4 Contextualizing Aphra Behn: plays, politics, and party, 1679–1689

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The recent explosion of interest in the seventeenth-century English playwright, novelist, and poet, Aphra Behn, has led to numerous and diverse explorations of her life and work. Behn's colorful if often mysterious life has been the subject of five biographies and the stuff of at least two novels.[1] She has been celebrated as one of the most prolific and popular playwrights of the Restoration and an early practitioner of the novel.[2] Scholars have portrayed her as a thorough-going feminist, a libertine and an opponent of the domestic tyranny of patriarchy, and an abolitionist, writing one of the first anti-slavery novels in Western literature.[3]

Despite the recent avalanche of scholarship, little has been written

[1] George Woodstock, *The Incomparable Aphra* (London: Boardman, 1948); W. J. Cameron, *New Light on Aphra Behn* (Auckland: The University of Auckland Press, 1961); Maureen Duffy, *The Passionate Shepherdess: Aphra Behn, 1640–1689* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977); Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra* (New York: Dial Press, 1980); Sara Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies*, chap. 3, "Aphra Behn" (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 116–84. I know of two novels about Behn: Emily Hahn, *Purple-Passage: A Novel about a Lady both Famous and Fantastic* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1950); Ross Laidlaw, *Aphra Behn – Dispatch'd from Athole* (Nairn: Balnain Books, 1992).

[2] Behn wrote at least seventeen plays, fourteen prose fictions, several translations, and two volumes of original poetry. Judith Phillips Stanton has demonstrated that Behn was the second most successful female dramatist writing between the years 1660 and 1800. See her "'This New-Found Path Attempting': Women Dramatists in England, 1660–1800," *Curtain Calls: British and American Women and the Theater, 1660–1820*, eds. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991), 325–54. On Behn the novelist, see Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction, 1558–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684–1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[3] Warren Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Donald R. Wehrs, "*Eros*, Ethics, Identity: Royalist Feminism and the Politics of Desire in Aphra Behn's *Love Letters*," *Studies in English Literature* 32 (1992): 461–78; Cheri Davis Langdell, "Aphra Behn and Sexual Politics: A Dramatist's Discourse with her Audience," in *Drama, Sex and Politics*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 109–28; Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring, eds., *A Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

about Behn as a political writer. This is a rather curious omission for several reasons. Scholars have long recognized the highly politicized nature of the theater in the 1680s.[4] Studies of the politics and ideology of male dramatists, particularly John Dryden, abound.[5] Behn, like her male competitors Dryden, Shadwell, Settle, Crown and others, also produced highly political stage plays, bursting with topical references, mired in the controversies of the time. Yet beyond the blanket assertion that Behn was a Tory propagandist, little analysis of her political vision exists.[6] This is particularly surprising for a rare female voice in the loud political cacophony of the 1680s. No other woman writer was as public, vocal, or prolific as Aphra Behn in the pre-Revolution era.

This chapter is an examination of the political content of Behn's work from 1678 to the year of her death, 1689. These years were some of the most traumatic in English history, beginning with the controversies over the Popish Plot and Exclusion Bill from 1678 to 1681; extending through the discovery of the Whig conspiracy known as the Rye House Plot in 1683 and Monmouth's Rebellion in 1685; and ending with the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89.

Behn was a full participant in this highly disputatious political culture. Her plays written in the 1680s, her poems on state occasions, and her first novel all reflect and comment upon the political milieu of London in the first age of party. Several of Behn's comedies were fierce political satires. Their humor revolved around ridiculing contemporary personalities, Whig slogans and idioms, popular fashions and literature. Behn's political vision was encoded in her satire. If we are to begin to discern her politics, let alone "get the joke," we must first understand the

[4] Allardyce Nicoll, "Political Plays of the Restoration," *Modern Language Review* 16 (1921): 224–42; George Whiting, "The Condition of the London Theaters, 1679–1683: A Reflection of the Political Situation," *Modern Philology* 25 (1927): 195–206. More recent work includes Douglas Canfield, "Royalism's Last Dramatic Stand: English Political Tragedy, 1679–89," *Studies in Philology* 82 (1985): 234–63; Susan Owen, "Interpreting the Politics of Restoration Drama," *The Seventeenth Century* 8 (1993): 67–97.

[5] Philip Harth, *Pen for a Party: Dryden's Tory Propaganda and Its Contexts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); J. R. Moore, "Political Allusions in Dryden's Later Plays," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 73 (1958): 36–42; Steve Pincus, "Shadwell's Dramatic Trimming," *Religion, Literature and Politics in Post-Reformation England*, eds. Donna Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 253–74; Richard E. Brown, "Nathaniel Lee's Political Dramas, 1679–1683," *Restoration* 10 (1986): 41–52.

[6] For example, A. E. Leja, "Aphra Behn – Tory," Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas, 1962; Mary Ann O'Donnell, "Aphra Behn: Tory Wit and Unconventional Woman," in *Women Writers in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Katharina M. Wilson and Frank J. Warnke (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989): 341–74.

political and religious debates, controversies, fears, and dilemmas facing Behn and her contemporaries.[7]

Scholars have asserted *ad nauseam* that Behn was Tory propagandist and Stuart apologist. I do not dispute either claim. But I think such broad characterizations are less then helpful. Historians of Restoration political thought are well aware of the varieties of early Whiggism.[8] Although Tory ideology in its genesis has received less scholarly attention, it is undoubtedly true that not all Tories thought alike, and this was as true for politicians and ideologues as it was for poets and playwrights.[9]

Unlike many royalists in the 1680s, Behn was not a follower of Sir Robert Filmer. Filmer's patriarchalism supplied much of the ideological stuffing for Tory propaganda in the 1680s. Tory propagandists popularized the principles of Filmer's *Patriarcha* and other works; royalist playwrights echoed Filmerian positions, Dryden notoriously so.[10] But Behn conspicuously did not. She asserted divine right tenets, but her devotion to monarchy did not rest on patriarchal theories.[11] Instead Behn's royalism, articulated time and again in her work, revolved around an idealized aristocratic ethos that liberated the individual from the tyrannies of dull customs and traditions, things acceptable for the common castes of society, but which shackled the noble mind and heart. In better times, Behn may well have concentrated solely on the need to break those traditional shackles which so confined a woman's life. But in the climactic atmosphere of pre-revolution London, Behn's focus re-

[7] As Robert Darnton reminds us, our "inability to get the joke is an indication of the distance that separates us" from the early modern world (*The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* [New York: Basic Books, 1984], 77–78).

[8] J. G. A. Pocock, "The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform," in *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215–310; Mark Goldie, "The Roots of True Whiggism, 1688–94," *History of Political Thought* 1 (1980): 195–236; Melinda Zook, "Early Whig Ideology, Ancient Constitutionalism and the Reverend Samuel Johnson," *Journal of British Studies* 32 (1993): 139–65.

[9] Work on individual Tory thinkers exists, but there is very little published work on Tory ideology as a whole. Two of the best recent studies in Tory politics are Harth, *Pen for a Party* and Tim Harris, "Tories and the Rule of Law in the Reign of Charles II," *The Seventeenth Century* 8 (1993): 9–27.

[10] Bruce King, "Dryden's Ark: The Influence of Filmer," *Studies in English Literature* 7 (1967): 403–14; Michael J. Conlon, "The Passage on Government in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 78 (1979): 17–32.

[11] Filmer's ideas rested on a Scriptural reading of history. Behn, however, asserted that Scripture had no instructional value insofar as "astronomy, geometry or chronology" were concerned. She believed Scripture was too often used "for mischief" when applied to secular concerns. See her preface to her translation of Fontenelle in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Janet Todd (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992–95), 4 vols, IV: 79, 85.

volved around glorifying and defending the Cavalier culture of court and castigating its enemies, the Whigs and Dissenters.

Behn's political philosophy hence centered around a celebration of the young elite male, the cavalier, the epitome of individual freedom. She associated tradition and the rules of sexual behavior not only with Puritanism, resurrected she believed by the Whigs and Dissenters in the 1680s, but also with the middling and lower castes. True freedom was freedom from want, freedom from customary behavior, and freedom from religious fanaticism. In 1677, Behn located these qualities in the witty, genial, and womanizing cavalier Willmore in *The Rover*, whom she revived in a sequel, *The Second Part of The Rover* (January 1681). But as tensions in London swelled, Behn's hero became far more of a political animal, predatory and manipulative, yet retaining his wit, love for women, and royalism. This new cavalier, more rake than rover, reappears as the "Heroick" Loveless in *The Roundheads* (1681) and as the Tory, Tom Wilding, in *The City Heiress* (1682). By the late 1680s, Behn concentrated on the cavalier's more tragic and romantic dimensions, as seen in her portrayal of the "royal slave" in *Oroonoko* (1688) and in the warrior-hero, Nathaniel Bacon, in *The Widow Ranter* (1690).

The transformation of Behn's cavalier from merry rover to cunning rake to sacrificial martyr-hero reflected Behn's political anxieties in the 1680s. Tom Wilding and Loveless are savvy operators because the turbulent times demanded as much. They have all the characteristics of Behn's earlier rovers of the 1670s only, as their way of life is under siege, they are more calculating and less frivolous men. By the late 1680s, Behn placed the same attributes in her tragi-heroes, but her style and tone had changed. James II's revolutionary zeal in government and religion had begun to inspire more fear in old-time royalists like Behn than Whig demands had before him. By the time of the revolution, Behn's writing reflects a sense of resignation. Her cavaliers are already lost men, anachronisms. Nathaniel Bacon commits suicide; Oroonoko is crudely dismembered.

Women were participants in the cavalier's drama but were not themselves cavaliers. Behn might have come as close as any to a "she-rover" for a woman in the late seventeenth century; she was an extraordinary woman. But she realized that the cavalier's libertine lifestyle was ultimately unobtainable for most women. Behn's witty heroines may engage in clever banter; they may despise the drudgery of marriage; and they may even don male attire and draw their swords. Yet, most often, they must marry or be ruined. The narrow and circumscribed role in which "women of quality" could maneuver was demonstrated time and again in Behn's plays and novels. Behn raised

disturbing questions about the treatment of women and the feminine identity. But ultimately her central concerns by the early 1680s surrounded her country's political future. Her work defended the world of those whom she admired, those who could obtain personal and public freedom, elite males.

In 1679, Aphra Behn wrote her first dedication, openly soliciting literary patronage for her plays for the first time. She had published her first nine plays, from 1670 to 1677, without dedications, an unusually long time to remain outside the patronage system.[12] But as the political climate changed in the late 1670s, and Behn's plays became ever more politicized, she may well have felt the need for publicly acclaimed alliances with powerful men and women. She dedicated her plays to those in and around the court, including those closest to the king himself. *The Feign'd Courtizans* (March 1679) was dedicated to Charles II's mistress, the actress, Nell Gwyn, who had played the prostitute, Angellica Bianca, in Behn's highly successful play *The Rover* (March 1677). In 1681, amid the fierce battle over the Exclusion Bill, Behn dedicated *The Second Part of The Rover* to the "popish successor" himself James, duke of York. She praised York for his "divine patience" as he withstood the insults of that "seemingly sanctifi'd Faction" (the Whigs) who wished to "Play the old Game ov'r again."[13]

The "old Game ov'r again" was, as Behn put it elsewhere, "the old beaten path of Forty-One."[14] The bloody civil wars of the 1640s played out again in the 1680s. The cry "forty-one all over again" was a common Tory propaganda ploy in the early 1680s. Behn used it repeatedly. Like all good propagandists, she belittled the grievances of the opposition, the Whigs and Dissenters. Her plays made the current crises look like the product of the personality flaws of a scheming, ambitious, and hypocritical few, whose intent it was to resurrect the Commonwealth by deluding the rabble through religion. But, in fact, the issues at hand could not have been more critical. The future of the polity and its confessional nature was being debated in Parliament and pamphlet.

Behn understood the significance of the political struggles which her

[12] Her first nine plays were *The Forced Marriage* (1670); *The Amorous Prince* (1671); *The Dutch Lover* (1673); *Abdelazer* (1676); *The Town Fop* (1676); *The Rover* (1677); *The Debauchee* (1677); *The Counterfeit Bridegroom* (1677); *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678).

[13] *The Second Part of the Rover* (1681), dedication. Throughout the 1680s, Behn continued to dedicate her works to powerful royalists and courtiers, including Henry FitzRoy, duke of Grafton, Charles II's illegitimate son by the duchess of Cleveland; and the Catholics James Cecil, earl of Salisbury, and Lord Richard Maitland, fourth earl of Lauderdale, both of whom became Jacobites after the revolution.

[14] *The City Heiress; Or, Sir Timothy Treat-all* (1682), Act III, i.

plays crudely satirized. Her constant references to events, personalities, and the political tropes of the times – along with the sharpness of her jabs at those she blamed for the public's discontent and the rabble's grumbling – reflected her anxiety over the current climate. At stake for Behn was not solely a matter of who governed or how or where one prayed, but an entire mentality and way of life which was imperiled by what she saw as the rancorous and selfish demands of the Whigs and Dissenters and their allies among London's mobile. The cavalier's sword, noble birth, and code of honor were in danger of becoming meaningless in a world run by the crude and ambitious middling sorts who knew no loyalty to the monarchy, deference to birth, or respect for a man's word. The exceptional individual, unbound by custom, law, or religion was lost in the din of the clamoring demands of the multitudes with their leveling politics and mercantile interests.

In the early 1680s, Behn wrote her most political comedies. In plays like *The Roundheads* (December 1681) the middling and lower ranks of society are portrayed as the political tools of the Whigs, seduced by their slogans and Puritan/Dissenting cant. *The Roundheads*, Behn's comic satire on the last days of the Commonwealth, begins with a street scene.[15] A group of soldiers confront two artisans, a joiner and a feltworker. The artisans are religious radicals, part of the "sanctify'd mobile" who speak the language of the godly and reiterate the tropes of the Good Old Cause. "Here's a saucy dog of a Joyner," says one of the soldiers, "Sirrah, get ye home and mind your trade and save the Hangman the labour." The Joiner retorts, "I fear no Hang-man in Christendom; for Conscience and Publick Good, for Liberty and Property, I dare as far as any Man" (Act I, i).

This opening scene was particularly meaningful to Behn's audience. They knew that the joiner (or carpenter) should have heeded the soldier's warning. Stephen College, the so-called "Protestant Joiner," meddled in the politics of Exclusion Crisis, authoring anti-papist, anti-duke of York ballads and satires. He was tried at the Old Bailey for seditious words and actions in July of 1681 but a Whig-packed jury came back, predictably, *ignoramus*.[16] He was not so fortunate a month later. At the Oxford assizes, College was tried for treason for his seditious

[15] *The Roundheads* was a loose adaptation from John Tatham's *The Rump* (1660). Behn added several characters, including all of the cavaliers, Lady Desbro, and the canting lay elder, Ananias Goggle. The opening street scene described below was also Behn's invention.

[16] Whig sheriffs empaneled London and Middlesex juries with those sympathetic to Whig defendants. A verdict of *ignoramus* meant that a jury considered the evidence against the defendant insufficient and they were freed from further prosecution.

behavior during the abortive Oxford Parliament. He was convicted, hanged, and quartered.

The allusion to the fate of Stephen College at the beginning of *The Roundheads* worked as a powerful warning not only about mobile meddling and its consequences, but also as a reminder to the audience of how similar times were then (the Interregnum) to their day. In the play, cavaliers are labeled "Heroicks" but also "Tories"; while the Roundheads are sometimes called "Whigs." Both the play's themes – political confusion, social leveling, irreverence to the monarchy, and religious hypocrisy – and Behn's numerous references to contemporary times reiterate the idea that "the Sins of Forty-One [were being] reviv'd again in Eighty-One."[17]

The Roundheads also echoes themes from Shakespeare's *Richard III*. In both plays, factionalism has resulted in political chaos and the crown is contested by bribery, deception, and the sword. Both recount the last days of disorder before a restoration of the rightful heir to the throne. Behn was particularly interested in Shakespeare's presentation of a hierarchy inverted, where "men are rul'd by women" and where the base-born are advanced over the noble. In *Richard III*, "the world is grown so bad/ That wrens make prey where eagles dare not perch;/ Since every Jack became a gentleman/ There's many a gentle person made a Jack."[18]

Women have clearly overstepped their bounds in *The Roundheads*, holding committee meetings, redressing petitions, advising men. Lady Lambert, the "she-Politician," rules her husband. Lord Lambert and the other Roundheads have usurped political power, noble titles, and estates through "Dissimulation, Equivocation, and mental Reservation." The "Heroick" Loveless, a cavalier, could once "have boasted Birth and Fortune ... Till these accursed Times, which Heaven confound,/ Razing our all Nobility, all Virtue,/ Has render'd me the rubbish of the world;/ Whilst new rais'd Rascals, Canters, Robbers, Rebels,/ Do lord it o'er the Free-born, Brave and Noble" (Act I, ii).

But true nobility is more than lands and titles; it is a style of behavior – "Wit, Softness, and Gallantry" – visible to all (Act II, i). Lady Lambert is dismayed when Loveless does not recognize her new position and power: "I thought I'd been so elevated above the Common Crowd, it had been visible to all Eyes who I was." Whereas Loveless's "Love, Wit

[17] The quote is from *The City Heiress* (Act III, i), which contains the same political messages.

[18] In *Richard III*, the base-born Elizabeth Woodville is thought to rule over her husband, the dying Edward IV (Act I, i). The Woodvilles and their relations are the "jacks" that have become "gentlemen" (Act I, iii).

and Beauty [are] revel'd in his Eyes" (Act I, i). The play ends with General Monk marching on London. The Roundheads scatter, and Lord Lambert is arrested. Her power lost, Lady Lambert sighs, "I'm a declining shade." But Loveless happily declares, "By heaven, you were never great till now." The social and political order is restored; Lady Lambert is no longer a meddling she-politician, but simply a woman in love (Act V, iii).

The cavalier's code of honor, wherein a man's word is his oath, a pledge of fidelity, trust, and loyalty, is another casualty of the topsy-turvy worlds portrayed in Behn's plays. In *The Roundheads* and in Behn's satire on contemporary Whig-governed London, *The City Heiress*, oaths are meaningless where guile, deception, and personal interest rule and loyalties alter with each shift of the political winds. "How cou'd I now advise you to be King," the cynical Lord Whitlock informs Lord Lambert, "if I had started at Oaths, or preferr'd Honesty or Divinity before Interest and the *Good Old Cause*?" (Act I, ii). Time and again, Behn equated Roundheads and Whigs with "Dissimulation and Hypocrisy," oath-breaking, and perjury and the "bare-fac'd" cavaliers and Tories with reverence for truth, loyalty, and the "code of the word."[19]

Behn's emphasis on oath-breaking in the early 1680s reflected a profound, yet common royalist concern over recent legal maneuvers taken by the Whig-dominated city government of London. Royalists like Behn were infuriated over the veracity given to the incredible popish plot tales of Titus Oates;[20] the perjured witnesses whose testimony led the Catholic lords to the scaffold; and the Whig-packed juries that refused to charge either Stephen College or the Whig leader, the earl of Shaftesbury, by returning *ignoramus* verdicts.[21] "The City's a grumbling, lying,

[19] *The Roundheads*, Act IV, i. See Douglas Canfield's discussion of the "code of the word" in "Royalism's Last Dramatic Stand," 234–38.

[20] There are several humorous references to the "Salamanca Doctor," Titus Oates, in Behn's plays. The joke is always a play on the absurdity of Oates's stories and those who believed him. In *The Lucky Chance*, the naive Bearjest asks Breadwell if he's heard of any miracles from St. Omers lately. Breadwell responds: "None, Sir since the wonderful Salamanca Doctor, who was both here and there at the same Instant of time."

BEARJEST: How, Sir? why, that's impossible.

BREADWELL: That was the Wonder, Sir, because 'twas impossible.

NOISEY: But 'twas a greater, Sir, that 'twas believed. (Act I, iii)

Also see *The City Heiress*, Act V, v.

[21] Like other Tory playwrights and propagandists, Behn ridiculed Shaftesbury. There are numerous references to him in *The Roundheads* as someone who switched political allegiance with each new government during the 1640s and 1650s. In *The City Heiress*, the absurd old Whig, Sir Timothy Treatall, is a Shaftesbury figure who is offered the crown of Poland. Shaftesbury was commonly lampooned in Tory propaganda as the "king of Poland," because it was thought that he wanted to set up an elective monarchy on the Polish model (K. H. D. Haley, *The First Earl of Shaftesbury* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968], 689).

dissatify'd City, and no wise or Honest man regards what it says," exclaims the loyal country gentleman, Sir Anthony Merriwell in *The City Heiress* (Act I, i). Whig control of London made justice impossible. Perjury, bribery, and the packing of juries subverted the legal order. The "dissembling Whig," Sir Timothy Treatall in *The City Heiress*, knows that the Tories cannot touch him: "Let 'em accuse me if they please; alas, I come off handsmooth with *Ignoramus*" (Act III, i).

Behn's preoccupation with oaths and dissembling did not end with the Tory reaction that began in 1681 and led to their retaking of London. It was not simply city politics that concerned Behn, but a whole new modern age devoid of honor, loyalty, and trust. There is a deep sense of nostalgia, particularly in Behn's later work, for an older aristocratic code of values. The importance she placed on the oath, "the code of the word," took on darker shades in her novellas, particularly *Oroonoko*, first published in July 1688 on the eve of the revolution. The thoroughly Europeanized African prince Oroonoko, Behn's most tragic cavalier hero, is continually tricked by whites who give him their word. Lied to again after his failed slave rebellion, he concludes,

> there was no faith in white men, or the gods they adored, who instructed them in principles so false honest men could not live amongst them ... he knew what he had to do, when he dealt with men of honour, but with them a man ought to be eternally on his guard, and never to eat and drink with Christians without his weapon of defense in his hand, and, for his own security never credit one word they spoke.[22]

Men of honor understand, respect, and love one another in Behn's work. They are their own caste, a breed apart, freed from the dull customs, conventions, and taboos which order and circumscribe the lives of the rest of society. Marriage, in particular, stands out in Behn's work as a tiresome custom that kills free love. The assertion that "Love knows no ceremony," as Willmore declares in *The Second Part of The Rover*, was an oft-repeated motif in Behn's work. Not only were her cavaliers above the traditional rules of courtship, her she-rovers, such as Ariadne in *The Second Part of the Rover* and Sylvia in Behn's first novel, *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, were also advocates of love freed from marriage. Ariadne despises the courtly Beaumont to whom she is contracted and declares, "I'd have a Lover rough as Seas in Storms, upon occasion; I hate your dull temperate Lover, 'tis such a husbandly quality" (Act II, ii).[23]

[22] *Oroonoko, The Rover and Other Works*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 130. Henceforth cited within the text as "Todd edition."

[23] Ariadne, however, marries Beaumont at the end of *The Second Part of the Rover*. Similarly, Sylvia is punished for her outlandish sexual behavior in *Love Letters* and must

The sexual activity of lovers outside the bounds of the "cold matrimonial embrace" is "scarce a sin." Only the arranged marriage is "flat adultery."[24] Or as the Tory-cavalier, Tom Wilding states in *The City Heiress*:

> According to the strictest Rules of Honour,
> Beauty should still be the Reward of Love,
> Not the vile Merchandize of Fortune,
> Or the cheap Drug of a Church-Ceremony.
> She's only infamous, who to her bed
> For Interest takes some nauseous Clown she hates:
> And though a Jointure or a Vow in publick
> Be her Price, that makes her but the dearer Whore. Act VI, i

Behn's abhorrence of the "forced marriage" (the title of her first play) was a constant and conspicuous theme. But Behn was not simply an opponent of the prearranged marriage. Her cavaliers were above all convention, the taboos against homosexuality and incest included. Even "the law established" was made to hem in the little people, not men of honor. *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, written between 1684 and 1687, was loosely based on real events and personalities. Though Whig politics are chided (and punished) in the novel as sins against "our good, our gracious monarch," transgressions against custom by the novel's Whig-cavalier, Philander, are never condemned.

Philander eloquently convinces his sister-in-law, Sylvia, that they should love freely and not be frightened by artificial conventions such as marriage or that which calls their passion "incest." "What's a ceremony imposed on man by custom," he exclaims:

> Let us, (born for mightier joys) scorn the dull beaten road, but let us love like the first race of men, nearest allied to God, promiscuously they loved, and possessed, father and daughter, brother and sister met, and reaped the joys of love without control, and counted it religious coupling, and 'twas encouraged too by heaven itself; therefore start not (too nice and lovely maid) at shadows of things that can but frighten fools. (Duffy edition, 4)

Sexual love between men and, particularly, men and boys was also a condoned part of the cavalier's world despite the traditional regulations and biases against sodomy. When Sylvia cross-dresses as a "youth" in *Love Letters*, she "captivated the men no less than the women" (Duffy edition, 119). In *The Second Part of the Rover*, Ariadne cross-dresses as a

live as a prostitute by the end of the novel. Behn's she-rovers must eventually conform or suffer the consequences.

[24] *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, introduced by Maureen Duffy (New York: Virago Classics, 1987), 8; henceforth cited within the text as "Duffy edition"; *The Second Part of The Rover*, Act II, ii; *The False Count*, Act I, i.

boy and catches Willmore's attention. He decides to whisk a prostitute off to his bed instead, telling the "boy," "thou'rt a pretty Youth; but at this time I've more occasion for a thing in Petticoats – go home, and do not walk the streets so much; that tempting face of thine will debauch the grave men of business" (Act III, i). In *The Widow Ranter*, the heroic Captain Daring wants to make love with the rich widow while she wears male attire. "Take me that humour while thy breeches are on," he tells her, "for I never liked thee half so well in petticoats" (Act IV, iii).

In *The Widow Ranter* the protagonist, Nathaniel Bacon, is another "tragic masculine hero," who like Oroonoko believes in the "integrity of language: the oath and word of honour" and is thereby tricked by lesser, unscrupulous men.[25] The play was also a thorough attack on the formalized word, the law, when it binds "noble actions." Behn mocked Whig efforts to regulate the royal succession, the monarchy, and religion "by the law established." When Bacon defends the colonists against a raiding Indian tribe but without the colonial government's consent, the cowardly JPs threaten to hang him; exclaims one, "We'll teach you, sir, to serve your country against the law." Bacon replies, "I've not offended honour or religion . . . Should I stand by and see my country ruined, my King dishonoured and his subjects murdered?" (Act II, iii; Act II, iv). But Bacon has violated the law and is charged with treason. As one character sympathetic to Bacon puts it, "What pity 'tis there should be false maxims in the world, that noble actions, however great, must be criminal for want of a law to authorise them" (Act I, iii).

Behn blamed the legal and moral limitations placed on "noble actions" on the Whigs and Dissenters, whom she believed would gladly revive the prudish anti-pleasure principles of the Puritans. In the 1650s, "stage plays, horse-racing, cock-fighting, maypoles, and brothels had all been suppressed," and adultery was made punishable by death.[26] Despite these draconian measures, Behn's Puritans in *The Roundheads* "drink as deep and entertain themselves as well" as the royalists only they do so "with this silent way of lewd Debauchery." Puritans and Whigs entertain themselves as much with women and drink as the cavaliers but always for reasons of interest. Pleasure becomes debauchery; "harmless Wit and Mirth's a Sin, laughing scandalous, and a merry Glass an Abomination" (Act II, i).

In *The City Heiress*, the Tory, Tom Wilding, scolds his old Whig uncle, Sir Timothy Treatall, whose lavish public dinners are meant to convert all London to the Whig cause. "You keep open House to all the Party,"

[25] Janet Todd, *Gender, Art and Death* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 50–54.
[26] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, abridged edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 396.

exclaims Wilding, "not for mirth, Generosity or good nature, but for Roguery" and "in hopes of Debauching the King's Liege-people into Commonwealthsmen" (Act I, i). Behn's cavaliers, on the other hand, are barefaced and open-hearted, love wit, mirth, a hearty drink, and a pretty face. Moreover, they do their drinking and wenching openly. When Ariadne asks Willmore in *The Second Part of The Rover* if he can keep a secret, he replies, "Secrecy is a damn'd ungrateful Sin, Child, known only where Religion and Small-beer are current" (Act II, i).[27]

Not all religion, of course, was the "cozening, canting, sanctifying" kind. After attending an Anglican service, the royalist Sir Anthony in *The City Heiress* remarks, "I love good wholesome Doctrine, that teaches Obedience to the King and Superiors, without railing at Government, and quoting Scripture for Sedition, Mutiny, and Rebellion" (Act I, i). It was, of course, the Dissenters who, like the Puritans before them, were continually "quoting Scripture." In *The Roundheads*, Loveless exclaims that all Puritan women are "sanctify'd Jilts ... Make love to 'em, they answer in Scripture" (Act I, i).[28] This sanctifying religion was pure hypocrisy, a language used by "the Pulpit knaves" to "brew" treason among the ignorant.[29] "All the Rhetorick of the Learn'd or Honest" cannot move the "rascally Rabble" where "your seditious cant ... prevails" (Act III, ii). When the insipid Lord Fleetwood speaks in the language of the godly, Lady Lambert is infuriated. Whitlock patiently explains, "Madam, this is the Cant we must delude the nation with." Lady Lambert angrily replies, "Then let him use it there, my Lord, not amongst us, who so well understand one another" (Act I, ii). Godly cant was simply a means of deception.

The cavalier's world of honor and oaths, generosity and pleasure for pleasure's sake – where nothing is hidden and society's rules of social behavior simply don't apply – stood in stark contrast to a world of ambitious, dissembling upstarts. The clashing of these two worlds was a

[27] Small beer was less alcoholic. Temperance was a Puritan concern which Behn constantly lampooned, particularly in *The City Heiress*, which contains numerous references to Whigs drinking small beer. The loyal, hearty drinking Sir Charles Merriwell describes Sir Timothy Treatall's Whig friends as "Puritanical, Schismatical, Fanatical, Small-beer-Face[d]" (Act III, i).

[28] Behn was particularly harsh on Dissenting/Puritan women. In *The City Heiress*, Mrs. Clackett, "a City Baud and Puritan," is described as "A Saint in the Spirit, and Whore in Flesh;/ A Doer of the Devil's Work in God' Name" (Act IV, i). Mrs. Senure, Sir Timothy Treatall's maid, is caught in bed with her master, carrying a book of Richard Baxter's sermons (Act V, i).

[29] *The Roundheads*, prologue. Time and time again, Behn linked Dissent with sedition. Even as early as 1678, Behn's title character, a Dissenting Whig alderman in *Sir Patient Fancy*, is described as "vainly proud of his rebellious opinion, for his Religion means nothing but that" (Act II, i).

constant theme in Behn's work; it was her interpretation of the struggles she witnessed in London in the early 1680s; a struggle she believed the cavalier was losing to the "All-Powerful Whigs" and all they represented.[30]

In August 1682, Behn committed a political blunder. The consequences she suffered may have begun to transform her political vision. Her Tory politics went too far when she insulted the king's first and favorite bastard son, James Scott, duke of Monmouth. Tory attacks on Monmouth were nothing new. Monmouth, "the Protestant Duke," had become a popular Whig alternative to the much despised and feared "Popish successor," the duke of York. The duke of Monmouth, on the other hand, embodied the beautiful cavalier, adorned with the most tragic and romantic features of the Stuart dynasty. But Monmouth was seduced by ambition, Tory satirists asserted, bewitched by Whig promises of his father's throne despite his illegitimacy.

In 1682, Behn penned the *Epilogue to Romulus*, spoken on stage by the actress, Lady Slingsby. They were both arrested.[31] While the entire epilogue to *Romulus* satirized Monmouth, the lines which offended the court reflected his ambition for the throne: "Love! like Ambition, makes us Rebels too:/ And of all Treasons, mine was most accurst;/ Rebelling 'gainst a King and Father first/ A Sin, which Heaven nor man can ev'r forgive."[32] Monmouth may have been too much in Whig company, but he was still the king's son.[33] Behn's arrest must have felt a bit of a shock and a betrayal for someone who so "faithfully serv'd that royal cause."[34] Four years passed before Behn would again write for the stage. In the meantime, she wrote poems on state occasions, translations, and fiction. When she did return to the theater in April 1686, it was with *The Lucky Chance*, a comic satire on Whig aldermen meddling in London affairs. The play's politics were strangely anachronistic since the Whigs had lost control of London long ago and had been scattered in the wake of Monmouth's failed rebellion in 1685. James II was firmly in power; Whiggism appeared to be defeated.[35]

More successful than Behn's return to the theater was her epistolary

[30] *The False Count* (1681), prologue.

[31] The *Protestant Mercury* (August 12–16, 1682); The Newdigate Newsletters, L.C. 5/191, 100.

[32] *Prologue to Romulus* (1682). The *Epilogue* is printed on the reverse side.

[33] Dryden and Lee also felt the displeasure of the court for the same reason when they mocked Monmouth in *The Duke of Guise* (1683). As the author of the Newdigate Newsletters put it, though the king was angry at Monmouth, "yet he is not willing that others should abuse him out of a natural affection for him" (L.C. 5/144, 81).

[34] *The Lucky Chance* (1686), dedication.

[35] *The Lucky Chance* reflects the politics of Charles II's reign rather than James II's, including references to Titus Oates and the battle over London's city charter. It was

novel, *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, which was published in three parts between 1684 and 1687.[36] *Love Letters* was loosely based on a real social-sexual scandal, involving the prominent Whig noble, Lord Grey of Werk, an ally to the duke of Monmouth. In August 1682, Grey abducted his eighteen-year-old, unmarried sister-in-law, Henrietta Berkeley. He was charged with debauchery but was able to retain Henrietta by marrying her to his servant. The following spring, Grey and Monmouth were implicated in the Rye House Plot to assassinate the royal brothers. While Monmouth begged a pardon from his indulgent father, Grey and Henrietta escaped to Holland.

Love Letters charts a transformation in Behn's politics from a strident royalism to an increasingly tolerant view of the opposition. In 1684, when Part I was written, Behn was still propagating an orthodox royalist opinion. Her character, Sylvia (Henrietta), praises Charles II and preaches divine right tenets. "[He] was born your King," she reminds Philander (Grey) and "holds his crown by right of nature, by right of law, by right of heaven itself" (Duffy edition, Part I, 34–35). But three years later, when the third part of the novel was published in the reign of James II, Behn's outlook had changed.

This is most tellingly evident in her construction of Monmouth through the character, Cesario. Part III of *Love Letters* was written after Monmouth's futile rebellion. Monmouth and Lord Grey were both captured after the Battle of Sedgemoor and taken to London. Grey turned king's evidence and was pardoned, but Monmouth, whom James II detested, was not so fortunate. The gruesome beheading of this royal son made a powerful impression on the late Stuart consciousness. Behn was certainly free to attack Monmouth in 1687. But she saw him instead as a pathetically tragic figure. In Part III, the beautiful and romantic Cesario is betrayed and misled by those around him. He fights heroically at Sedgemoor, but after his capture he loses all courage and reason. He is a pitiful creature. Behn described his last moments on the scaffold and wrote, "so ended the race of this glorious youth, who was in his time the greatest man of a subject in the world, and the greatest favorite of his prince" (Part III, 460).

Behn's portrayal of Monmouth as a tragic figure in *Love Letters* is not the only evidence of a more indulgent view of the Whigs. The broadside poem, "Rebellions Antidote: Or A Dialogue Between Coffee and Tea,"

probably written around the same time as *The City Heiress* and *The False Count*, which it resembles.

[36] On the novel's popularity, see Judith Kegan Gardiner, "The First English Novel: Aphra Behn's *Love Letters*, the Canon, and Women's Tastes," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7 (1988): 203.

recently attributed to Behn by Janet Todd and Virginia Crompton, also indicates a transformation in Behn's politics. Written in the spring of 1685, around the time of Argyle's and Monmouth's Rebellions, the poem clearly condemns such sedition. Yet while royalism is represented in the dialogue by "Tea," a more Whiggish perspective is voiced by "Coffee." The poem contains none of the shrill polemical venom so characteristic of Behn's prologues and epilogues of the early 1680s. Instead the tone of the poem alternates between optimism and anxiety. As Todd and Crompton put it, "If Tea is Behn, the poem offers a picture of an older professional woman who counters the political anxieties of Coffee with tolerant humour and compromise."[37]

The poems recorded in Behn's personal chapbook also suggest that she was more receptive to Whig concerns in the late 1680s. The political doggerel copied in "Astrea's Book of Songs and Satyrs" belongs to the period between 1685 and 1689. There are a few stridently Tory pieces, but there are also several Whig verses. The majority of the poems, however, strike the same note of caution and compromise as "Rebellion's Antidote." Some warn Whigs and Dissenters against supporting King James's Declaration of Indulgence (1687), which was seen by many as a first step toward the reintroduction of popery.[38] Others lament James II's treatment of the Seven Bishops. Still others see little difference between the extremism of the Whigs and Dissenters in the early 1680s and that of King James and his counsellors in the late 1680s.[39]

What seems to have transformed Behn's political vision was not only her personal humiliation in 1682 but an increasing concern over the direction of James II's administration. James's Romanizing policies and his heavy-handed use of kingly prerogative were the cause of much anxiety not only among the Whigs, but among the Tory elite as well. On the eve of the Revolution, James's appointing of papists and Dissenters in positions of power, his pardoning of Whig radicals and courting their

[37] Janet Todd and Virginia Crompton, "Rebellion's Antidote: A New Attribution to Aphra Behn," *Notes & Queries* 38 (June 1991): 175–77.

[38] See the last stanza of "The Story of the Pot and the Kettle," which Behn transcribed in her chapbook as:

> Learn hence (yee Whiggs) and act no more
> Nor trust their friendship who would make you tooles
> While empty praises and smooth flattery's
> Pay with feign'd thankes, what their feign'd smiles deserve
> But let not the alliance further pass
> For know that you are clay and they are brass.

("Astrea's Book of Songs and Satyrs," MS Firth c. 16, Bodleian Library, Oxford, fol. 263)

[39] See, for example, "The Confinement," about the Seven Bishops (MS Firth c. 16, fol. 288v); and "A Short Litany to the Tune of Cooke Lawrell," which equates the extremism of James with that of the Whigs (fol. 286v).

favor alienated Anglican clerics and the conservative elites who had been the bulwark of his brother's government.[40] Like numerous other Tories, Behn found herself a monarchist without a monarch she could trust. The political nation was as threatened by the zeal of James II's policies as it had once been by the Whigs' unruly demands under Charles II. Behn may well have perceived – as did others – that James was pushing Protestant England to the brink of revolution.[41]

Moreover, by 1688 Behn was also chronically ill and living in penury. Her own future was in doubt. Two of her final creations were the novel *Oroonoko* and the tragi-comedy *The Widow Ranter*. Both contain political commentary and tell us about the state of Behn's mind on the eve of the Glorious Revolution and her own death in April 1689. Behn stripped her cavalier down to his most noble and honorable features. But he was also a lost man; his time had come and gone.

Nathaniel Bacon, the tragi-hero of *The Widow Ranter*, epitomized Behn's lost cavalier. *The Widow Ranter* was based on the popular uprising, Bacon's Rebellion, which took place in Virginia in 1676. Much of the play was standard Behn fare: the social climbing, political meddling, base-born colonists and their Puritan minister are all dissembling upstarts, who insist on holding men of honor to "the law established." But the play also made several unsettling topical references. In Act IV, scene ii, the colony's JPs, all great cowards, have turned on each other amid the confusion of Bacon's Rebellion. Whimsey and Dullman decide to string up Whiff for running from the battlefield. Dullman declares, "one witness will stand good in law, in case of treason."

This line must have sent shivers through Behn's audience. It was an unhappy reminder of the notorious trial and execution of Colonel Algernon Sidney in 1683. Sidney was tried for high treason for his part in the Whig conspiracy known as the Rye House Plot, though there was only one witness against him, an infamous breach of tradition.[42]

[40] Laurence Eachard, *The History of England* (London: 1707–18), 3:78; J. R. Jones, "James II's Whig Collaborators," *Historical Journal* 3 (1960): 65–73.

[41] The diaries of Whigs and Dissenters record a sense of tremendous foreboding on the eve of the revolution; royalists and Anglican clerics as well felt uneasy and anxious, fearing James's ultimate goal was to restore Catholicism. For examples of both see *The Autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster, 1665–1752*, ed. J. D. Marshall (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), 91; Roger North, *The Lives of the Norths*, ed. Augustus Jessopp (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), 3 vols., I: 358–61.

[42] Two witnesses were needed for a charge of high treason. Unable to find a second witness against Sidney, the government used Sidney's own republican manuscript, the "Discourses concerning Government," as evidence against him. See Craig Allen Houston, *Algernon Sidney and the Republican Heritage in England and America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 58–67.

Along with Lord Russell, who was also beheaded for the Rye House Plot, Sidney's Whig martyrdom had grown to legendary proportions by the time of the Revolution. Having a fool, Dullman, assert this extra-legal procedure, Behn not only reminded her audience of the means used by Charles II's government to execute the noble Sidney, she delegitimized it as well. Perhaps by 1688, the memory of aristocratic blood shed on the scaffold through the machinations of lawyers was more powerful to Behn than the image of a notorious Whig leader being punished.[43]

By the conclusion of *The Widow Ranter*, all its heroic characters are slain, destroyed by their own codes of honor. The central tragic hero, Bacon, is an ambiguous figure. He has many of the characteristics of Behn's earlier cavaliers. He is "by nature generous, brave, resolved and daring"; he is not bound by custom or law, but by his honor and his word. He even breaks racial boundaries by loving the Indian queen, Semernia. But he is also clearly motivated by ambition and becomes a popular hero. As the play progresses, he increasingly resembles the duke of Monmouth. The English gentleman, Friendly, informs the audience from the onset that Bacon, having studied "the lives of the Romans and great men that have raised themselves to the most elevated fortunes, fancies it easy for ambitious men to aim at any pitch of glory. I've heard him often say, 'Why cannot I conquer the universe as well as Alexander? or like another Romulus form a new Rome and myself adored?'" (Act I, i).

As crowds once shouted "A Monmouth, A Monmouth" in the early 1680s, so, in Act II, the rabble rescues Bacon from the clutches of the colonial magistrates hollering, "A Bacon, A Bacon." Bacon does not suffer the same gruesome fate as Monmouth. He will not allow himself to be made "a public spectacle upon the common theatre of death" and thereby falls upon his own sword. But his gasping last words remind us of Monmouth's failings: "never let ambition – love – or interest make you forget as I have done - your duty and allegiance" (Act IV, i). As a rebel, Bacon must die. His death is the victory of the cowardly and greedy upstarts of the colonial government. The chivalric, the romantic, the honorable – these men have no place in this new world, neither colonial America nor revolutionary England.

Unlike Bacon, Oroonoko's heroic status is unquestionable. He is Behn's ultimate aristocratic hero. Much has been written about

[43] Colonel Sidney's case may have been particularly poignant to Behn. She had some personal knowledge of Sidney as she had reported on his republican activities in Holland while she was there on a spying mission in the 1660s. See Cameron, *New Light on Aphra Behn*, 25–27, 47, 73, 79.

Oroonoko as a critique of both imperialism and slavery. But the central concerns of the narrative were not about colonialism or race. The racial "others" in the story are the native Indians, not "the royal slave," Oroonoko. What is important about Oroonoko is his class, his princely status. His treatment at the hands of the white colonists in Surinam is "an indignity to his class rather than his race."[44] After all, all three races represented in *Oroonoko* – the Europeans, the Africans, and the Indians – practice slavery. Moreover, in many ways, Oroonoko is more European than African. His physical features and his education are European. He had learned "morals, language and science" from his French tutor and, like Bacon, he admired the Romans. His politics were firmly royalist: "He had heard of the late Civil Wars in England, and the deplorable death of our great monarch, and would discourse of it with all the sense and abhorrence of the injustice imaginable." Oroonoko's long hair is even described as "cavalierish" (Todd edition, 80–81).

Oroonoko is not exotic because he is an African, but because he is a living anachronism plunged into a new world. He is the last honorable man, embodying "the Restoration heroic ideal: proud, honorable," a man of "wit and address" who follows chivalric notions of love and honor.[45] His aristocratic code is, nonetheless, his undoing as he is continually deceived by the "degenerate" whites. His own people fail him as well, and he declares that they are "by nature slaves" (Todd edition, 126, 130). Appropriately enough, Oroonoko's slave name is "Caesar" and like Caesar (to whom Bacon also compares himself) Oroonoko is betrayed and brutally sacrificed.

The dismemberment of Oroonoko is Behn's most grisly execution scene. Oroonoko is carved up piece by piece while he calmly smokes a pipe:

> the executioner came and first cut off his members and threw them in the fire. After that, with an ill-favored knife, they cut his ears, and his nose and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him. Then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe. But at the cutting of the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped, and he gave up the ghost without a groan or reproach. (140)

Behn's ultimate cavalier, flawless in every way, meets the most terrifying death.

Oroonoko has been analogized to Charles I and the duke of Monmouth, both of whom suffered spectacular executions, as well as to

[44] Ballaster, *Seductive Forms*, 81.

[45] Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (New York: Basil Blackman, 1986), 48; Brown, *The Ends of Empire*, 37.

James II, on the eve of the Revolution that would overthrow him.[46] But there is no one-to-one political parallel in *Oroonoko*. Behn's Oroonoko would have been a roving cavalier in a happier time. But in the New World, he was both out of place and out of time – in much the same way as a sickly Behn must have felt in the spring of 1688 when *Oroonoko* was written and when the storm clouds of revolution loomed hauntingly.

The following spring, after the exile of James II and the coronation of William III and Mary II, Behn was asked by one of the great Whig architects of the revolution, Bishop Gilbert Burnet, to write some verses in celebration of the new king. She refused and wrote her last poem in response. In "A Pindarick Poem to the Reverend Doctor Burnet," Behn described herself as an "Excluded Prophet"; this "the Universal Turn" she wrote, "makes me Useless and Forlorn." Like her cavaliers, with whom she so much identified, the new age "leaves me unpity'd far behind."[47]

[46] Laura Brown equates Oroonoko with Charles I (*Ends of Empire*, 58); Janet Todd sees Monmouth as a possible inspiration (*Gender, Art and Death*, 33); and George Guffey identifies him with James II ("Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: Occasion and Accomplishment," in *Two English Novelists: Aphra Behn and Anthony Trollope* [Los Angeles, The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1975], 3–41).

[47] "A Pindarick Poem to the Reverend Doctor Burnet, On the Honour he did me of Enquiring after me and my Muse," in *The Poems of Aphra Behn – A Selection*, ed. Janet Todd (London: William Pickering, 1994), 195–98.