While the act of writing for money resulted in Behn being likened to a prostitute, the sexuality of her writing frequently brought accusations of libertinism. Behn vehemently refused the accusations of libertine indecency. In her introduction to *The Lucky Chance*, Behn mockingly asks forgiveness for the “masculine strokes” leading her to write as she did (190). However, she writes, “Had the plays I have writ come forth under any man’s name, and never known to have been mine” then no one would accuse her of lewdness, but “the woman damns the poet” (190). Behn may have disproved of the double standards she faced, but her own personal experience with libertines could easily account for her occasionally unflattering depictions of libertine men. As a friend of John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, she surely knew “what kind of man Rochester was, at his worst as well as his best” because of his libertinism (Stapleton 122). She also would have awareness of the way women were not welcome to be libertines *and* how men like Rochester who may have supported her career still reinforced the double standards through his antics. For this, Behn may have exacted “benign revenge” on Rochester by using him as a model for her unglamorous, unsophisticated rake, Willmore, in *The Rover* (Austin and Stapleton 77-78). Through keeping company of men like Rochester, Behn, yet again, found an alternative to marriage that, in the end, was not one.

Behn’s was not alone in her consideration for viable alternative for women. Like Behn, women such as Mary Astell (1666-1731) and Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710) expressed concern for the opportunities afforded women. In *A Serious Proposal to the*

*Ladies* (1694), Astell poses the question, “If all men are born free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?” (18). Following a similar sentiment to Astell, in her poem, “To the Ladies,” Mary Chudleigh proclaims “Wife and Servant are the same, / But only differ in the Name” (1-2). Not unlike Behn, Chudleigh and Astell questioned the benefit of marriage to women as well as their perceivable inferiority within patriarchal social structure. Astell believed that a woman should only marry if she is prepared to adhere to the “indisputable Maxim that her Husband must govern absolutely and intirely, and that she has nothing else to do but to Please and Obey” (Kinnaird 68). For a woman to be free from the expectations of a wife, she needed to stay single (Taylor 69).

Behn’s concern for women’s place in society may have led her to plead forgiveness, perhaps sarcastically, for her “masculine strokes” (190). However, as indicated by the fact that women after Behn, like Astell and Chudleigh, prompt the same questions tells us that these self-identified “masculine strokes” are actually quite feminine. Regardless of the intention behind the way Behn addresses her “masculine strokes” or the “masculine part” of her, there is no denying that women have continued to address similar, if not the same, concerns (190-191). Behn was labeled the “punk-poetess” for her depiction of women’s issues, but, in the more modern sense of the word “punk” pertaining to someone unusual and “contemptible,” Behn’s interest in the betterment of women’s lives was only unconventional on the Restoration stage because of her *feminine* strokes (*OED*).

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