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Aphra Behn and the Roundheads

Kimberly Latta

*In a secret life I was a Roundhead general.*¹

The unacknowledged fact is that Aphra Behn frequently identified herself as a prophet. In the dedicatory epistle to *The Roundheads* (1682), for example, she begged the privileges of the “Prophets . . . of old,” to predict the future and admonish the populace. To the newly ascended James II she boasted, “Long with *Prophetick Fire*, Resolved and Bold,/ Your *Glorious FATE* and *FORTUNE* I foretold.”² When the Whigs drove James from power and installed William of Orange in his place, she represented herself standing mournfully, “like the Excluded Prophet” on the “Forsaken Barren Shore.”³ In these and other instances, Behn clearly and consciously drew upon a long-standing tradition in English letters of associating poets with prophets. But the figure of the prophet cannot be isolated to that literary tradition at this time in England, particularly when we are talking about a woman struggling to assert her own literary authority. We often remember Behn as the first professional woman writer, but we more frequently forget that she wrote in the wake of several hundred *religious* women writers, self-styled prophetesses, and visionaries who had been publishing in the burgeoning capitalist marketplace for many years before her. Although the poet herself remarked of religion, “we have scare other Theme; ‘tis grown so general a Mode, that even the Sword-men are now fiercer disputants than heretofore the lazier Gown-men were,” most

critics have dismissed its importance to Behn and her culture.⁴ Because religion “is the master-code in which issues are conceived and debated in pre-capitalist societies” and “the cultural matrix for explorations of virtually every topic: kingship, selfhood, rationality, language, marriage, ethics, and so forth” (Jameson 37; Shugar 6), we need to take it into account as a category of historical analysis when we read Behn. As Adorno reminds us in an important essay on ideological commitment in art, literature is “inherently collective [and] impenetrable to the mere subjective intentions of the author” (181). Even if Behn did not overtly iterate the kinds of pieties that dominate the published work of her immediate, sectarian literary foremothers, she shared many of their assumptions. That is, her work endorses ideas she did not openly countenance, such as the idea that women were spiritually equal to men and therefore had sufficient authority to become authors.

Some feminist critics, rather than representing Behn’s declaration of writerly authority as a dynamic process, have generally focused on the ways in which the playwright defied limitations presumed to be static, a set of iron bars or imprisoning beliefs and attitudes which she slipped through or re-fashioned to her own ends. The argument, for example, about Behn as a “poet-punk” too quickly assumes that all writers who published their thoughts were disparagingly consigned to the status of “public women,” or whores, and that Behn embraced this stereotype. Scholars who make this argument have relied on the viewpoint of a scurrilous, narrow-minded poet, Robert Gould, whose scathing attack on “Ephelia” and other female poets, including Behn, finally and appropriately inspired more spirited defenses of female wit from others than poetic acclaim for himself. Gould notoriously wrote:

For *Punk* and *Poesie* agree so pat,
You cannot well be *this* and not be *that*. (7)

Commenting on these lines, Catherine Gallagher writes, “the equation of poetess and ‘punk’ . . . was inescapable in the Restoration.” This belief “rested on the evidence neither of how a woman lived nor on what she wrote. It was, rather, an

a priori judgment applying to all cases of female public language (*Nobody's Story* 23).” Yet, Robert Gould, for one, did not apply this judgment to all women. In the very stanza in which he makes that infamous leap from poet to punk, Gould specifically attacks *hackney* writers; elsewhere in the same poem he commends Katherine Phillips (19). Although there is no doubt that *some* women who spoke out in public were vilified as “whores,” little evidence suggests that Behn adopted such an identity.⁵ In fact, as Margaret Ezell observes, the vast majority of seventeenth-century women writers were religious writers, and many of these women did not think publication injured their modesty (*Writing* 134-35). It therefore makes little sense automatically to regard Behn as a singularity who dared to publish only by donning the prostitute’s vizard, and much more sense to ask how she fits into the dynamic that those religiously minded women writers established.

Behn deployed the figure of prophet as an “author-figure” in order to assert her own literary authority, her right and ability to *author* texts.⁶ The beliefs of the sectarian and non-conformist women she frequently reviled and opposed deeply influenced this gesture, as the *The Roundheads*, in particular, demonstrates. The various figurations of the prophet in that play shed light on the formation of women’s literary authority at a time when traditional notions of political “authority” had completely broken down and a number of different factions competed with one another to re-define it. As other scholars have begun to demonstrate, women’s literary authority developed in Restoration prose and poetry in relation to the revaluation of women’s spiritual, political, and literary authority in nonconformist Protestantism.⁷ Behn was not a nonconformist—she remained faithful to the Church of England—but her contribution to the articulation of women’s literary authority can and should be understood through her figure of the poet-prophet, an identity that nonconformism helped to create. Like the category of the modern author itself, Behn’s representation of the poet-prophet emerged as a result of clashing forces, both residual and emergent, absolutist and liberal. In other words, she asserted her own literary authority in a dynamic process in which she accepted, rejected, affirmed, and denied various, mutating ideological strains competing for hegemony during her time.

Because the Interregnum and Restoration arenas of providential evangelism also roared with the discord of religio-political factionalism, to announce oneself as a prophetic “author” at this moment was also to invoke particular notions of authority under attack, a complication that needs to be acknowledged in considerations of development of the modern author.⁸ Nevertheless, even when we have to do with outspokenly conservative personalities such as Behn, it can be misleading to think in terms of the opposition of absolutists versus liberal theorists, or Tories versus Whigs, or Cavaliers versus Roundheads, because even those dramatists who promoted the interests of the landed aristocracy and identified themselves as Tories employed the mercenary strategies of the moneyed men they ostensibly deplored. On that level, at least, it makes no sense at all to distinguish between the ancients and the moderns, because, whether they liked it or not, all authors in this period were modern. Moreover, most public writers necessarily engaged with the marketplace; in that sense Cavaliers writers (who allegedly upheld “ancient” values hostile to emergent capitalism) were Roundheads (who endorsed “modern” mercantile ethics), grubbing for their livelihood in the inky world of print.

So what did it mean for a woman to declare that she was an “author,” in a world that firmly denied her that agency and authority? Seventeenth-century English women did not easily come by any form of public authority for a number of complex and well-known reasons. They were barred, for example, from all state offices, from holding and investing property in most cases, and from positions of leadership in the Catholic and Anglican churches and in most of the Protestant denominations and sects that sprang up after the Reformation.⁹ A woman could not, technically, be an “author,” an entity that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, derived from the old French *autour*, later *auteur*, and the Latin *auctor*. Early senses of the word in English included “the person who originates or gives existence to anything.” “Author” indicated “one who sets forth written statements; the composer or writer of a treatise or book” at the same time that it also indicated inventor, constructor, founder, creator, begetter, ancestor, and father. Although a number of women seem to have drawn upon the metaphor

of motherhood in order to demarcate their right to *author* things, many women writers, including Behn, refrained from using that trope.¹⁰ Identifying themselves as prophets seems to have been a more successful strategy for women to win recognition and appreciation for their verbal and written utterances, since such writers could claim the *authority* of providence. God's voice could not be denied, regardless of the vessel through which it spoke.

Radical political-religious fervor after 1640 and the empowerment of women in Protestant sectarian groups constitute two of the most significant factors that contributed to women's sense of themselves as having sufficient authority to contribute positively, in print and in oral performances, to public affairs (Schwoerer 61-63). The new *spiritual* authority that radical Protestants ascribed to women derived principally from the belief in the inner light, which George Fox described in the following manner: "God had given to us, every one of us in particular, a Light from himselfe shining in our harts & consciences." This light, this divine insight into "the true state of all things," made "our hearts . . . glad," loosened "our tongues" and opened "our mouths . . . we spake with new tongues as the Lord gave us utterance, as his spirit led us, which was poured down upon us, on Sons and Daughters (A3v; B2)." Similarly, Elizabeth Bathurst defined the "Spirit of Truth" as "a principle of Divine Light and Life . . . placed in the Conscience, which opens the Understanding, enlightens the Eyes of the Mind, discovers Sin to the Soul" (63). "If we see these high and precious effects [of prophecy] beginning to put forth either in sons or daughters, in handmaids or servants, let us rejoyce and be glad, for the summer is nigh at hand," crows the editor of Anna Trapnel's *The Cry of a Stone* (A2r-v). Such enthusiasm encouraged many Quaker women to publish their views about the state of the world as well as human souls. It led Margaret Fell, Fox's wife and co-leader of the Society of Friends, to rail against followers of the Pauline injunction to women to keep silent in *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All Such as Speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus. And how Women were the first that preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1666). Fifth Monarchist Mary Cary, to whom a male commentator referred boldly and unconventionally as a "female minister" and "author," directed her

own independent congregation and published a number of well-respected treatises.¹¹ Leveller Katherine Chidley, a businesswoman who led a group of women to Parliament in order to present a petition, signed by 6,000–10,000 women, published her political and religious views throughout the 1640s. Women played important and leading roles in the formation of small, independent congregations, and London sectaries allowed their female members to vote, debate, and preach. At the General Baptist Church in Bell Alley, a woman preached once a week, and women regularly gave sermons at churches in Lincolnshire, Ely, Hertfordshire, Yorkshire, and Somerset (Thomas, “Women” 46–47). During the same period, school-teacher Elizabeth Warren published erudite religious tracts annotated by copious Latin references, and many other non-conformist women published numerous tracts throughout the Restoration.

Of course, it would be neither correct nor useful to assert that radical sectarian Protestantism and the social upheavals of the Interregnum unequivocally improved women’s situation in English culture. Puritanism’s appropriation of patriarchal power from centralized figures of authority, such as the monarch and the priesthood, to individual fathers in every household, arguably tightened masculine control over women. Yet, radical interpretations of Scripture, the doctrine of the spiritual equality of the sexes, the attack on traditional figures of authority and hierarchical distinctions, the greater emphasis on general literacy, the breakdown of censorship, and the unleashing of the presses all contributed to an environment in which ordinary women, middling and poor, broke through patriarchal opposition to public female authority and authorship. To stress sectarian discourse as a source of feminist consciousness is not to say that the doctrine of absolutism had no bolstering effect on the self-confidence of women writers during the seventeenth century—in fact, absolutist ideology’s emphasis on the *maternal* and paternal aspect of the king may have encouraged a number of women to identify with the power of the absolute monarch, and clearly, this aspect of patriarchalist thought deserves more scrutiny in relation to the development of women’s authority.¹² But it certainly would be cavalier, to speak in puns, to suggest

that absolutist discourse, with its emphasis on the political, moral, and social superiority of fathers, was more important to the development of women's literary authority than the variety of progressive discourses that radically challenged and eventually defeated it.

How, though, does this analysis shed light on Behn's own assertion of literary authority? It helps to historicize the writer within a *religious* culture in which many other women published their work. The example of female visionaries prophesying on street corners, banding together to petition Parliament, preaching and leading their own congregations, publishing their tracts, poems, prayers, broadsides, and statements, and running presses—as, for example, the royalist polemicist Elinor James did during the Restoration—must have made an impact on the intelligent young woman in London during the 1670s who found herself endowed with talent and drive, but no money. Behn needed to make a living and did so, famously, with her pen. The confidence she demonstrated when she took up that instrument, however, and the spirit that authorized that gesture, derived neither solely from her acceptance of her position within the absolutist chain of being, nor, clearly, from her claim to an “Inner Light” that poured forth from her heart. Yet, the social, economic, political, and spiritual passions that flowed from her pen should not be regarded in isolation from those that flooded forth from Quaker and other nonconformist women writers in her century. If, as Virginia Woolf said, women writers think back through their mothers, isn't it also true that they thought through their sisters, aunts, and irritating cousins as well?

Claiming divine inspiration was one of the only means by which a woman could claim authority for her utterances before 1640 (Thomas, *Religion* 183). After censorship laws broke down, and the presses began to work better than ever before, having a vision or holy message from God to share licensed large numbers of women to publish. A prophet need not have received any special training or education in order to have something “worth” printing, whether the bookseller perceived that worth to consist in its truth-value, political urgency, or marketability. In other words, prophetic office conferred *authority* on many people, male and female, whose works otherwise would never have come into the public

domain, especially because to be a prophet was to be a *poet*, according to a well-established tradition. The visionary founder of the Philadelphian Society, Jane Lead, took this tradition to heart in a long mystical poem that prefaces her journal, *A Fountain of Gardens* (1697). Here Lead introduces her followers to the spirit of Wisdom, a maternal figure who not only personifies divine creative energy, but also an agency of discerning and “art” potentially locatable in all souls.¹³ Lead hailed from a strongly mercantile and sectarian culture. Her notion of herself as a creative agent therefore provides us with an interesting counterpoint to absolutist women writers such as Margaret Cavendish, because Lead clearly did not need to imagine herself as an “absolute,” individual subject in order to understand herself as a source of creative generation.¹⁴ Lead proves that multiple models of creative subjectivity and authorship obtained during the seventeenth century.

Because literature, as Adorno pointed out, is inherently collective, always the expression of social forces larger than the author’s subjective design, the popular tradition of prophecy that inspired so many women to publish in the seventeenth century must have shaped Behn’s consciousness. Perhaps the hundreds of nonconformist women publishing their religious opinions inspired her. Perhaps they irritated her so much that she couldn’t resist countering their polemic with her own royalist viewpoint. She certainly seems to be doing something like this in *The Roundheads*, as I show below. In other words, Behn adopted the tradition of the poet as prophet by drawing upon both “high” English letters and “low” texts that religious writers created during her time. In fact, as Marjorie Kingsley’s study of male Restoration poets who adopted the prophetic stance suggests, *all* poets who represented themselves in this fashion drew upon both “high” and “low” traditions of prophecy.

It is worth quoting Robert Herrick’s “Not every Day Fit for Verse” (1648) in full, because it encapsulates the assumptions that characterize the tradition in English letters of the poet as prophet:

’Tis not ev’ry day, that I
Fitted am to prophesie:

No, but when the Spirit fills
 The fantastick Pannicles:
 Full of fier; then I write
 As the Godhead doth indite.
 Thus inrag'd, my lines are hurl'd,
 Like the *Sybells*, through the world.
 Look how next the holy fier
 Either slakes, or doth retire;
 So the Fancie cooles, till when
 That brave Spirit comes agen.

The idea of the Spirit suddenly and unpredictably filling the speaker with fire is common in poetry as well as nonconformist, visionary accounts. Both kinds of texts influenced Behn, but she consciously allied herself—either as the foreteller of England's redemption through the birth of James's heir, or as the scorned seer on the "forsaken barren shore" after the ascendance of James's usurper, William III—with the tradition established in English letters. Sir Philip Sidney recalled this tradition in *An Apology for Poetry*: "Among the Romans a Poet was called *Vates*, which is as much as Diuner, Fore-seer, or Prophet, as by his conjoined words is manifest." Thus when, in the postscript to *The Rover* (1677), Behn stoutly declares, "I will only say in English what the famous Virgil does in Latin: I make Verses and others have the Fame," she was consciously setting herself within line of prophetic versifiers whose works, such as *The Aeneid*, were plundered for prefiguring wisdom.¹⁵

Restoration poets regularly deployed the figure of the prophet in what Earl Miner calls the new "public mode" of late seventeenth-century poetry. Miner illustrates the "new account" that late seventeenth-century poetry contributes to English letters with these lines from *Paradise Lost*: "O for that warning voice, which he who saw/ Th' Apocalypse, heard cry in heaven aloud" (4.1-2; cit. 4). Although Miner notes that Milton looks from creation to the end of history, he does not comment here on the appeal Milton makes for a specifically *prophetic* power. If "public poetry is distinguished by its assumption that the world is as real as the poet and that understanding of the world and oneself is shared with other men" (8), it also seems to involve some new kind of identifi-

cation of the poet with the prophet. This figure delivers a truth relevant not just to a small, coterie audience or group of friends, but to the whole world. The poet as *vates* holds such an important public function in society because, like the prophet, she or he mediates the truth, or the divine word. "Prophecy," Benedict de Spinoza wrote in 1690, "or revelation is sure knowledge revealed by God to man. A prophet is one who interprets the revelations of God to those who are unable to attain to sure knowledge of the matters revealed, and therefore can only apprehend them by simple faith" (10). The prophet has greater access to divine will than ordinary people do. Moreover, the late seventeenth-century prophet-author is a truth-teller with a public mission: to describe the world so that it can be reformed.¹⁶ Because verbal enactment empowers the prophetic word, prophetic literature treats words as events that generate change and effect reality, rather than as flat representations of what has happened. In calling upon the author to translate divine will into human utterance, and thereby also to bring providence and material reality into harmony, prophetic literature locates both author and reader in the public realm (Kingsley 20-21). Indeed, public events both natural and social—the plague of 1665, the second Anglo-Dutch war, the Great Fire of 1666—inspired a new flurry of prophetic writing in the popular press.

Miner argues that the new "public mode" of Restoration literature was "radical" not just because of poets' new faith in the relation between human beings and the world, but also because it "involved belief that the divine and human creators possessed comparable functions, just as the divine and human creators were believed to resemble each other" (16). Restoration writers accepted a model of appropriation and alternation in which the writer fashioned something new, never seen before.¹⁷ The Restoration artist generated something new not in the sense of a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," but rather in the Lockean sense of taking up something found in nature and adding one's labor to it in order to make it one's property and therefore proper to, and of, one's self.¹⁸ Behn expresses this consciousness in her postscript to *The Rover* (1677), where she defends herself against the charge of plagiarism by claiming that she has appropriated only a few elements from Thomas Killegrew's

Thomaso, and that “The Plot and Bus’ness (not to boast on’t) is my own” (*Works* 5:521). Moreover, the creative authority to *author* texts has to do with the poet-prophet’s mediation of providential designs for the social order. Unlike Herrick’s persona in “Not Every Day,” the Restoration prophet-poet decodes divine will directly *in relation to* the corruption and chaos that ensues when human beings forget or become deaf to the voice of God. She or he points to what has gone wrong and toward what must be done to repair the damage. Moreover, the prophet’s constructive role involves three, active steps: recognizing the voice of the spirit, or the providential sign; interpreting that sign accurately; discerning its relationship to reality and reproducing that sign in such a way that it can be properly understood by the people to whom one is delivering it (Kingsley 25). The prophet functions therefore not so much as a divine transmitter, a passive vessel through whom the Word passes, but rather as an active mediator, crafting new representations through the application of his or her own labor in order to reconstruct the social order.

Secularization, skepticism, and the suspicion of language as a medium of truth during the Restoration actually heightened the creative, active role of the prophetic poet, promoting the development of the appreciation of aesthetic values rather than utterly verifiable truths. The prophet of aesthetic truths did not attempt to contain the radical voices she or he echoed, but rather to draw upon “generative rhetoric” itself as a “source of power, only partially harnessed, for the poetics of political reconstruction” (Kingsley 25). Thus, what is offered in opposition to disorder as a providentially designated harmony is also marked as yet another potentially false fabrication. What gives pleasure to the text’s audience is not the transmission of absolute truths, but rather the conscious, poetic mediation of a providentially prescribed social order. The poetic translation of divine will registers as aesthetically “in order,” a more pleasing approximation of what language cannot finally represent that is also purged of the dangerous “enthusiasm” behind unruly religious zealotry. Presenting an aesthetic truth in the voice of a prophet, however, does not obviate the poet’s claim that she or he speaks as the inspired messenger of the Spirit, filled with divine fire and writing “as the Godhead

doth indite.” Indeed it is this notion of a supernatural source that links the prophetic poet to contemporary, public visionaries, whose presentations of themselves and their texts as literal recorders of the spirit appear to have been more naïve. The skeptical poet-prophet writes, then, not as an atheist, but rather as a believer who speaks in a specifically *literary* realm of discourse just separating from “history,” a discourse of aesthetic values in which ancient, secular notions of the creative spirit overlap with religious, Christian ideas of the artist as the mediator of spiritual truths.

To summarize briefly, prophetic office confirms creative agency not only because as it requires the active, constructive *mediation* of divine messages but also because it involves the rhetorical generation of aesthetic truths, truths that record the creative spirit of the artist actively working upon what has been received through divine inspiration. Spinoza once again helps us to understand emergent notions of the prophet-poet as a creative agent. He insisted that the Biblical prophets “were endowed not with a more perfect mind, but instead with a power of imagining unusually vividly.” Their ability to reveal the truth therefore involved an inherent, generative faculty distributed in greater and smaller measures to all human beings: “simply because our mind contains objectively in itself, and participates in, the nature of God, it has the power to form certain notions that explain the nature of things and teach us how to conduct our lives. We can, therefore, rightly maintain that the nature of the mind, insofar as it is conceived this way, is the first cause of divine revelation” (16). Prophets and readers in the seventeenth-century “defined the nature of representation as essentially instrumental and essentially generative rather than mimetic, and thus as capable of effecting both social change and social order” (Kingsley 20-21).

Behn asserted this kind of creative, generative agency when she adopted the prophetic stance, and thereby set herself apart from many other women who justified their publication and literary authority in the public sphere by styling themselves as prophets. According to Phyllis Mack, prophetic women excused their audacious public displays by asserting that they were not imposing themselves as women, and that they did not even understand themselves as *women*, but rather as members

of a larger, “unsexed” body moved by the spirit of providence speaking through them.¹⁹ Not conceiving of themselves as individuals, they could not have adopted the Lockean, proprietary notion of the individual self as the source of a literary text, and would therefore have with difficulty regarded themselves as creative agents actively engaged in the shaping of the truths they mediated. In addition, Mack and Paula McDowell both imply that most of the women who authorized their literary production by calling themselves prophets held to a relatively naïve faith in language as a trustworthy, stable medium of truth. They therefore would not have imagined themselves as producing *aesthetic* values, but rather as channeling verifiable truths. Mack and McDowell suggest that representing the self as a non-sexed, passive vessel of providential content is a convention in radical women’s literature of prophecy.

Behn does not conform to this convention. When she dons the mantle of the prophetic poet, she hurls her self and her lines, “like *Sybells*, through the world,” headlong into the polemical battles of her time. She also strongly identifies herself as a sexed, embodied being and thereby achieves a degree of subjective, creative agency that had been roundly denied women.²⁰ Writing in the “public mode” of Restoration letters, Behn claims a creative power not just to mirror her society’s corruption, but also to transform public and private life with her words.²¹ “Tis example alone that inspires Morality and best establishes Vertue,” she argues in *The Lucky Chance* (1687), “it being undeniable . . . that Plays and public Diversions were thought by the Greatest and Wisest of States, one of the most essential parts of good Government.” Now, when she begs in that same statement for public recognition of the “masculine Part the Poet in me,” in order to “tread in those successful Paths [her] Predecessors have so long thrived in,” she seems to demonstrate what Mack would refer to as the generally “unsexed” nature of early modern women’s identity.²² It is certainly true that Behn conceives of herself as more than a “mere woman,” a poet before she is a woman, but it is also true that she frequently demonstrates a fierce solidarity with her sex. Even when she demands recognition for the “masculine part” of her authorial persona, the poet underscores her femininity by dramatically pointing out that she has not been born “a *Hero*.” In short, the writer who values

"Fame as much," as a man wants to be known as a heroic *woman*. Moreover, when she adopts a prophetic persona traditionally associated with male authority, she neither portrays herself as "masculine" nor as someone who has transcended sexual categories. Rather, she identifies with Oenone, Dryas, or with the prophetic priestesses of Apollo's Oracle.²³ Her author-figure as a prophet therefore does not correspond to the fluid, hermaphroditic identities that Mack and McDowell find in women's prophetic literature of the time.

Behn directly calls attention to her femininity, for example, in "A Pindaric Poem to the Reverend Doctor Burnet." She begins this late poem by distinguishing her own, more truthful poetic voice from Burnet's "one single Voice . . . from whence Immortal Wit still flows" and "wond'rous Pen" which "carries a Commanding Force, like that of writ Divine." To invoke, for a moment, the terms of French feminist theory, Behn acknowledges the greater logo-phallogocentric force of Gilbert's empowered instrument, which is not only the product of the patriarchal system it inhabits, but which also embodies that system's logic and determining grammar, the force of the language in which both of their identities are forged. The poet constructs this relationship as a seduction with sexual and religious consequences: "Against my Will, you Conquer and Perswade/ Your Language soft as Love, betrays the Heart . . . While the fond Listner, like a Maid undone, . . . In vain essays her Freedom to Regain" (lines 19-24). Behn's feminized muse threatens to succumb to his erotic power, but "Loyalty" preserves her honor:

My Muse that would endeavour fain to glide
 With the fair prosperous Gale, and the full driving Tide
 By Loyalty Commands with Pious Force,
 That stops me in the thriving Course.
 The Breeze that wafts the Crowding Nations o're
 Leaves me unpity'd far behind
 On the Forsaken Barren Shore,
 To Sigh with Echo, and the Murmuring Wind;
 While all the Inviting Prospect I survey,
 With Melancholy Eyes I view the Plains,
 Where all I see is Ravishing and Gay,
 And all I hear is Mirth in loudest Strains;

Thus while the Chosen Seed possess the Promis'd Land,
I like the Excluded Prophet stand . . . (49-62)

Paradoxically acknowledging her feminine susceptibility to his over-powering masculine force, Behn succeeds in distancing herself from its grasp. Her womanly nature renders her erotically vulnerable to his "Pow'rful Reasoning;" his phallic words "Please, and Charm, even while they Grieve and Pain" (line 26). Is the I-speaker who finds herself excluded from the jubilant throng on a distant shore the same self who has not taken the "thriving course," or is she distinct from the "fond Listner" and corruptible Muse? "With Pow'rful reasoning drest in finest Sence,/ A thousand ways my Soul you can Invade, and spight of my Opinions weak Defense/ Against my Will, you Conquer and Invade." The polarity initially established between Behn's Muse and "Loyalty" collapses when she identifies her feminine, poetic sensibility with her political sensibility, her weak "Opinions." Both become the object of Burnet's rhetorical attack. Thus the Statesman's "wondrous Method" (68) and "Art beyond the Wit of Men," that "carries a Commanding Force, like that of Writ Divine" (lines 13-15) has not only "ruin'd" the "great Design" which she "adore[s]" (88) but also left her "like a Maid undone" (23), forsaken on the barren shore. Burnet's formative, rhetorical energy is comparable to divine agency in the sense that a rapist who destroys his victim's reputation might appear to be carrying out providential will, the force of fate. In this situation, Behn recalls her own Oenone, the prophetic wood nymph who laments her undoing and betrayal by Paris. Paris, of course, figures the faithless Monmouth, who ought to have treasured his pastoral innocence and not attempted to usurp his father, Charles II. Like Monmouth, Burnet has engendered a political catastrophe that leaves the poet, Oenone-like, ruined, bereft, and miserable; unlike Monmouth, Burnet has triumphantly transformed the world. Still, both Oenone and Behn continue to sing.

That Behn regards Burnet's conquest with skepticism and loathing is clear in these bitter, sarcastic lines:

Till now, my careless Muse no higher strove
T'inlarge her Glory, and extend her Wing;

Than underneath *Parnassus* Grove,
 To Sing of Sheperds, and their humble Love;
 But never durst, like *Cowley*, tune her Strings,
 To sing of Heroes and of Kings.
 But since by an Authority Divine,
 She is allow'd a more exalted Thought;
 She will be valu'd now as Currant Coyn,
 Whose Stamp alone gives it the Estimate,
 Tho' out of a inferiour Metal wrought. (32-43)

The author of numerous panegyrics and odes on Charles II and James II, their queens, progeny, and the Exclusion Crisis, Behn's sardonic praise for Burnet's "Authority Divine" reveals her deep disgust for his request that she now turn her pen to celebrate James II's usurper. To do so would be to allow her "self" to circulate like bad money, a coin whose worth derives from the imprimatur of the counterfeit sovereign stamped upon it. Agreeing to this bargain would debase her; it would be tantamount to bowing down before false idols, set up as Gods through the power of rhetoric alone, the "wondrous Method" (68) of Burnet's "Pen": "Tis to your Pen, Great Sir, the Nation owes/ For all the Good this Mighty Change has wrought" (66-67).

Ironically, the rhetorical feebleness that leaves her "like a Maid undone" is the very weakness that prevents her from being completely co-opted. "What must I suffer when I cannot pay/ Your Goodness, your own generous way?/ And make my stubborn Muse your Just commands obey" (46-48). It is this wayward Muse that "stops" Behn "in the thriving Course" and turns her into a Cassandra-like figure, "unpity'd far behind" the joyous crowds celebrating the "Mighty Change" that Burnet's phallic implement has brought about:

Oh Strange effect of a Seraphick Quill!
 That can by unperceptable degrees
 Change every Notion, every Principle
 To any Form, its Great Dictator please. (70-73)

Language has brought about this "Universal Turn," this total revolution against which she has industriously and passion-

ately employed her muse in the last decades of her life. The particular appeal of the prophetic stance, however, is that it paradoxically affords the poet the greatest literary and icastic (truth-telling) power at the moment in which she (or he) feel most "Useless and Forlorn" (87) and, above all, most excluded, because it frees her from the sexually charged linguistic entanglement in which she finds herself. Isolation provides her with a different vantage point from which to assert an oppositional logic, however ineffectual, in the depraved symbolic order in which she must now constitute her subjectivity.²⁴ Behn's gender identity is central to this subversion. She responds to Burnet, but also resists him, as a woman, "like a Maid," with nothing left to lose but her own "Sense and Reason."

A further irony of this predicament, for Behn, is that Burnet's victory heralds the realization of the visions of sectarian enthusiasts, who once clamored for reform from a similarly excluded position. Finding herself in that position, and the "Great Design" "ruin'd" (86-98), the poet reflects upon the power of a "Seraphick Quill" to "change every Notion, every Principle" its "Dictator" directs. Her own poem—a rhetorical construction—protests the dictatorial, or tyrannical, use of language, and yet cannot rise above the fiction-making medium of language itself. The "truth" she imparts as a prophet, then, can only register within a negative dialectic, where it functions *aesthetically*, as a preferable fiction.²⁵ At the end of the poem, Behn valiantly rejects the "Meager Furies" who would "convert" her to "this Unprecedented Enterprise." If the truth that she holds onto remains an aesthetic value, it confirms political as well as spiritual realities for her. Similarly, a major element of the plot of the Roundheads concerns the *conversion* of Lady Lambert from the wrong political and spiritual sensibilities to the right, Tory values, a choice that is confirmed in the aesthetic mode by the obvious pleasure it brings her. As ever with Behn, desire is key to her female characters' subjectivities.

* * *

The Roundheads; or, The Good Old Cause was performed at the end of 1681 and published in 1682. Religious and polit-

ical frenzy convulsed the nation at this time, when a fanatical High-church Anglican priest spread rumors of a “Popish Plot” to murder Charles II and install his Catholic brother James, Duke of York, in power. The alleged plot fueled an already raging controversy over legal attempts to exclude James from the succession. The Earl of Shaftesbury led the challenge to *iure divino* monarchy that Sir Robert Filmer had fiercely defended in *Patriarcha*. With the memories of the great political, economic, and social transformations wrought during the Civil Wars and the Interregnum government of Oliver Cromwell still vivid in the people’s mind, and because the material forces which brought about those transformations had not yet stabilized into a predictable pattern, what was feared was nothing short of another “Great Rebellion.” Royalist and conservative parties, which coalesced into the Tories during this period, dreaded a violent outburst from the “Rabble,” who, allegedly inspired by the revolutionary rhetoric of “The Good Old Cause,” would not only destroy the monarchy but also all the hierarchical distinctions that guaranteed social and political order. On the other hand, Parliamentary and progressive parties, which coalesced into the Whigs, painted terrifying pictures of James’s future rule and of an England returned to a Catholic absolutism and tyranny that would stifle democracy and trade, subject the populace, and impoverish the nation. For the moment, the Tories appeared to have triumphed over Exclusion and the threat of a new order, but their ascendancy remained uncertain. Behn dramatized these anxieties in her brilliantly comic play.

The plot, which Behn adapted from John Tatham’s Tory farce, *The Rump* (1660), is fairly simple: important members of the Committee of Safety, the Puritan body that governed England in 1659 before the restoration of Charles II, demonstrate their ineptitude, avarice, and lechery while its most conniving committeemen, Lambert, the general of the army, and Fleetwood, a self-serving, canting fool who cannot speak without mentioning the “Lard,” vie with one another for the crown. The allegory, or, as Behn describes it, “Mirror, of the late wretched Times,” casts the Whigs as “Villains” and “Rogues without Remorse” who hypocritically mouth Puritan platitudes and bribe “Pulpit Knaves that Treason brew” in order to advance their own ends.²⁶

Behn modified Tatham's plot by twisting into it a Chaucerian May-December amorous thread, adding two Cavaliers, or "Heroicks," Loveless and Freeman, who pursue Lady Lambert and Lady Desbro, the exquisitely beautiful wives of older, less intelligent, and undeserving husbands. Desbro has wed in order to return her paramour's stolen estate back to him—her passion for Freeman never wavers. Lambert, a former mistress of Oliver Cromwell, endorses the reformed cause for pragmatic reasons: she expects to rule England as Protectress or, preferably, Queen. The irresistible charms of Loveless, however, soon convert her from Puritan "Roundhead" madness to a Royalist sanity, from dreams of political power and dominion to a putatively natural, wifely submission within an patriarchalist hierarchy, a submission she gratefully greets once the King's forces conquer and "ravish" the "wicked City." In this seemingly happy ending, the "Great Heroick" and "King Husband" is reunited with his proper spouse, the now-regulated realm, and the individual protagonists each find their rightful partner. Although Behn's *amorous* plot portrays submission to Tory rule as a normative inclination common to all women, who cannot "resist" the superior sexiness of Cavalier men, what we might call the *historical* plot brings this conclusion about through military force. The amorous plot confirms an aesthetic value—the political and spiritual rectitude of absolutist principles. But the historical plot undermines the pleasures, and political certitudes, that the amorous plot purveys.

If Lambert figures the City as a woman fondly overcome with masculine charm, the historical plot represents the City's conquest by royalist forces as a rape. This suggests that we should not read *The Roundheads* as straightforward Tory farce, although critics generally interpret it that way.²⁷ In one of its last scenes, the now discredited Puritan divine Ananias reveals to two low-ranking parliamentarians that the city has been betrayed and "ravish'd, deflow'ed." Horrified, the Joyner responds, "Oh, monstrous! was ever such a Rape committed upon an innocent city? Lay her Legs open to the wide World, for every Knave to view her nakedness?" (5.1.435-40). Are we to assume that, like the major female protagonists of the play, the City has spread "her legs open" for the Royalist invaders because, as Desbro intimates when

she confesses, “I never knew a Woman cou’d resist’em” (2.1.384), the Cavaliers exert a benign, amorous power, the power of love, that restores women to their putatively natural place in the social hierarchy? We are indeed. But the play permits us to see this military and sexual conquest *also as a* “monstrous” violence exerted against women, particularly those who have asserted their authority in the public realm. Does Behn secretly identify with the Roundhead women she overtly rejects? There are three figures associated with the prophet in this play, each of whom claims public power, the right to speak and effect change in the public sphere. Each of them, Behn’s “author-figure” in the dedicatory epistle, Lambert, and the widow Cromwell, figure, in some way, woman as public authority, woman as author. I will examine each in turn.

Behn explicitly associates herself with a poet-prophet in a polemical, political-religious sense in her dedicatory epistle to Henry Fitzroy, the Duke of Grafton and second son of Barbara, Lady Castlemaine (later Duchess of Cleveland) and Charles II. Writing in the wake of Shadwell’s Whig success, *The Lancashire Witches* (1682), Behn explains that she expects her explicitly Tory “Play with a Loyal Title” to arouse antagonism as well as fascination because it “expose[s]” current politicians to be the direct offspring of the perpetrators of the “*Rebellion, Murders, Massacres and Villainies*, from 40 upwards.” This truth she has “Represented for the better undeceiving and informing of the World,” even though she knows that her Whig London audience will

Flock in a full Assembly with a pious design to Hisse and Rail it as much out of countenance as they would *Monarchy, Religion, Laws, and Honesty*, . . . as if that . . . cou’d hinder honest truths from breaking out upon ‘em in Edyfing Plays, where the Loyal hands ever out-do their venom’d Hisse; a good and happy omen, if Poets may be allowd for Prophets as of old they were; and ‘tis as easily seen at a new Play how the Royal Interest thrives, as at a City Election. (15-26)

In this passage Behn begs for patronage as well as protection from the violent opposition of the anti-royalist public,

that, like voters in a city election, has to be persuaded to virtue by rhetorical means. Of course, all of this excitement—her lurid, bold charges that the Whigs are “murderers” and villains “mad with zeal for change and reformation”—heightens the urgency of a situation that she is eager to manipulate in order to curry favor with Grafton. If she adopts the prophetic persona out of mercenary ends, though, she does not disentangle those motives from her political and spiritual loyalties. The aesthetic “honest truths” she offers “in Edyfyng Plays” not only inform the populace of “the Sacred Cause” (90); they also operate like the charismatic Duke himself and will therefore persuade her audience to be “reconciled to Honesty again” (44). She therefore solicits from Grafton, who was “born for Conquest every way,” the aesthetic power that is his chief political weapon:

what Phanatick, what peevish Polititian, testy with Age, Diseases, miscarried Plots, disappointed Revolutions, envious of Power, of Princes, and of Monarchy, and mad with Zeal for Change and Reformation, could yet be so far lost to the sense of Pleasure, as not to turn a Rebel to Revenge, the Good old Cause, and the patronage to Plebian sedition with only looking on you . . . (37-42)

Behn grounds her writerly authority in the public mode of the prophet, who like the charming patron who protects it, purveys aesthetic, pleasing truths. Her work functions as a “small Mirror, of the late wretched Times” (61) in which Grafton, and her audiences, will recognize that they are governed, “through the infinite Mercies of God to this bleeding Nation” by “the best of Monarchs,” who, “like a skilful Pilate, by the wreck of one Rich Vessell, learn how to shun the danger of this present Threatning, and save the rest from sinking” (70-71, 79-80).

Lambert, the hypocritically pious heroine who has risen to public power on the Puritans’ coattails, corresponds to figures of female prophets and political agitators in Interregnum satires in a number of ways. Although historical analysis suggests that most of the women who participated in sectarian meetings, and preached and published their works were sober, modest, tax-paying women, polemical tracts from both the right and the left generally portrayed

them as unruly, power-mad, oversexed, and crazy. As Sharon Achinstein observes, charges of impropriety were the means by which writers condemned women's religious and political activities in public, outside the house, and beyond the control of their husbands and ministers (145). The royalist newsbook *Mercurius Elencticus*, for example, presents Leveller women who petitioned parliament in the 1640s as "loose Religious Charmers" and "holy sisters" (3). The Republican Henry Neville satirized women taking on active public roles in religion and politics in a number of tracts depicting fictional "parliaments of women." In one of them the women pass "merrie laws" that will allow them to "live in more ease, pomp, pride and wantonness; but especially . . . [to] have superiority and domineer over their husbands."²⁸ In *Newes from the New-Exchange, . . . Printed in the yeere of Women without Grace, 1650*, Neville mocks women who appropriated republican rhetoric. He facetiously recalls the "time in *England* when Men wore the *Breeches*, and debar'd Women of their *Liberty*" which obtained until

the Ladies-*Rampant* of the Times, in their last Parliament, knowing themselves to be a part of the *free-People* of this nation, unanimously resolved to assert their own *Freedoms*; and casting off the intolerable yoake of their *Lords* and *Husbands*, have voted themselves the *Supreme Authority* both at home and abroad, and settled themselves in the posture of a *Free-State*, as may apeare by their *Practices*. (1)

Neville further explains that the political "freedoms" that these "ladies" (a euphemism for "whores") have avowed principally consists of voracious, sexual license. His tract recalls a popular ballad from the period depicts sectarian women as power-hungry and loose:

For Husbands we shall have none,
But Brothers in purity;
We will not be Wives
And tye up our Lives
To Villanous slavery;
But couple in love and fear;

When mov'd by the spirit to't
 For there is no sin
 To let a Saint in;
 When he has the grace to do't²⁹

Depicting sectarian women as licentious formed part of a deliberate strategy to demarcate independent, public women as “mad” or irrational, or incapable of the reasoning that could justify their assumption of religious or political authority. Achinstein sees the depiction of women taking active public roles as lunatics and wild-eyed “religious charmers” as evidence of the fact that polemicists took what women had to say “seriously enough to record it and to refute it in terms that sought to eliminate women’s participation in debate” (149).

Behn certainly does not seem to take Lady Lambert seriously. She introduces the coquette to the audience in a discussion between Loveless and Freeman of the “whores,” (I.i.122) and “pretty women” (1.1.130) regularly seen in sectarian assemblies. Loveless’s first report after meeting her directly corresponds to satires of sectarian women, for he describes the “She-Saint” (1.1.143) as

A strange fantastic Charmer,
 A thing just like a Woman friend,

 But when she talk'd, mad as the Winds she grew.
 (1.1.265-69)

Like the “religious charmers,” of royalist satires, Lambert is a sectarian woman who uses sex to gain power, and who is also presented to us—through Loveless’s eyes—as completely irrational. Lambert’s madness consists in her presumption of power unseemly in a woman, her “raving on Crowns and Kingdoms” (4.2.12), and her failure to understand her true position in society. She is supposed to accept her subordination to the King as well as to her husband, but treats the “sacred Reliques” of the monarch, the crown and scepter, as “Trophies” to be awarded to her “young and Gay” lover (4.2.150, 123). She puts on airs and assumes public powers to which she has no legitimate right; she looks down

on Loveless when she, as a woman and a commoner, should look up; she directs affairs of state and derides her “Fool and a Coxcomb” husband for mismanaging the Committee members: “I see I must go myself, there will be no bus’ness done ‘til I thunder ‘em together” (4.1426-27). She clearly runs Lambert, directs public policy through him and is, for this reason, a kind of “author” or public authority who shapes popular opinion and state affairs. She becomes “sane” again when she gives up her pretensions to glory and power, recognizes her dependency upon Loveless, and withdraws from the public realm (4.1365-84; 485ff). Lambert’s alleged madness is also represented as a sexual voracity and corruption; her affair with Cromwell, “who first infus’d Politiques into” her (1.2.135), is the means by which she has “clim’d to Empire” (1.2.135-36) and become a public whore.

If Lambert’s sexual appetite leads to insanity, it leads also to the recovery of her senses. According to the official Tory logic of the play, her desire for Loveless, who encourages her to “leave . . . Politicks, and fall to love” (1.2.255), finally redeems her by bringing about her fall from public power. The sight of Loveless “betray[s] all [her] Devotion” and leads her into adultery with the “villainous” royalists. Lambert’s lust annihilates any presumption to the autonomous agency she has enjoyed as a roundhead “queen” (a word we can understand in its bawdy and political senses): “I was just on the point of falling,” she says to Desbro, who interrupts Loveless’s attempted seduction. “—As thou say’st, these Heroicks have the strangest Power,” she continues, “I wonder our Lord shou’d take away their Swords, and let ‘em wear their Eyes” (2.1.260-95). Loveless’s charismatic weapons of beauty and charm dissolve Lambert’s public agency, delivering her down to domesticity and private obscurity, the lowly position she must occupy in order to be cured. Yet, if Loveless’s charms correspond to the pleasing influence that Grafton possesses and that Behn hopes to wield in her plays, they also resemble the seductive rhetoric that Behn attributes to Burnet’s “Pen.” Aesthetic power, Behn urges here, serves both good and evil ends.

It is useful to pause for a moment to set Behn’s poetic response to Burnet next to *The Roundheads* in order to comment on a structural similarity between Behn’s self-rep-

resentation as an “Excluded Prophet” and “mad” Lambert, who, as I have shown, corresponds to seventeenth-century polemical portraits of prophesying women. Both figures find themselves responding, as women, to men who represent their political-spiritual opposites; both resist seduction and subordination to patriarchal authority. Lambert feels torn between her desire to be sexually overwhelmed, and her desire for political power and fame: “Shall it be said of me in after Ages/ When my great Fame ‘mongst Queens shall be recorded,/ That I . . . regardless of my Countries Cause,/ Espous’d the wicked Party of its Enemies, the Heathenish Heroicks?” Lambert asks herself (1.2.267-71). Behn indirectly poses a similar question in her poem to Burnet, albeit from the obverse political point of view. Is it better to choose the “thriving Course” and glorify William III? Although Lambert’s political allegiance is diametrically opposite to Behn’s, she is as conscious of her posterity as the poet who wanted to be remembered in the company of Sappho (“Of Plants” 590-94). Like Behn the poet-prophet, Lady Lambert exists in a world in which she must work out her ambitions to assert a public voice in relations with men, with whom political contingencies cannot be divorced from amorous contingencies. The symbolic order in which both figures must function disposes them to sacrifice public majesty in the face of masculine potency. Yet, as she presents herself in the “Pindaric,” Behn reaches for the laurels alone, holding firm to her religio-political convictions to the end, even though her politically transformed world offers her neither shelter, nor consolation. She resists the erotic pull of Burnet; Lambert is not so strong. She falls for the perhaps aptly named Loveless.

Another structural similarity between Lambert and the prophet-author-figure that Behn assumes, in this case in the dedicatory epistle to Grafton, suggests that Behn unconsciously, and indirectly, identified with her Roundhead protagonist. In the letter, the playwright portrays herself as the potential victim of the kind of violence similar to the punishment exerted by satires of publicly active women by predicting the fury of Whig audiences, whom she has unmasked as the Parliamentarian thugs of old: “—what, to Name us cryes one, tis most abominable, unheard of daring cryes another—she

deserves to be swing'd cryes a third" (48-50). The structural similarity obtains when Lambert is hounded by the London rabble for being a "She-Politician" and "sorceress." Lambert hasn't named anyone, of course, or told any unpopular truths, but, like the woman playwright, she is perceived to have acted with unacceptable autonomy and power in the public sphere. Both have employed rhetorical tools to promote social change. We might also read the author's alleged fear of the rabble in light of her other well-known expressions of frustration with her society's refusal to accord women the same dramatic license it gave to men.³⁰ Both figures come across as women who claim much more authority than was customarily or comfortably tolerated in "the Sex" at this time, and both are represented as victims of the mob's aggression. In the epistle to Grafton, Behn demonstrates an awareness that she is vulnerable to the same violence with which popular satires punished other women who spoke out in public.³¹ Even though Behn re-deploys elements of those satirical texts in her portrait of Lambert, she represents both the figure of herself (a poet-prophet) and Lambert (a woman associated with female prophets) as the objects of public derision and vilification.

If Lambert corresponds to satirical figures of prophets in royalist satires, Cromwell much more directly echoes the expressions of female prophet-authors themselves. Cromwell darkly, and accurately, predicts the latter's future: "I may yet live to see/ Thy Husband's Head o'th top of *Westminster*/ Before I see it circled in a Crown" (1.2.164-66). She tells her daughter, Lady Fleetwood, that Lambert will betray her husband, "as he did thy Brother," (1.2.189). After the faux "Protectress" (Lambert) realizes that her brief run of majesty has come to an end, she calls Cromwell a "Screech Owl" (a bird associated with prophecy) and dismisses her "Voice" which grates because it is "ominous."³² The widow then threatens that she'll "prove *Cassandra* to thee, and prophesie thy Doom" (5.1.306, 357).

Connections can be drawn between all three prophet figures: Behn's representation of herself in the dedicatory epistle, Lambert and Cromwell. In an interesting, early scene, Lambert and her openly royalist woman, Gilliflower, regard the widow Cromwell, who has come to confront her husband's whore. Although Cromwell's critique of the

Roundhead government dovetails exactly with that of its Tory author, Gilliflower dismisses her as “mad.” Since Lambert clearly registers as “mad” in the Tory ideology of the play, and because her lunacy corresponds to that attributed to female prophets during this period, when Lambert looks as Cromwell, she views her double in the present and the future. Behn’s Cromwell figures Lambert’s present self as a crazy, sectarian woman, who believes she utters the truth but is interpreted by her audience as delusional and foolish; she figures Lambert’s future self as a has-been. Nevertheless, Behn’s representation of the widow, a much kinder portrait than the one found in Tatham’s *Rump*, transcends *both* Lambert’s roundhead and Gilliflower’s royalist viewpoints. Tatham’s Cromwell conforms to the conventions of royalist satire—she is shrewish, power-hungry, and irrational. In contrast, Behn makes her strong, intelligent, and dignified. Cromwell stands as a rational, intellectually autonomous woman speaking the truth about current affairs in an effort to bring the world in tune with her own understanding of providence. The conservative public, threatened by her (and figured by Gilliflower), maligns her as “mad.” In this moment, Behn steps back from the discursive polarities according to which women who speak out in public were constructed. She therefore steps beyond, however briefly, the rigid categories of the royalist satire that she is writing, permitting an association between her “author-figure” as a royalist prophet and both of these Roundhead women. The playwright, Lambert, and Cromwell are all vulnerable to the patriarchal system that punishes women who act and speak with authority—an authority that is necessarily assumed, posed, and created in language—in public.

When Behn regards Lambert looking at Cromwell, then, the various discourses of the play, roundhead and royalist, liberal-radical and absolutist, cross over one another and become entangled. Another instance of this ideological confusion occurs when the committed royalist, Desbro, utters a republican slogan: “we stand for Liberty and Property of our Sex, and will present it to the Committee of Safety” (5.1.267-68). Of course, Behn’s loyalties rarely seem particularly confused, but her identification with the figure of the prophet

demonstrates a richer and more complex ideological consciousness in this play than critics have previously discerned, because Behn's Tory politics do not simply cancel out the progressive possibilities her characters entertain. The result is a subtler mix of viewpoints. Behn's prophet-self on the "forsaken, barren shore" ironically corresponds to Cromwell's isolation, her lack of a comfortable place to stand, to exist, within the possible governing systems. It is as though she had pre-figured her own future persona (as depicted in the ode to Burnet) in this portrait of Cromwell. Both figures discover in politico-religious isolation a hopeless, yet still fecund, dignity, a rhetorical authority that finds no fit audience. Moreover, the complicated overlapping of Behn's own Virgilian prophet-figure with the lampooned prophetess, Lambert, and the scorned, yet stalwart, widow Cromwell illustrates a fruitful and dramatic interplay of "high" and "low" discourses of prophecy. In this configuration the playwright is clearly working out her relationship to both traditions and producing her own persona as a *woman* poet-prophet within a contested field. That is, she claims authorial authority in a dynamic relationship with both sectarian-progressive and conservative ideologies.

Obviously, Behn never imagined herself, even in a secret life, as a Roundhead general, but she drew upon radical Protestant prophetic discourses and practices as cultural resources in order to underscore and defend her public voice. Moreover, when we look to Behn as an important player in the development of the category of the "modern author," we need to see how she contributed to that emergent entity in a conflicted politico-religious field rather than locating her solely within the intellectual confines of absolutism. This writer claimed the authority of the prophet after the fashion of many progressive, visionary women writers, but she also exhibited a characteristically conservative skepticism of language as a stable medium of divine truth.³³ Behn simultaneously aestheticized absolutist piety by representing it as the most *desirable* form of government and critiqued its restriction of women's literary, spiritual, and political authority, offering her "honest Truths" as aesthetic values requiring what Adorno called "innumerable mediations" (183). That is to say, while her work overtly promulgates what Marxist critics

might call a tendentious, or one-sided, political message, it also resists that message on the level of form and structure, giving the audience room to consider two conflicting discourses of political and religious authority. Because none of the ideologies of her time openly sanctioned the political authority of women, Behn could finally only assert her own creative agency by opposing all forces that repressed women's voices. Therefore, when we wrestle with the paradox of Behn's feminism and absolutism, we would do well to remember that "it is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to [wo]men's heads" (Adorno 180).

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Frances Rosalia Price Latta (1906-2003), who lived by the wisdom of "the Prophetess," Ellen G. White.

¹Neil Tennant, "Left to My Own Devices."

²For examples of Behn's adoption of a prophetic persona or tone see "A Congratulatory Poem to Her Most Sacred Majesty, On the Universal Hopes . . . for A Prince of Wales," 7-8; see also "A Pindarick on the Death of Our Late Sovereign: With an Ancient Prophecy on His Present Majesty"; "A Pindarick Poem on the Happy Coronation of His most Sacred majesty James II . . ."; "A Congratulatory Poem to The King's Most Sacred majesty, On the Happy Birth of the Prince of Wales." All references to Behn's poems, prose and plays are to Todd's edition.

³"A Pindaric Poem to the Reverend Doctor Burnet," 62, 55.

⁴*The History of Oracles* (1688); dedicatory epistle "To . . . GEORGE, Lord Jeffreys, . . . Lord High Chancellor of England" in Todd (1992) 4: 171. Behn translated Fontanelle's *l'Histoire des Oracles* in 1688; it was reprinted in 1700. Critics who dismiss religion in Behn's thought include Duffy 102; Mendelson 165; and Todd, *Secret Life* 19.

⁵For the refutation of Gallagher's claims, see Hughes, *Theatre of Aphra Behn* 1-3; and "Masked Woman" 149-64.

⁶For the term "author-figure," see Foucault. I use Foucault's term here in order to demarcate the vexing issue of exactly when the "author" comes into existence. See also note 8.

⁷See Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History*. McDowell also discuss the influence of sectarian women's writing and the development of women's literary authority.

⁸I do not have room to demonstrate the interrelation of various partisan notions of political authority and their relationship to notions of the author in this essay. Jeff Masten and Catherine Gallagher

("Embracing the Absolute") suggest that the modern notion of the author originates in absolutist ideology. Kewes's argument that the modern notion of the author arises through the interplay of both conservative and liberal ideology is more convincing. For a useful discussion of the notion of authority as developing through the "enduring conflict" of rival ideologies during this period, see Pocock 103-109.

⁹There are a number of excellent books discussing the political and property rights of women during the seventeenth century. The works that I have found most useful and influential include Amussen, Cahn, Clark, Hufton, Staves, and Wiesner.

¹⁰Women who assert a right to authorship explicitly on the grounds that they are mothers include Grymeston, Leigh, Jocelin, and Richardson.

¹¹Downname, preface. This was a response to Mary Cary's *The resurrection of the witnesses and Englands fall from (the mystical Babylon) Rome . . .* (London, 1648).

¹²Such analysis might begin with Debra Shuger's fascinating analysis of "nursing fathers" in patriarchalist thought, 218-24.

¹³"The Mind of Wisdom thus opened itself in me, as I waited in my Spirit upon her, she did shew me what key would open the *Great Mystery*, which lay deeply hid in myself. It was wrought and carved out of . . . pure Gold . . . But the great thing, saith Wisdom, now is to discipline and make thy Spirit a cunning Artist." Lead, 1.22-24. Cf. 1.57, 59, 61.

¹⁴On absolutist subjectivity as the prerequisite for creativity in Cavendish, see Gallagher ("Embracing"). On Lead, see Catherine Smith, and, especially, McDowell 167-201.

¹⁵On the association of Virgil with prophecy, see Hollander. Sidney's contemporary Puttenham maintains that poets were "the first priests, the first prophets, the first legislators and politicians in the world." Poets were also "the first Prophetes or sears, *Videntes* for so the Scripture tearmeth them in Latine after the Hebrue word," in Gregory Smith; cit. Balfour 59. On James Harrington's political usage of Virgil, see Norbrook 360-1.

¹⁶John Milton, in *The Reason of Church Government*, declared his commission to be "a very sword and fire in house and City over the whole earth," in Wolfe, 1.802-3. Cf. *The Readie and Easie Way*, "Thus much I should perhaps have said though I were sure I should have spoken only to trees and stones; and had none to cry to, but with the Prophet, O earth, earth, earth! to tell the very soil it self, what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to," Wolfe, 7.462-3. For a discussion of Milton's understanding of himself as a prophet, see Kerrigan.

¹⁷Kewes's distinction between the model of legitimate appropriation and the Romantic ideal of originality is helpful: "Although the two frameworks provide different definitions of how literary works should be conceived and authored, they assign comparable attributes to the final product," 8.

¹⁸“Whatsoever then [a person] removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left in it, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*.” Locke 288. Cf. John Dryden in the preface to *Don Sebastian* (1690), “’Tis the contrivance, the new turn, and new characters, which alter the property and make it ours.” *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, et al., 20 vols, (Berkeley, U of CA P, 1956-), vol. 15, 69; cit. Kewes 126.

¹⁹Mack (1992) 5, and (1982) 34. Paula McDowell adopts Mack’s argument, esp. 180-214. On the other hand, Esther Cope maintains that the prophetess Eleanor Davies “incorporated her personal identity in her prophet persona” and did not imagine herself an unsexed or androgynous vessel for the spirit, 209. Cf. Ezell, *Patriarch’s Wife* 134-35.

²⁰The seventeenth-century argument that women had no trustworthy creative capacities but, at best, only the ability to engender monstrous constructions, was largely influenced by Aristotle, who argued in *The Generation of Animals* that the masculine principle alone had the power to shape things, was still widely regarded as an authority on the differences between men and women during this period. See Barnes, I:1184 (Book IV, § 1). For a discussion of Restoration stereotypes of women as creative agents, see Francus.

²¹Earl Miner argues that the new “public mode” of Restoration literature, was “radical” not just because of poets’ new faith in the relation between human beings and the world, but also because it “involved belief that the divine and human creators possessed comparable functions, just as the divine and human creators were believed to resemble each other,” 15-16.

²²Todd also refers to Behn as “mentally a hermaphrodite,” (*The Secret Life*) 1.xxix.

²³See “A Paraphrase on Oenone to Paris” (1680), esp. 115, “I presag’d, some ominous Change was near!” and 191, “Like me forsaken, and like me forlorn!” See also the prophet goddess of the oak tree, Dryas, “a Prophetess, And all the Glories of immortal Fame . . . / Is but at best from thy triumphing Boughs / To reach . . .,” in Behn’s translation of the sixth book of Abraham Cowley’s *Of Plants*, 581-585. Cowley’s work was printed in Latin in 1668. *The Second and Third Parts of the Works of Mr. Abraham Cowley . . . The Third containing His Six Books of Plants . . . Now made English by several Hands* appeared in 1689. In this work she also begs from Dryas a right to wear the laurels of the poet “by a double right . . . / Both from my sex, and in Apollo’s name / Let me with Sappho and Orinda be / O ever sacred Nymph, adorn’d by thee; / And give my Verses Immortality” 590-594.

²⁴See Kristeva 24-33; and Rose for a definition of the symbolic order.

²⁵Cf. Behn's epistolary address to the reader in *The Dutch Lover* (1673). "Comedie was never meant, either for a converting or confirming Ordinance: In short, I think a Play the best divertissement that wise men have; but I do also think them nothing so, who do discourse as formallie about the rules of it, as it 'twere the grand affair of humane life. This being my opinion of Plays, I studied only to make this as entertaining as I could" (162).

²⁶*The Roundheads, or, The Good Old Cause*, Dedication to the Duke of Grafton, 61, and Prologue, 13. in Todd (*Works*), vol. 6. All references to this play will be to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and page number.

²⁷Critics generally conclude that the imperatives of royalism overwhelm Behn's feminist sensibilities in this play. Hughes, for example, writes, "the collapse of natural authority has created a hypothetical space in which female power might expand, but which remains morally and psychologically out of [Lady Lambert's] and any other woman's reach." Susan Owen observes that in her most political plays, "Behn's habitual—and liberating—depiction of women who are wiser and wittier than their husbands coexists and is overdetermined by a conventional Tory rhetoric of gender difference and subordination," 22.

²⁸*The Parliament of Women* (1647), cit. Achinstein 142.

²⁹"A Psalm of Mercy. Ursula, (who crys Ends of Gold and Silver) reads, and all the Sisters sing. To the Tune of "*Now thanks to the Powers below!*" in Brome 194-195.

³⁰See, for example, her complaint in the epistle to the reader that prefaces *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678): "The play had no other misfortune but that of coming out for a Womans; had it been owned by a Man, though the most Dull Unthinking Rascally Scribler in Town, it had been a most admirable Play," *Works* vol. 6, 5.

³¹Satires of female prophets and political agitators in this period, Sharon Achinstein observes, "demonstrate genuine concern about the roles women were taking in public: voting, speaking out in public spaces, voicing religious truths, challenging authority in ways that were not wholly irrational or 'other,' but that were politically recognizable."

³²The screech owl is associated with prophecy in Isaiah 34:1-17.

³³For the relationship between conservative ideology and extreme skepticism, see McKeon, *Origins of the English Novel* 171.

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