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**Staging Gender in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*
and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife***

Bakalářská práce

Klára Žídková
Anglická filologie

Olomouc 2023

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V Olomouci dne

Podpis

Poděkování

Ráda bych poděkovala Mgr. Emě Jelínkové, Ph.D. za vedení této bakalářské práce a za její ochotu, podporu a trpělivost.

Velké díky patří těm nejlepším rodičům pod sluncem za jejich nekonečnou lásku a podporu.

A v neposlední řadě díky Lexi za vzájemnou psychickou podporu a dlouhé dny společně strávené v knihovně.

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to compare two comedies from the Restoration period, *The Rover* (1677) by Aphra Behn and *The Country Wife* (1675) by William Wycherley. They represent two most popular plays written by a woman and a man in this time period and as such pose a good point of comparison. I believe that through the analysis and comparison of these two specific plays a lot can be explored and understood in terms of their genre and authorship. My objective throughout this thesis is to pay special attention to representation of gender, gender related social issues and to female authorship.

To understand the plays I believe it is important to understand the genre and the time period they were written in first and that is what the first chapter of this thesis focuses on. In my overview of the genre I explain the influences that shaped it and offer a general description of characteristics of the genre. To study the gender aspect of performed Restoration plays in the second half of the first chapter I explore the presence of actresses and women in the audience.

It is by no accident that one of the plays chosen for comparison is by a female author, even more so by Aphra Behn. The topic of female authorship is what I focus in the second chapter. While I do offer the names of several other female authors and list some of the important 'first' it is not my goal to list all the possible writers of this era in this chapter, but more so to explore and define the identity of 'a female writer,' to explain the situation and possibilities for women writers and to describe how were they received by a society that was yet to be used o women publicly sharing their work and pursuing writing as a profession. In this chapter I aim to give a greater context to Behn's authorship.

I believe it important to at least briefly introduce the authors and their backgrounds, especially in my goal of comparison of these two specific plays because they were written at a time when a person's socioeconomical background truly mattered as not everyone could write and produce plays or any other literary work. The difference between the two writers is that more prominent because of their different gender. For these reason in the third chapter I offer an overview of the author's lives as well as familiarize the readers with my two chosen plays.

In chapter four I analyze and compare the two plays. Beside the general comparison of the plays in terms of setting and genre specific characteristic my main goal is to examine the difference, if there is any, in how the two authors portray and utilize female and male

characters, their relationships and if the plays contain any social critique that could be related to gender.

In the last chapter I examine if *The Country Wife* and *The Rover* were forgotten in the mists of time since the end of the Restoration period and offer a short overview of how was Aphra Behn perceived as female author, if she was a part of canon and her rediscovery by feminist critics in 20th century.

1 Restoration Comedy

“For in truth this part of our literature is a disgrace to our language and our national character. It is clever, indeed, and very entertaining; but it is, in the most emphatic sense of the words, earthly, sensual, devilish.”¹

1.1 Influence

No form of art exists in vacuum and so it is always to some degree product of its environment. No different is the Restoration comedy, a genre that is a direct result of the turbulent time-period in English history that it came out of. In this section I would like to give a brief overview of the historic events and other influences that shaped genre.

Restoration period and its drama was preceded and influenced by the Interregnum period which took place since the execution of Charles I in 1649 up until the restoration of monarchy in England with the return of his son and the next English monarch in line Charles II in 1660. During this time of republican rule England was under significant puritan influence. Puritans viewed theatre as “immoral and unholy” and not only because the plays were performed on days otherwise dedicated to God (Sundays and other holy days).² Another reason Benjamin Brawley brings up is that of the actors’ habit of female roles being played by crossdressing males,³ as was customary at that time. This goes directly against the Bible that states: “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.” (Deuteronomy, 22:5). The Puritans’ distaste for stage plays resulted in their complete ban.

The ban of theater preceded the Interregnum and came with the First English Civil War in 1642. It lasted long 18 years and plays were officially allowed on stage only after the return of an avid theatergoer Charles II. However during this time theater did not die down completely and it continued in form of puppet plays and drolls, which were short comedic

¹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, Vol. 3 (Boston and New York: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1838; Project Gutenberg, 2009), 51, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/28046/pg28046-images.html>.

² Benjamin Brawley, *A Short History of the English Drama* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), 123.

³ Brawley, *A Short History of the English Drama*, 124.

pieces often culled from already written plays.⁴ But because of this forced interlude the evolution of theater was significantly delayed.

To see a fully fledged predecessor of Restoration theater we need to go back to the English Renaissance theater era and look specifically at Elizabethan comedy. While it is not the focus of this thesis to look deeper into the intricacies of Elizabethan theater, I believe that by highlight some of the differences between stage plays from the two eras we can understand the genre of Restoration comedy better. Comedy of manners replaced the Elizabethan favorite Romantic comedy and with the change came a change of language. While previously in comedies use of poetry was customary, with Restoration prose takes its place.⁵ Nettleton further describes Elizabethan theater as original and creative compared to imitative Restoration theater that routinely used and adapted old plays.⁶

The plays also greatly reflected who were they written for. An important part of the audience in Restoration theater was the King and his court, which resulted in “great majority of the characters [being] ladies and gentlemen, and not citizens or boors as was often the case in Elizabethan comedy.”⁷ Akin to this most of Restoration plays took place where the court resided. Nettleton writes “hero and heroine know the world, but the world is London” and regards Elizabethan plays more national.⁸ Restoration stage plays also differ from its predecessor with the upgraded mechanisms used on stage, including movable scenery, machines and devices such as cranes and trap doors.⁹

Its is also worth mention the foreign influence on Restoration comedy. The scope of namely French influence has been the topic of many academic debates, but its presence is undeniable, especially since it was the King Charles II and his court who after spending 9 years in French exile brought the French influence to the reopened English theaters.

Dobrée discusses the source of influence on Restoration comedy and while he admits the presence of some French plots he rather links the genre to the domestic Elizabethan

⁴ George Henry Nettleton, *English Drama Of The Restoration And Eighteenth Century (1642-1780)* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1914), 16.

⁵ Nettleton, *English Drama Of The Restoration And Eighteenth Century*, 5.

⁶ Nettleton, *English Drama Of The Restoration And Eighteenth Century*, 3.

⁷ Bonamy Dobrée, *Restoration Comedy 1660 – 1720* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), 52.

⁸ Nettleton, *English Drama Of The Restoration And Eighteenth Century*, 4.

⁹ Edward A. Langhans, “The theatre,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9-10.

comedy. An example he provides is the theme of sex-antagonism that is almost completely absent from French stage plays but is ever so present in Restoration comedies. He explains the theme evolved from more romantic and idealistic Shakespearean and Fletcherian comedies which still portrayed a classic happy marriage, first started to show in early plays by Marston and Middleton and then is undeniably present in *Brome and Shirley*.¹⁰

Another development from the Elizabethan age is that female actresses are finally allowed to join the stage, which in itself significantly influenced the theater and resulted for example in the “breeches roles” becoming a staple of Restoration comedies. This topic will be discussed in greater detail later on.

1.2 Characteristics

I already outlined the general nature and sociohistorical background of the genre. In this section I would like to discuss the characteristics of Restoration comedy and to establish some of the terms I will use in the analysis of my two chosen plays.

Restoration comedy is sarcastic, witty and bawdy in nature. The plays did not shy away from sexual topics such as portrayal of extramarital affairs, female desire and rape threats, which resulted in the genre’s infamous reputation. The comedies are satirical in nature. They aim to expose the true nature and desires of the seemingly sophisticated and proper characters while taking a jab at the audience and the King himself at the same time. The plays are characterized by use of wit, a simple term that may be difficult to define, but during 17th century, at the time when both *The Rover* and *The Country Wife* were written, wit was viewed as “capacity for ingenuity, an ability to make unexpected unions or contrast of generally diverse ideas.”¹¹ In the most simplest of explanations it was the writer’s ability to humor the audience, but to be clever about it. It is most often expressed via verbal play, namely use of similitudes, puns, allusions, epigrams and irony.¹² This includes nameplay, which we can observe in both studied plays.

The plays were for the most part written in prose and poetry was used only sparingly. Humphreys explains it as a consequence of the turbulent events of 17th century that caused the

¹⁰ Dobrée, *Restoration Comedy 1660 – 1720*, 39-42.

¹¹ Michael Werth Gelber, “Dryden’s Theory of Comedy.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26, no. 2 (1992), 269.

¹² John Harold Wilson, *A Preface to Restoration Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 168.

English audience favor simpler modes “which would unite rather than divide men. [...] Englishman had suffered so much from intellectual fission that they wanted amalgamation.”¹³ This was another reason for the frequent use of puns and other play-on-words like double entendres, it added another layer of meaning to otherwise simple language, showing off the author’s wit.¹⁴

Structurally the plays consist of five acts. The plot follows a chronological order but otherwise the unities of time, play and action tend to be ignored. The plays tend to use the same themes and character archetypes. At the center of the story stands a male libertine character, a rake with a distaste for marriage who pursues the opposite sex. He usually meets his match in a female libertine character and together they form a ‘gay couple’ that “reject[s] the oppression of sexual instincts [and] seek pleasure in their daily lives.”¹⁵ The ‘sensible couple’ contrasts them by representing an idealized form of love. There also tends to be a cuckold as well as a mistress. Other themes we can see are masking and mistaken identity theme.

1.3 Actresses

First actresses joined the English stage right at the beginning of the Restoration era. After his return from exile Charles II granted staging rights to two established playwrights, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant who each established their own theater company. Davenant’s Duke’s Company was the first one to allow and hire actresses, but it was on the stage of Killigrew’s King’s Company where the first actress publicly performed, when in December 1660 Margaret Hughes performed as Desdemona in *Othello*.¹⁶

Allowing actresses on stage was not a deliberately progressive step to give women more opportunities but rather a calculated decision of how to stand against the prevalent distaste for theater because of female roles being played by cross-dressed boys. However this

¹³ Arthur Humphreys, “The Social Setting,” in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*. Vol. 4, *From Dryden to Johnson*, ed. Boris Ford (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 20.

¹⁴ Melahat Sibel Dinçel, “Technical and Thematic Developments in Three Representative Comedy of Manners: Wycherley’s the Country Wife, Etheregels the Man of Mode and Congreve’s the Way of the World,” Master’s thesis, (Hacettepe University, 1989), 75.

¹⁵ Dinçel, “Technical and Thematic Developments in Three Representative Comedy of Manners: Wycherley’s the Country Wife, Etheregels the Man of Mode and Congreve’s the Way of the World,” 76.

¹⁶ Langhans, “The theatre,” 3.

“heteroerotic appeal as a bulwark against sodomy” only inevitably led to explicit sexualization of female bodies and plots involving adultery.¹⁷ The moral reason for involving women in theater plays became even more compromised with the rising popularity of ‘breeches roles’ in which an actress was paraded on stage wearing, quite ironically, male clothing, specifically short and fitted pants that showed off her legs.

For these reason it is not surprising that being an actress was not seen as respectable by any means. As Diane Maybank in her edited version of *The Rover* says it was a profession linked to prostitution and often attracted women from lower social classes.¹⁸ Actresses often had rich lovers that would patron them, most notably Nell Gwynn who was patroned by the King Charles II himself.

1.4 Women in the Audience

The audience of Restoration theater greatly impacted the character of the plays. I already noted how the audience affected the language of the plays because of the shared preferences for simpler language. This is also the reason for the popularity of the comedy genre. After an era of turbulent social changes people wanted to be entertained and to laugh. Comedy also allowed writers to comment on the current happenings in the court and in the society. Nettleton also writes that “[c]omedy mirrored not English nature, still less human nature, but the nature of the court.”¹⁹

In this thesis I argue on the role of women in drama during the Restoration period. The hidden and mostly nameless women in the audience could be easily overlooked and because of that we should not do so. Most women who came in contact with theater during the Restoration era were not writers or actresses but the female members of the audience. Maybank notes that “in the 1660s respectable women started to wear masks when they attended the theater” in order to protect their reputation, however this trick backfired when prostitutes learned and adopted the habit.²⁰

¹⁷ Joseph Roach, “The performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31.

¹⁸ Diane Maybank, „Interpretations,“ in *The Rover*, ed. Diane Maybank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 173.

¹⁹ Nettleton, *English Drama Of The Restoration And Eighteenth Century*, 72.

²⁰ Maybank, “Interpretations,” 191.

Robert Markley reviews how a contemporary critic reacted to Behn's *The Rover* being performed and he notes specifically on the women in the audience. No matter how hidden the women in audience were, they were as on display for the male viewers as the actresses on stage and, because of their status, they were put under even bigger scrutiny.

The women respond both to the spectacle of fallen breeches and to their recognition that they, too, are on display; putting their fans in front of their faces registers both their fascination with the male body and their awareness that their interest and knowledge violates conventions of feminine modesty.²¹

The quote reflects how men enjoyed watching women for their reaction to libertine scenes, experiencing pleasure when seeing women revealing their sexual desire in a public setting. A theme of female sexual desire is one that can be observed in Restoration plays, but in this sense it overlaps with the real life audience and the women in it as well.

²¹ Robert Markley, "The canon and its critics" in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 231.

2 Female Writers

Restoration period opened doors not to only actresses but to female writers as well. I already mentioned the tainted reputation that came with being an actress, and female writers were met with similar scrutiny. It is then no surprise many women did not want to be publicly associated with this profession even though they did produce some literary texts.

Paul Salzman identifies four types of female writers. The first and most straightforward one are women who fit the most neatly into the category of ‘authorship’ as we know it today, including women who aspired to some sort of career in this profession. The second type refers to “less powerful women who attempted to authorize their writing by associating it with the works of other, more powerful women” and Salzman names Aemilia Lanyer as an example. Third category concerns female writers in the most literal and somewhat stereotypical sense of the word – women who wrote about topics connected to women and their activities in form of diaries, mother’s advice books or recipes. And finally there are women who wrote about political or even more often religious issues.²² Aphra Behn without a doubt fits the first category as she openly pursued a career in writing. However we will learn that this attitude was quite unusual at the time and other women writers who would fit the first category as well were usually more conservative when it came to presenting their writings to public.

To get back to dramatic production, we know about approximately 15 women who from 1610 to 1690 wrote what could be considered as ‘plays.’²³ Wynne-Davies regards that in this time period the trend for female writers was to turn from translations to original plays and to focus on performability in writing their plays.²⁴ The preference for original plays brought us both the first original tragedy and comedy written by women writers (respectively Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* from 1613 and Mary Wroth’s *Love’s Victory* from circa 1615-1620). The second change we can observe a little later in the plays of three women of the Cavendish family - sisters Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley and their step mother

²² Paul Salzman, “1. Identifying as (Women) Writers” in *The History of British Women’s Writing*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 33-34.

²³ Marion Wynne-Davies, “10. Early Modern English Women Dramatists (1610–1690): New Perspectives,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 188.

²⁴ Wynne-Davies, “Early Modern English Women Dramatists,” 188.

Margaret Cavendish. Despite the plays not being performed at the time they exhibit a knowledge of staging and theatrical devices.²⁵

The paradoxical Restoration era combined the old and the new and no different was it in its drama that, despite the earlier want for original plays, brought back translations as well as adaptations and closet drama. In this era the first play translated by a woman sees the stage in 1663 in the form of Corneille's *Pompey* translated by Katherine Philips. Staves poses an interesting remark about this play. Even though the play is republican in nature, which is understandably quite a sensitive topic in an era of newly restored monarchy, Philips translated it faithfully to the original, choosing not to make changes to appeal it to the public more and the play was surprisingly permitted to be performed.²⁶ This suggests that in their translations women had somewhat bigger literary freedom, while in their original works they had to be more mindful about nature of their texts.

Dorothy Mermin in her article notes that female writers usually wrote as if from “a relatively egalitarian world, remote from politics and power, in which the conventional hierarchy of gender is mitigated or evaded.” She further explains that they wrote in a specific way, as if to belittle themselves in comparison to their male counterparts, because they were always conscious of the fact that they will be read as female writers, while the male writers voices are seen as universal.²⁷ However Wynne-Davies argues that while women's drama could have been presented as submissive and in compliance with what patriarchy deemed female written drama should look like, if we look at the content it still engaged with topics deemed inappropriate for female writers. To name a few examples, the Cavendish sisters wrote about the suffering and loss caused by the Civil War, and Margaret Cavendish proves her knowledge of wide range of political issues in her plays.²⁸ In *The Rover* Behn also presents us her vast knowledge of the current political and social happenings, as she makes allusions to the post Civil War political situation and the King as well as the court. However it is arguable whether her sexual comedy conforms to patriarchal standards on female writing in any form.

²⁵ Wynne-Davies, “Early Modern English Women Dramatists,” 189.

²⁶ Susan Staves, *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 54.

²⁷ Dorothy Mermin, “Women Becoming Poets: Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Anne Finch,” *ELH* 57, no. 2 (1990): 336, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2873075>.

²⁸ Wynne-Davies, “Early Modern English Women Dramatists,” 189.

Marta Straznicky points out Williamson's analysis of the 'Behn/Philips dichotomy' where this era's female authors' careers tend to follow one of two patterns. Aphra Behn presented a type of professional author that is assertive, competitive and openly public. However this road was for a long time only walked by Behn herself. On the other hand Katherine Philips represents the much more common type of female author, one that is amateur in nature, private and reserved.²⁹

We cannot blame Philips for her reservation towards public authorship as publicity was in this era, and several following centuries, deemed harmful for female virtue. Not long after the success of *Pompey*, which already made Philips anxious about connecting her name to a published work, her poems were published without her knowledge and approval. She fought against the publication and made the printer write a public apology as well as announce his plan to stop publishing the book.³⁰ Despite her reserved stance towards publicity Mermin argues that Philips still wrote for publication. She even goes on to say Philips and another significant female writer Anne Finch, who was active a little later at the turn of 17th and 18th century, both "thirsted for literary fame" and she supports this hypothesis by quoting Finch herself who wrote 'none have writ (whatever they pretend) / Singly to raise a patron, or a friend.' Mermin further expands on her hypothesis by saying that while male writers also wrote disclaimers for their writings it was simply to present themselves as mere amateurs and gentleman, but women's disclaimers are "charged with sexual error."³¹ This suggests that we cannot simply differentiate between women who wanted and who did not want to be published. Mindful of the fact that the patriarchal society will inherently judge man's and woman's work by different standards it seems women were wary of the reception and repercussions to their reputation to the point where it affected their willingness to share their work.

Despite her prolific authorship Sazlman notes Margaret Cavendish's anxiety over female authorship that she expressed by repeating Edward Denny's catchphrase "Work o th' Workes leave idle bookes alone / For wise and worthy women have writte none" twice in

²⁹ Marta Straznicky, "Restoration Women Playwrights and the Limits of Professionalism," *ELH* 64, no. 3 (1997): 705, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030237>.

³⁰ Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York: The Dial Press, 1980), 144.

³¹ Mermin, "Women Becoming Poets," 338.

her works.³² However Angeline Goreau in her chapter on ‘Literary Foremothers’ points out that while Margaret Cavendish guarded her chaste reputation and reminded her readers of the inadequate skill of both hers and her gender in general, it appears she did not necessarily view her writings being published as something that tarnished her reputation, and even admitted that she wrote for “fame” and “eternity itself.”³³ This further proves my previously stated point.

Something else that Philips and Cavendish had in common was patronage. Margaret Cavendish and her stepdaughters were both financially and socially patronaged in their writing activities by their father and husband William Cavendish who was a writer himself and Philips had financial stability provided by her husband as well as the support of her friends and the ‘Society of Friendship’ she helped to establish. In comparison, Aphra Behn who was born into poverty had no such support. On the contrary, her financial situation was precisely the reason she started pursuing career in writing. But as Goreau cleverly states “[i]f she had no one to protect her or to fall back on, she also was the guardian of no one’s honor but her own.”³⁴ What they all had in common was that in a world ran by men they could make their own name in writing. Now history knows them not only by their father’s or husband’s name but Katherina Philips as ‘Orinda,’ Anne Finch as ‘Ardelia’ and Aphra Behn as ‘Astrea.’

The first original play written by a woman that was performed on stage at the time was in 1669 and it was Frances Boothby’s tragicomedy *Marcellia, or the Treacherous Friend*. Staves proposes that the successful reception of Philips and Boothby’s plays on stage proves that female written plays could be accepted in theater and that might have inspired Behn who in the prologue of her first staged play *The Forc’d Marriage, or The Jealous Bridegroom* from 1670 clearly states her female authorship. The play was a success, however as Staves further points out Behn then moved from heroic drama and tragicomedy to writing sex comedies and when she made it clear she intends to write more than one or two plays and plans to pursue career in this profession she was then met with resistance.³⁵

At the beginning of this section I drew an analogy between actresses and women writers in terms of how were their professions received by the society. Women writers were not

³² Salzman, “Identifying as (Women) Writers,” 38.

³³ Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra*, 146.

³⁴ Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra*, 149.

³⁵ Staves, *A Literary History of Women’s Writing in Britain*, 61.

physically presented to the public as the actresses on the stage in front of an audience were, but still there seems to be “an equivalence between a woman who made herself public by having a play produced or published and a woman who was available to the public as a prostitute.”³⁶ Straznicky explains this link between female authorship and prostitution as a consequence of the sexual undertones that accompanies the “pleasure-for-money exchange” nature of theater.³⁷

Theodora A. Jankowski draws our attention to an interesting comparison of Behn and Louise de K eroualle whose portrait is on the book cover of *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*. De K eroualle was the mistress of King Charles II. Jankowski explains the connection between her and Behn by saying they represent the “two now ‘acceptable’ kind of ‘public’ work for women – author and courtesan.”³⁸

Interestingly William Wycherley himself also made a comment on female authorship being a public profession with sexual undertones in a poem where he addressed Behn:

Once, to your Shame, your Parts to all were shown,
But now, (tho' a more Public Woman grown,)
You gain more Reputation in the Town;
Grow Public, to your Honour, not your Shame,
As more Men now you please, gain much more Fame;³⁹

As Staves states in her analysis of the poem by her ‘parts’ being shown he in play on words refers to both her thoughts and intellectual properties as well as her physical body.⁴⁰ To offer further analysis he specifically uses the word ‘public’ to describe her situation after she gains some fame, and by ‘pleasing men’ he refers to the sexual nature of men paying for pleasure in attending plays in theater I wrote about earlier.

³⁶ Staves, *A Literary History of Women’s Writing in Britain*, 61.

³⁷ Straznicky, “Restoration Women Playwrights and the Limits of Professionalism,” 709.

³⁸ Theodora A. Jankowski, “12. Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage,” in *The History of British Women’s Writing*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 221-222.

³⁹ William Wycherley, “To the Sappho of the Age, Suppos’d to Ly-In of a Love-Distemper, or a Play,” Poetry Nook, accessed November 26, 2023, <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/sappho-age-supposd-ly-love-distemper-or-play>.

⁴⁰ Staves, *A Literary History of Women’s Writing in Britain*, 61.

I would also like to comment on how Behn herself viewed her position among other female writers. On one hand in the 'Preface' to one of her last plays *The Lucky Chance* (1686) she clearly states her desire to be accepted among the male writers:

All I ask, is the Priviledge for my Masculine Part the Poet in me [...] If I must not, because of my Sex, have this Freedom [...] I lay down my Quill, and you shall hear no more of me [...].⁴¹

However in an aside she makes in a poetry she translated she also expresses her connection to other female writers, namely to the celebrated ancient Greek poetess Sappho and her contemporary Katherine Philips, referred to as 'Orinda.'

Let me with Sappho and Orinda be
Oh ever sacred Nymph, adorn'd by thee
And give my Verses Immortality.⁴²

This section aims to offer an explanation of why was Aphra Behn so different in her open stance towards public authorship. While she had no family name or financial stability it was exactly for and because of these reasons she was able to pursue and claim the title as the first Englishwoman professional writer. She pursued public writing career not necessarily because she aimed to share her art with the general public and not even because she wanted to pave the road for other future female writers. Her reasons were of commercial nature. After her financial difficulties and stay in a debtor's prison she needed money and in theater saw an opportunity of how to acquire them. This is commendable if not from a literary standpoint then from a feminist one. Ironically her endeavors probably discouraged more women to publish their works than anything else.

⁴¹ Aphra Behn, "The Lucky Chance," in *Behn Five Plays*, ed. Maureen Duffy (London: Methuen Drama, 1990), 7.

⁴² Abraham Cowley, *Works Parts 2 and 3* (1689), trans. Aphra Behn, 149, quoted in Salzman, "Identifying as (Women) Writers," 41.

3 Literary Context

While I already discussed Behn in some capacity I mostly did so in regard to the status and reception of female writers in this time period. In this section I will present a more comprehensive overview of hers as well as Wycherley's lives. I will also present a brief introduction of the plays I will be comparing.

3.1 Aphra Behn

Before one starts to discuss Behn's life it is important to point out that we do not know as much about her life as we probably would have were she a man. Not only is the Restoration period badly documented in itself, but we do not have that much information on Behn simply because most of the institutions that kept records only documented the activities of the gentlemen and did not pay much mind to the ladies.⁴³ These circumstances gives her biographers truly a difficult task. I found that Janet Todd took on this challenge excellently and her biography of Behn aptly named *A Secret Life* was the most helpful in my studies of Behn.

We learn of Behn's origin from none other than Anne Finch who wrote about Behn that she was a "Daughter to a Barber, who liv'd formerly at Wye a little market town (now much decay'd) in Kent."⁴⁴ Behn was born in 1640 in a village in Kent, as Finch writes, into a family of a barber and a wet nurse. Though both of her parents' professions sound simple they provided them connections to important people, especially her father would have met people from all over and "the daughter of such a man, if she had some linguistic talent, might gain a smattering of languages without stepping far from home."⁴⁵

Behn's life was marked by her and her family's travel to Surinam in the early 1660s and she stayed there until 1664. Several years spent in Surinam influenced Behn to write her famous humanitarian novel *Oroonoko* (1688) where she depicts the colonial life on Surinam and the horrors of slavery.

⁴³ Janet Todd, *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 20.

⁴⁴ Anne Finch, "The Circuit of Apollo," quoted in Janet Todd, *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 33.

⁴⁵ Todd, *A Secret Life*, 37.

After losing her father most likely already on the way to Surinam Behn as a woman in her mid-twenties and in need of financial stability had several options, Todd states. Besides the easiest and most common choice of marriage she could also consider becoming a mistress, but that was quite an unstable position for a woman to be in. Her other options were that of an espionage or of a literary career, though there was no precedent for a woman to write as a profession to earn money before her. Later in her life she would explore all of those options but this time she chose marriage. She got married after return from Surinam. Not much is known about Mr. Behn. He might have been a merchant of English, German or American origin. Their marriage did not last long and he most likely died in 1666. Throughout the rest of her life she had lovers but never remarried.⁴⁶

Following the politically turbulent period of Civil War, Interregnum and the Restoration of monarchy it is unsurprising that politicians and monarchs would use spies as a tool to gain the upper hand in the complicated machinations of politics. Behn was one of them. She acted as a spy in the King's service in Bruges during the Second Anglo-Dutch War but she most likely acted as an agent even before during her stay in Surinam. Though her espionage career did not bring her success and instead only landed her in debtor's prison it opened her a door to a much more successful career as a writer. In becoming a playwright she saw a financial opportunity. She was "forced to write for Bread and not ashamed to own it"⁴⁷ Her pen name 'Astrea' originated from her agent activities and is yet another connection between her espionage and writing career.

A woman in 17th century Behn did not have any formal education, but that did not stop her from writing. As Todd states she probably did copying for money since childhood as she had a good clear handwriting.⁴⁸ Throughout her life she also learned French and later did translations.

Already a poetess before presenting her first play *The Forc'd Marriage* in 1671, which was received well and played for several nights, her biggest breakthrough came with *The Rover* in 1677. Despite the criticism she received she enjoyed a commercial success as in the 1670s and 80s her plays were performed more than John Dryden's who was named England's

⁴⁶ Todd, *A Secret Life*, 94-103.

⁴⁷ Aphra Behn, "To Sir Fancy," quoted in Derek Hughes and Janet Todd, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9.

⁴⁸ Todd, *A Secret Life*, 42-43.

first Poet Laureate.⁴⁹ It is also notable that at a time when few playwrights had their plays printed “almost all of Behn’s plays were published, a considerable achievement,” writes Todd.⁵⁰

Behn did not shy away from politics. She had sided with the Tories and through her work expressed her support for the royal family. This became evident especially during the Exclusion Crisis when there was a movement to try and exclude the King Charles II’s brother James from the royal line because of his catholic faith. She was the most political in her plays *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678), *The Roundheads* (1682) and *The City-Heiress* (1682) where she openly criticized the anti-royalist Whigs. Her criticism of the Whig party got to the point of there being a warrant for her arrest but we have no proof of the warrant being carried out.⁵¹

At the end of her life Behn struggled with illness and poverty. She met her end in 1689 at mere 48 years of age. Her final resting place lays in Westminster Abbey. Todd writes that “[w]ith felicitous error, the burial register recorded the death not of the secretive Mrs Behn, but of the public ‘Astrea’, patron and poet of Arcadia.”⁵² Her tomb is marked by an inscription that states:

Here lies a Proof that Wit can never be
Defence enough against Mortality.

3.1.1 *The Rover*

The Rover takes us to Italy during the time of the Naples Carnival. In the five act play we follow the English cavaliers Willmore, Belvile and Frederic and the events and plots that lead to all three of them getting married. Their to be wives are, respectively, witty Helena, her romantic sister Florinda and their cousin Valeria. The sisters’ brother Don Pedro serves as the antagonist of the story as he tries to force Helena into a nunnery and Florinda to marry his wealthy friend Don Antonio. He is however rather more interested in the beautiful courtesan

⁴⁹ Todd, *A Secret Life*, 27.

⁵⁰ Todd, *A Secret Life*, 182.

⁵¹ Marry Ann O’Donnell, “Aphra Behn: the documentary record,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, eds. Derek Hughes, and Janet Todd, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.

⁵² Todd, *A Secret Life*, 505.

Angellica. Throughout the play we also meet and witness the foolishness of the English country gentleman Ned Blunt.

The title of the play alludes to the play's rake Willmore. 'Rover' refers to a person who travels from place to place and does not stay in one spot for too long, but in Willmore's case it does not refer just to his travels but to his romantic intentions as well because he likes to keep his options open and romances two women at the time. On one hand he is enamored with Helena but at the same time he starts a romance with Angellica. In the end it is intelligent Helena who decides to take the matter of her life into her own hands and with the help of different disguises and some scheming she is the one who ultimately wins his heart.

Florinda is more traditional feminine than her pragmatic sister and often poses as the damsel in distress character. She and her beloved Belvile know each other since before the events of the play and throughout the journey to their eventual marriage they have to come over the obstacles of Florinda's male family members trying to dictate who will she marry as well as men who threaten her innocence.

The play is an adaptation of Killigrew's closet drama *Thomaso* from 1664. I already touched upon the Restoration habit of adapting old plays instead of writing new material. Dobson notes that this was possible because most of the old plays (besides maybe the famous pieces by Shakespeare, Jonson or Fletcher) were seen as an intellectual property of the theater companies rather than the authors' so they were considered "a fair game" to any writer to change them so they can be performed again as new plays.⁵³ However when Behn came out with *The Rover* the stance on adapting older plays has been changing and she ended up having trouble with Killigrew's publishers, which led to her two next adaptation plays being published anonymously.⁵⁴

⁵³ Michael Dobson, "Adaptations and revivals," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 47.

⁵⁴ Dobson, "Adaptations and revivals," 47.

3.2 William Wycherley

If we were to compare Behn and Wycherley's lives the first stark difference would be Wycherley's access to formal education, not only because he was a man and thus had more opportunities open to him, but also because he was born into a well-off family of a moderate estate that could afford to send him to France for studies when he was 15 years of age. After his return to England he went to Queen's College in Oxford but he left without any degree. After that he joined 'The Honourable Society of the Middle Temple' but, as Leigh Hunt states, "with little or no intention of studying the law."⁵⁵

Wycherley wrote four major plays. His first two plays, *Love in a Wood* and *The Gentleman Dancing-Master* were both first performed in 1671 but Wycherley claims to have them written years earlier. Specifically he claims that he wrote *Love in a Wood* a year before he went to Oxford, but Hugh Chrisholm argues that we should not believe him and that there are discrepancies in the text proving that at the age of nineteen he did not have the experiences to write a play like that.⁵⁶

The Country Wife was first performed in 1675 and *The Plain Dealer* a year later. In his last play he reflects his knowledge of law as well as his experiences of being a naval officer.⁵⁷ The play's main character Captain Manly also resulted in Wycherley gaining the nickname 'Manly Wycherley.' *The Plain Dealer* influenced his life in yet another significant way when the play's popularity helped him to get out of prison.

Wycherley, same as Behn, struggled with debts throughout his life. Though he became the tutor of the King Charles II's illegitimate son, the Duke of Richmond, this close connection to the King as well as the money it brought him came to an end when the Charles II found out of Wycherley's secret marriage with the Countess of Drogheda. His wife died in 1685 but Wycherley was denied of her fortune and he ended up in the debtor's prison because of the high law-expenses. He spent seven years in the Fleet prison until he was released by none other than the king himself – now King James II who succeeded his brother Charles II after his death in 1685. Chrisholm explains that "James had been so much gratified by seeing

⁵⁵ Leigh Hunt, ed., *The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar: With Biographical and Critical Notices* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1866), 10.

⁵⁶ Hugh Chrisholm, "Wycherley, William," in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, ed. Hugh Chrisholm (Cambridge University Press, 1911), 864.

⁵⁷ Chrisholm, *The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar*, 11.

The Plain Dealer acted that, finding a parallel between Manly's 'manliness' and his own, such as no spectator had before discovered, he paid off Wycherley's execution creditor and settled on him a pension of 200 a year."⁵⁸

Just two weeks before his death he took on a second wife, which he had apparently done in order to spite his nephew. After this one last act of defiance he died less than two weeks later in 1716. Unlike Behn Wycherley lived a quite long life and was able to reach the age of 74. However it should be pointed out that he was only literary active in the first half of his life as *The Plain Dealer* was the last play he wrote.

3.2.1 *The Country Wife*

The plot of the play resolves around the rake Mr. Horner and his ingenious scheme of spreading the rumor of his impotency to appease the jealous husbands and gain access to their wives. One such a jealous husband is Mr. Pinchwife, a former rake himself, who just returned to London with his new wife from the countryside, Mrs. Margery Pinchwife.

Mr. Pinchwife who is very familiar of how easy the wives cheat on their husbands is afraid of becoming a cuckold and becomes very possessive of his new wife and tries to do everything in his power to hide her away from the lecherous London men. Horner who enjoys teasing jealous Mr. Horner sets his eyes on Margery who upon meeting him is immediately charmed by his charisma and handsomeness and the fun he offers her.

Another romantic storyline this play follows is that of Mr. Horner's sister who is to marry Mr. Sparkish. Sparkish is a foolish character who only pursues Alithea for her money and for the status she would bring him while Alithea is pragmatic about her marriage prospects and only wishes for a husband who will not be jealous and possessive of her. Neither of the couple truly cares about each other and they are quite a mismatched duo. The couple is saved from a loveless marriage by Harcourt, one of Horner's friends, who falls in love with Alithea and pursues her despite being her hand being promised to a man who considers him his friend.

The play ends in a more pragmatic way than Behn's *The Rover*. By the end of the last act we only get one marriage and that of Alithea and Harcourt who represent the play's

⁵⁸ Chrisholm, *The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar*, 866.

sensible couple. Horner is free to continue his actions without any punishment and Pinchwife and his wife must continue to live in an unhappy marriage.

PINCH. But I must be one—against my will to a country wife, with a country murrain to me!

MRS. PINCH, [aside] And I must be a country wife still too, I find; for I can't, like a city one, be rid of my musty husband, and do what I list.⁵⁹

Wycherley's play is not an adaptation of a single drama like Behn's. Instead he partly borrowed from three comedies when writing *The Country Wife*, namely from Molière's plays *The School for Husbands* (1661) and *The School for Wives* (1662). Besides that the idea of Horner's faked impotence is from *Eunuchus* by the roman playwright Terence from 161 BC.

⁵⁹ William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, ed. Gregory Koutrouby (New York: Dover Publications, 2018), 86.

4 Literary Analysis

4.1 Setting

Restoration comedies were usually set in London. As I have previously mentioned the plays were influenced by whom they were written for, which in this case was the audience in London where the plays had been performed. Not only the city provided a familiar setting for the viewers but it was the perfect place to set in stories full of intricate social relationships, scandals and romantic affairs.

London was also the ideal setting because of the time the plays were set and created in. I already discussed all the political happenings tied to the Restoration period. Writers liked to reflect, satirize and make allusions to those events, knowing well the upper-class audience will understand and appreciate those references, not to mention the King and his court who might also view the play. The comedies were as a result often political in nature and London as the capital was center of all political happenings.

The story of *The Country Wife* is set in London and it focuses on the portrayal of characters, relationships and social norms of upper-class Londoners. Wycherley presents social commentary full of satire on the expense of the nobility and their in his view hypocrisy and superficiality.

In an interesting contrast Behn sets her play quite a long distance from London in the Italian Naples. Not only that but a considerable portion of her characters are Spanish nobility, and besides the English cavaliers Angellica is the only main character of Italian origin. This is a very clever and deliberate choice on Behn's part. She chooses the location of Naples because of its famous carnival and she sets her play to take place exactly during that event to accentuate the disguise theme present throughout the play but also to set her characters in a freer setting than the by social norms and rules bound England; she gives them "a holiday from the patriarchal system in a space where unconventional behaviour is acceptable."⁶⁰

Spanish comedia is here modified by the presence of English characters, English politics, and a low-comic gulling action. Love and honor are balanced by sex and farce. Behn makes full use of her Neapolitan setting, complete with its Carnival,

⁶⁰ Maybank, „Interpretations,“ 194.

to create still another version of the mixed comedy so favored by playwrights and audiences.⁶¹

Behn makes a lot of political and topical references in her work and in her choice of casting Spanish character she alludes to England's long rivalry with Spain. She takes a jab at Spanish men and presents them as incompetent fighters (Don Antonio even has to task an Englishman Belvile to fight on his behalf in act IV scene II) and criticizes them on their habit of marrying women off to old men (Florinda was originally supposed to marry the much older Don Vincentio by the wish of her father). And Blunt, who is already a subject of ridicule, is even more humiliated at the end of the play when he comes back from the tailor in Spanish clothing.

BLUNT. Well, Sir, 'dsheartlikins I tell you 'tis damnable ill, Sir — a Spanish Habit, good Lord! cou'd the Devil and my Taylor devise no other Punishment for me, but the Mode of a Nation I abominate? ⁶²

With the presence of English Cavaliers in Spain Behn references the events of the English Civil War and the time period that followed. Cavaliers, or the supporters of King Charles I during the Civil War, have to be in exile because the king was executed and England became a republic ruled by Cromwell. By making the Englishmen in *The Rover* royalist she presents herself as a royalist as well. Furthermore, it is said that Willmore represents the figure of Charles II. Willmore being an Englishman in exile, a 'rover,' is an obvious allusion to the time Charles II had to spend time in exile in France because of the events that led to the execution of his father. Moreover, in a gesture that would certainly flatter the king, Behn highlights his wittiness, charm and libertine character. Additionally Maybank points out that Willmore wears the clothes the king wore when he escaped from the battle of Worcester.⁶³

An element that is present in both plays and that would amuse London audience is making fun of the countryside and its residents. In *The Rover* countryside is ridiculed through Blunt's character whose foolishness is partly attributed to his Essex origin and throughout the play he is referred to as 'Essex calf.' In *The Country Wife* the joke is the most

⁶¹ Brian Corman, "Comedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, ed. Deborah Payne Fisk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64.

⁶² Aphra Behn, *The Rover*, ed. Diane Maybank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.1.618-621.

⁶³ Maybank, „Interpretations,“ 181.

apparent as it is present right in the title of the play. The country wife Margery Pinchwife is presented as naive, gullible and inexperienced and Pinchwife married her for exactly those reasons, believing marrying a girl from the country will spare him becoming a cuckold. We can see other characters making fun of Mrs. Pinchwife and by extension of the countryside as well:

MRS. PINCH. Ay, how should I help it, Sister? Pray, Sister, when my husband comes in, will you ask leave for me to go a-walking?

ALITH. [aside] A-walking! ha! ha! Lord, a country-gentlewoman's leisure is the drudgery of a footpost; and she requires as much airing as her husband's horses.⁶⁴

Overall what most Londoners might think of the country gentlemen is expressed by Horner when he speaks on the time Pinchwife spent in the country: "I see a little time in the country makes a man turn wild and unsociable, and only fit to converse with his horses, dogs, and his herds."⁶⁵

In summary I believe setting is an interesting point of comparison for the two plays because though Wycherley does set his play in his homeland it lacks the political themes and he instead he focuses on social commentary as he satirically portrays the upper class and in his view the fake social norms and cynical view of marriage. Behn on the other hand sets her play in a foreign land and half of her cast is of a completely different nationality, but that is a deliberate choice on her part and it further serves to convey the political themes present in her play. This make sense considering though both authors were of royalist sympathies Behn was much more active in her political commentary throughout her life.

⁶⁴ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 21.

⁶⁵ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 44.

4.2 Comparison of the Portrayal of Female and Male Characters

4.2.1 Female Characters

Behn in her play presents an array of varied and complex female characters. She provides them with agency over their own lives and opportunities to act on their desires, though the desires might not always get fulfilled. In her apparent critique of arranged marriages she lets the women themselves, namely Florinda and Helena, to successfully arrange a love match with suitable partners. Wycherley in comparison to Behn provides fewer and less complex female characters because he mostly uses women in his play as means of delivering social critique and as a result offers characters who tend to present themselves in a more stereotypical manner and who do not have the agency Behn's female characters have. Wycherley also tends to portray his female characters as victims of both rakes and their jealous husbands, as pointed out by Adil M. Jamil in his article on victimization of women in *The Country Wife*.⁶⁶

Helena is arguably *The Rover*'s most progressive female character. She is intelligent, headstrong and ambitious. She is able to break free from patriarchal control and defies her father's plan for her to become a nun as she successfully arranges a marriage for herself with a man of her liking, who furthermore did not even want to marry in a first place. She does so breaking some gender stereotypes. She appears in a breeches scene that were very typical for Restoration plays, but Behn does not necessarily use the scene to sexualize Helena's (or the actress' who would play her) body but as a means to achieve her goal of winning Willmore's heart; in fact they get engaged when she is wearing boy's clothes. Behn enhances her gender nonconformity by giving her a lot of the lines from the source play Killigrew originally wrote for a man.⁶⁷ Jankowski points out that Helena being so daring and directly dealing with a man like a courtesan would results in her being mistaken for one⁶⁸ but her virginity is never endangered as she is not once in the play threatened with rape.

⁶⁶ Adil M. Jamil, "Victimization of Female Characters in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*," *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 2020): 40-50, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346266176_VICTIMIZATION_OF_FEMALE_CHARACTERS_IN_WILLIAM_WYCHERLEY%27S_THE_COUNTRY_WIFE.

⁶⁷ Maybank, „Interpretations,“ 194.

⁶⁸ Jankowski, "Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage," 231.

The main female character in *The Country Wife* gets no such treatment. Margery, already married to Mr. Pinchwife at the beginning of the play, is fully under patriarchal control and when she tries to break free and pursue an affair with a rake she fancies she is punished and forced to remain in a loveless marriage. Still, we can find some similarities between her and Helena. Though nowhere near to Helena's level, who with the use of several disguises managed to win over the rake Willmore's heart, Margery did express some level of wittiness when being forced to write a letter to Horner by her husband and disguising herself as Alithea. Furthermore both characters expressed their sexual desire; Helena when declaring herself unfit for the nunnery and better suited for love and Margery in her lust for Mr. Horner.

Florinda and Alithea are the plays' honorable female characters whose shared attribute is loyalty. Florinda is a female Spanish name and means 'flower' which points out to her romantic nature. She remains faithful to her beloved Belvile to the point where she defies patriarchal authority and refuses to marry either of the two men her father and brother want her to. That results in her almost getting rape and losing her honor several times but in the end she gets to have her happy ending with Belvile. At the beginning of *The Country Wife* Alithea is loyal not primarily to a man but to her honor. Though she is trapped in an engagement with a fop who does not care about her she refuses to betray him and break off the engagement even when faced with a true love. But same as Florinda she ends up in a love match without her honor harm despite it being endangered by Margery's silly schemes.

If I deemed Helena to be *The Rover*'s most progressive character Angelica I would have to deem as the most complex. Her story in the play is full of irony. She is a famous and expensive courtesan but she is the one played and swindled by a man. She sells her body but speaks of the virginity of her heart. She is used to men fighting for her but now she is the one competing with another woman over a man and is rejected. She is the only female character whom Behn does not grant a happy ending. But Behn does not mean to punish her, but to humanize her character and her experience to the audience. Perhaps it is because in Angelica Behn sees herself, as their matching initials would suggest.⁶⁹ In the end Angelica has no option but to resume her public profession – same as Behn who remained in her public profession of a writer to make money until the end of her life. Maybank points out that Behn

⁶⁹ Maybank, „Interpretations,“ 186.

asks the audience to sympathize with Angelica⁷⁰ but maybe through her character she actually asks the audience to sympathize with herself.

Angelica has no match that could compare to her in *The Country Wife* but she is contrasted by another character from the same plays she appears in. Lucetta is a sex worker same as she is, though she is not a renowned courtesan like Angelica. She and her pimp Sancho single Blunt out as their victim. Lucetta then successfully seduces him on the pretense that she is a married lady, not a whore, and lures him into her house. There with Sancho and her gallant Philippo's help she tricks Blunt into undressing himself and then swiftly escapes with all his possessions, including his clothes and, in an emasculating gesture, his sword. The irony that Behn undressed a man for the laughs of the audience while presenting Helena in breeches as empowered should not escape us. In summary unlike Angelica Lucetta stayed true to her profession and emerged victorious in her endeavor with the Englishman whom she thoroughly humiliated in the process. Angelica forgot herself and her role and ended up the one being humiliated by another English cavalier. Staves highlights that Behn in her work offers the audience complex portrayal of the mistress character by which she also gives the actresses playing the roles more opportunity to showcase their talent.⁷¹

Both plays offer us side character roles of witty but clever servants or other attendants. In *The Country Wife* it would be Alithea's maid Lucy who helps both the young women in the play. She looks out for her lady and tries to break her resolve in marrying Sparkish, because she can see they are not a good match and Alithea would be unhappy in her marriage. She tries to sway her to give Harcourt a chance but Alithea does not listen to her. Later on she helps Margery to trick her husband and save her when in her silliness she almost confesses her adultery. She represents the common sense and how despite her lower class origin she can still be wiser than the noble ladies. She has a great understanding of relationships and throughout the play shares her knowledge, like her remark about the hypocrisy of the marriage of men and women of quality: "married women show all their modesty the first day, because married men show all their love the first day."⁷² Or when she discouraged Alithea from marrying Sparkish with the hope that she will learn to love him later in the marriage:

⁷⁰ Maybank, „Interpretations,“ 157.

⁷¹ Staves, *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain*, 88.

⁷² Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 53.

“The woman that marries to love better, will be as much mistaken as the wench that marries to live better. No, Madam, marrying to increase love is like gaming to become rich; alas! you only lose what little stock you had before.”⁷³

In *The Rover* we can also identify a character of this type though she is not as present in the play as Lucy is. Moretta is Angelica’s elderly servant who tries to warn her of Willmore, who she calls a beggar, an “enemy to [their] trade.”⁷⁴ But as is “the fate of most whores”⁷⁵ Angelica still falls in love, which Moretta calls the “general disease of our sex.”⁷⁶ Moretta’s name is inspired by Behn’s setting of carnival in Italy and a so called ‘moretta masks’ used at that time. The also called ‘mute mask’ was an oval black velvet mask that disallowed women to speak. We could interpret that as connected to Moretta trying to advice Angelica but not having her advices heard out.

Use of disguise is used by women in both plays as means of trying to retain some autonomy. Disguised as someone else they have bigger freedom in how to act since it will not reflect on their honor. As Mrs. Dainty Fidget in *The Country Wife* explains “women are least masked when they have the velvet vizard on.”⁷⁷ In *The Rover* Helena and Florinda, together with their cousin Valeria, join the masquerade dressed as gypsies. For the sisters it is a rebellious act of standing up against patriarchal control in form of their father and brother’s plans for their future. Florinda uses her masked identity to test Belvile love and loyalty to her in which he stands firm, and Helena uses different disguises to win over the rake’s heart. In *The Country Wife* Florinda is seen in a disguise two times but neither disguise is completely successful. First time it is in a breeches role when her husband forces her to dress up as a man in an attempt to hide his young country wife from the sly London rakes. At first a mere mask is suggested by Alithea when Margery expresses a desire to go out, but jealous Horner refuses because “a woman masked, like a covered dish, gives a man curiosity and appetite.”⁷⁸ His plan still backfires because Margery’s disguise does not conceal her beauty and Horner refers to her as a “pretty young gentleman” and says that “he is so handsome he should not be a

⁷³ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 50.

⁷⁴ Behn, *The Rover*, 2.2.179.

⁷⁵ Behn, *The Rover*, 2.2.185.

⁷⁶ Behn, *The Rover*, 2.1.162-163.

⁷⁷ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 79.

⁷⁸ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 36.

man”⁷⁹ and even kisses her when she is dressed as a man. Her disguise did not quite work because she did not choose it for herself but it was forced upon her by her husband. The second time she disguised herself as her sister in law Alithea, but in her lack of intellect she did not think of the consequences it would inevitably cause. Her disguise allowed to have an illicit affair with Horner but also put Alithea’s reputation in danger. However in the end it helped Alithea to rid herself of Sparkish and be free to marry Harcourt.

4.2.2 Male Characters

If we follow Jamil’s characterization of Wycherley’s female characters as victims the men are cast into the role of victimizers and, as Jamil adds, ‘self-made cuckolds.’⁸⁰ The rake Horner lusts for women and specifically goes after the married ones because of the secondary pleasure of making their husbands into cuckolds. Besides the pleasure women bring to him he does not care for them and looks down on married men.

Because I do hate ’em, and would hate ’em yet more, I’ll frequent ’em. You may see by marriage, nothing makes a man hate a woman more than her constant conversation. In short, I converse with ’em, as you do with rich fools, to laugh at ’em and use ’em ill.⁸¹

He compares women to dogs but sees the spaniels as more faithful of the two of them. He also questions their loyalty when he compares them to soldiers in that they are “made constant and loyal by good pay.”⁸² His name astutely refers to his habit of seducing married ladies and giving their husbands horns, i.e. making them cuckolds.

Behn’s Willmore though still a rake who deceived and hurt Angelica does not reach Horner’s misogyny levels. In the end he is still able to love a woman and agrees to marry her. Unlike Horner he does attempt rape, but Todd very highlights how his violence towards women is actually Behn’s anti-puritanical political commentary. As Todd further explains, puritans condemned rape and wife-beating so in a positively misogynistic view male violence

⁷⁹ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 44-45.

⁸⁰ Jamil, “Victimization of Female Characters in William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*,” 40-50.

⁸¹ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 36.

⁸² Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 19.

was equated with cavaliers and support of the king.⁸³ As Willmore's name suggests he wills for more, he always wants more, especially in his pursuit of women, seducing both Angellica and Hellena, but when the situation arises he tries to force Florinda to his will as well.

Pinchwife is a man defined by his jealousy. Pinch' can mean to steal something which leads to believe Pinchwife's name refers to the irony that he himself used to 'pinch' the wives of other men and now that he has a wife of his own he is afraid the same will be done to him. He specifically picked his wife to be silly because "[w]hat is wit in a wife good for, but to make a man a cuckold"⁸⁴ which directly contrasts Willmore who marries Helena because she "has wit enough to manage an intrigue of love."⁸⁵

Both plays introduce some foolish male characters the audience can laugh at instead of laugh with. Ned Blunt is ridiculed by other male characters and scammed by the whore Lucetta. Blunt made it easy for her because in his arrogance and misogyny he did not even think to learn her name. When he took his anger out on Florinda his speech was too violent and misogynistic even for the Restoration audience and it was cut out from some performances.⁸⁶ Wycherley in general ridicules his characters and uses them to point out discrepancies in social norms more so it is no surprise he delivers the audience two foolish male characters. On one hand is Sparkish, a foolish fop with unwarranted level of confidence, and on the other Sir Jasper Fidget who was too easily tricked and made cuckold by Horner. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary 'spark' refers to "a foppish young man"⁸⁷ therefore Sparkish's name give us an insight into his foolishness and vanity.

Belvile and Harcourt are the two sensible lovers fighting for true love and protecting their ladies honor. Coincidentally both use disguise to achieve their goal. Harcourt disguises himself as a priest that is to wed Alithea and Sparkish to invalidate their marriage. A dishonest act on his part, especially since it goes against Alithea wishes, but Wycherley excuses his actions because they are done for true love. Belvile fights Don Pedro disguised as Don Antonio in a fight he thinks is over his beloved Florinda. His disguise also causes Florinda to be troubled because in a mistaken identity scene she thinks he is Antonio and begs

⁸³ Todd, *A Secret Life*, 206.

⁸⁴ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 18.

⁸⁵ Behn, *The Rover*, 4.3.424-425.

⁸⁶ Maybank, „Interpretations,“ 160.

⁸⁷ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "spark," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spark>.

him to spare his brother when he defeats him. Disguised Belvile then lays his sword to her feet, a gesture that appeases Pedro and he, under the pretense that it is Antonio, gives them permission to marry. Florinda is troubled again but Belvile then discreetly reveals his identity to her.

I believe it is interesting to look at how both play start. *The Rover* starts with a discussion of two women talking about their future and how unhappy they are with the fate their male family members prepared for them. By the end of the Act I Scene I the women decided to rebel against the male authority, and in doing so against patriarchal society, and escape to make their lives for themselves. On the other hand *The Country Wife* starts with Horner setting his plan of false impotency into motion. Both beginnings of the two plays set the tone and let the readers or viewers know about what to expect. *The Rover* is more centered about it's female characters who are by Behn given bigger agency and the main male leads, except for Blunt, present some noble qualities and end up to be married by the end of the play. In *The Country Wife* Wycherley focused more on delivering a message of a social critique and his characters were created as messengers of what he was trying to point and criticize. He has fewer female characters and his men generally, except for Harcourt, do not truly care about the ladies.

In the next two subchapters I will more closely analyze the two plays and write about the messages and social critique the author's try to relay to the audience through their plays.

4.3 Virgin-Whore Paradox in *The Rover*

A major theme that we can identify throughout Behn's play is a very blurred distinction between a virgin and a whore. In this section I will thoroughly examine the theme, how is it presented in the comedy and how it conveys Behn's commentary on sex economy, especially in regards to marriage and how it defines women's status. Besides my own analysis I am also leaning on the contents of Jankowski's chapter 'Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage' in *The History of British Women's Writing* and I support my findings with a few other author's analyses.

Jankowski writes about "the hybridity of the sexual economy of the restoration period" and how it "both replicated and challenged stage presentations of the early modern sexual economy during the first half of the seventeenth century." She further juxtaposes the 'public' female professions with the traditional, private status women have in marriage.⁸⁸ I discussed how female authors and actresses were received and how their honor was damaged because of their profession that put them in a 'public' eye in previous sections of the thesis. Now I will expand my focus on women's honor in relation to how are they perceived through their connections and relationships to familiar and unfamiliar men.

In the play we encounter two types of women that we could superficially cast as 'virgins' and 'whores'. On one hand we have the innocent noble sisters Florinda and Helena, on the other the beautiful famous courtesan Angellica. Nonetheless upon closer analysis we discover that the distinction between woman being a virgin and a whore is very muddled and can change regardless of the woman's status and actions.

When we meet Florinda and Helena at the beginning of the play they are both unwedded young women of quality and as such they 'belong' to their family patriarch and their honor is under his protection. The sisters are by their father destined to have different fates. Florinda is supposed to get married, originally to an old wealthy man by her father's wish, and then by her brother's scheming to Don Antonio. Neither of her patriarchs care for her own wishes and take into account the feelings she has for Belvile because both of them see her marriage as "relationship of exchange [...] not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of man [in which] the woman figures only as one of the

⁸⁸ Jankowski, "Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage," 222.

partners.”⁸⁹ For a woman marriage functions as a transfer of power. When she is wedded to a man she loses the status of a virgin but in exchange gains her husband’s protection over her honor. This suggests that woman’s reputation is determined rather by the male figures she is connected to and whether she has male protection and not necessarily by her character or her actions. In fact a married woman can have extramarital affairs and still be seen as virtuous if she does it in private. Wycherley points out this hypocrisy as well in *The Country Wife* through the words of Lady Fidget when she says “’tis not an injury to a husband till it be an injury to our honours [...] woman of honour loses no honour with a private person.”⁹⁰

We can observe how Florinda’s status changes from virgin to whore and vice versa throughout the play. In Act III scene V Florinda awaits Belvile in the garden at night dressed only in a nightgown. She is alone, without any male protection, and when she is discovered by drunk Willmore he mistakes her for a prostitute and tries to force her to his will. Florinda is fighting back and accusing Willmore of rape but he does not believe her: “A rape! Come, come, you lye, you baggage, you lye [...] why at this time of night was your cobweb-door set open, dear spider — but to catch flies?”⁹¹ Florinda is saved when Belvile enters in the next scene, in rage at Willmore that he did not recognize Florinda as a virtuous lady. Willmore explains that seeing Florinda this late and alone in a state of undress he mistook her for a whore. As Maybank points out in her analysis of this scene women without male protection and secure identity are regarded and treated as whores.⁹² Once Florinda is identified as a woman of quality by a man who hopes for her hand in marriage and who offers her protection she once again gains her status of a virtuous lady and is treated as such.

Florinda is mistook for a whore and threatened with rape once again in Act IV Scene V, this time by a Blunt who had just been humiliated, deceived and robbed by Lucetta and is full of hate directed at the female sex. Florinda is again without any male protection and tries to prove her innocence, pleading that she is “a harmless virgin”⁹³ but Blunt is mad with anger and wants to take revenge on “one whore for the sins of another.”⁹⁴ The scene is joined by

⁸⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 115, quoted in Jankowski, “Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage,” 222.

⁹⁰ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 29.

⁹¹ Behn, *The Rover*, 3.5.62-66.

⁹² Diane Maybank, „Notes,“ in *The Rover*, ed. Diane Maybank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155.

⁹³ Behn, *The Rover*, 4.5.46-47.

⁹⁴ Behn, *The Rover*, 4.5.61.

Frederick who met Florinda before, but only in Belvile's presence. Without him there he does not recognize Florinda and trusts Blunt that she is a mere whore. Blunt proposes they both rape her and Frederick agrees: "I am ready to serve you in matters of revenge, that has a double pleasure in't."⁹⁵ Desperate Florinda appeals to the men again and tries to convince them of her status by speaking on her connection to Belvile and by presenting them with a diamond ring she has on her person. Only then the men try to suspect she might be a woman of quality. Still she is "a whore until proven otherwise"⁹⁶ so they lock her up in Frederick's chamber. This example again proves that Florinda is only regarded as a virtuous virgin in a protective male presence. Frederick does not recognize her when she is alone because when he met her he saw her not for her as a person but for her status as a woman of quality and as Belvile's protégé. Without Belvile's presence she is unrecognizable to him. Her words matter not, in the end it is the material object of the diamond ring that proves her status, as Frederick says when he thought Blunt would rape her "had she not redeem'd her self with a ring."⁹⁷

The fight scene in Act IV Scene II really highlights the virgin-whore paradox because the fight is simultaneously over the courtesan Angellica and the virgin Florinda. The conflict originally started between Antonio and Pedro over Florinda, but Antonio could not take part in the duel because of his injury, so he commissioned Belvile to fight in his stead. However when Antonio explains that the fight is about a woman they both love, Belvile misunderstands and assumes he means Florinda. The two men think they fight over the same woman, but one has a virgin in his mind and the other a whore. This is another example of how a woman's reputation is determined not by her status but what men think of her.

While her sister was destined to be married from the beginning, Helena was supposed to be sent off to the nunnery. This was another alternative to the transfer of power that is marriage. In this way she would keep her status as a virgin but she would no longer be her male family member's responsibility. It is also possible that she was to become nun so her father would not have to pay a dowry to her husband. This presents marriage as an act of economic transaction, but arguably also as a socially acceptable form of prostitution. Jankowski also regards marriage as a form of sex work in her text on the early modern sexual

⁹⁵ Behn, *The Rover*, 4.5.124-125.

⁹⁶ Maybank, „Notes,“ 160.

⁹⁷ Behn, *The Rover*, 5.1.85-86.

economy.⁹⁸ In this prospect women exchange their virginity for male protection, but the men are the ones getting paid. As Stephen Szilagyi observes in his analysis of sexual politics in *The Rover* in marriage it is the husbands who sell themselves to their brides, and they carefully choose the bride that will bring them the highest price.⁹⁹ It is Angellica who points this out to Willmore: “Pray, tell me, sir, are not you guilty of the same mercenary crime? When a lady is proposed to you for a wife, you never ask, how fair, discreet, or virtuous she is; but what’s her fortune.”¹⁰⁰ This argument presents marriage as a form of prostitution in which men are the ones in a position of a prostitute, but it also further proves the arbitrariness of who is by society regarded as ‘a whore.’

A courtesan is not someone whom we could generally describe as a virgin but ironically it is Angellica who is in the play presented as the one who, in a sense of a word, loses her innocence. When Angellica is first introduced she is depicted as famous, beautiful, desired by men and envied by women. She used to be the mistress of the now dead Spanish general and now she comes back to Naples to advertise herself for the price of thousand crowns a month. She exchanges her body and companionship for money, but unlike in a marriage the money goes to her instead of her male partner. When Angellica stays true to her role and status as a whore she is successful and respected despite being a whore. This changes when she encounters Willmore and falls for his charm. He does not have the money to pay her but Angellica just wants him to love her. She admits that despite being a courtesan this is the first time she loves a man: “I never lov’d before, tho oft a mistress.”¹⁰¹ This puts her in a position of a virgin, not bodily but emotionally. Later on when she finds out Willmore has betrayed her she cries “my virgin heart [...] oh ’tis gone!”¹⁰² Another instance where she is metaphorically put in the role of a virgin is when she says about her relationship with Willmore that she “paid him: a heart entire.”¹⁰³ If we follow the logic that in a marriage as a form of prostitution the woman pays with her virginity and with her dowry then Angellica would be in her romance with Willmore the maid who paid the price.

⁹⁸ Jankowski, “Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage,” 223.

⁹⁹ Stephen Szilagyi, “The Sexual Politics of Behn’s ‘Rover’: After Patriarchy,” *Studies in Philology* 95, no. 4 (1998): 448.

¹⁰⁰ Behn, *The Rover*, 2.2.104-107.

¹⁰¹ Behn, *The Rover*, 2.2.132

¹⁰² Behn, *The Rover*, 4.2.166.

¹⁰³ Behn, *The Rover*, 3.1.198-199.

Behn also contrasts the sisters and Angellica in how the women advertise themselves. Most notably Angellica publicly advertises herself with a portrait. Szilagyi points out Florinda's locket with her miniature inside that she hands to Belvile and that is later on passed and admired by his companions¹⁰⁴ and Copeland argues that Helena puts herself on display by her description of herself in Act I Scene I where she describes her attractive physical attributes to prove she is also fit for love.¹⁰⁵

Despite this crossing of boundaries between who is virgin and who is a whore, at the end of the play the women resume their original roles. Florinda and Helena get married to the English cavaliers and Angellica gives up her attempt at revenge and goes back to her profession.

Jankowski states that Behn deliberately portrays her female characters in contradictory ways as "radical ways in which women can reclaim their personal autonomy."¹⁰⁶ My analysis aims to present how Behn portrays the contradictions and I argue that the distinction between the status of a virgin and of a whore is very muddy and entirely determined by men and social perception of patriarchal society. Though we could describe marriage as a form of sex work, the woman involved is not regarded as a whore because she, and her virginity, was only part of an economic exchange between two men. Angellica's example presents that whores are expected to only have sex for money and if they betray their role and let their emotions get involved they get punished. Jankowski explains that women in public professions - be it courtesans, authors or actresses - get punished because they pose a threat to the sexual economy of marriage.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Szilagyi, "The Sexual Politics of Behn's 'Rover': After Patriarchy," 447.

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Copeland, "'Once a Whore and Ever'? Whore and Virgin in 'The Rover' and Its Antecedents," *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 16, no. 1 (1992): 22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43292571>.

¹⁰⁶ Jankowski, "Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage," 223.

¹⁰⁷ Jankowski, "Critiquing the Sexual Economies of Marriage," 222.

4.4 Notion of Honor in *The Country Wife*

In the satirical comedy *The Country Wife* Wycherley heavily criticizes the hypocrisy of the elite class, especially in terms of ‘honor.’ According to the Oxford English Dictionary honor refers to “great respect, esteem, or reverence received, gained, or enjoyed by a person or thing; glory, renown, fame; reputation, good name.”¹⁰⁸ To understand the notion of honor even better we might look at the definition from the Cambridge Dictionary that defines it as “a quality that combines respect, being proud, and honesty.”¹⁰⁹ In summary honor is a reputation that comes from one’s good qualities, namely honesty. In his play Wycherley presents and criticizes how the concept of honor has been bastardized to a fake title, or a social status, and how it now functions as a mere tool of enforcing patriarchic social norms. In his characters he portrays men and women of honor who are full of hypocrisy and act anything but honorable.

Wycherley’s satire is most obviously delivered through the character of Lady Fidget and her so called ‘Virtuous Gang.’ She and her friends pose themselves as honorable women of quality and they often speak on honor, yet in private they have illicit relationships. She is pointedly described by Horner in this exchange with her husband:

SIR JASP. Ay, my dear, dear of honour, thou hast still so much honour in thy mouth—
HORN, [aside] That she has none elsewhere.¹¹⁰

I already brought up Lady Fidget’s words about how a married woman does not lose her honor if she keeps her extramarital affairs secret in previous section. Lady Fidget is obviously aware of her position as a woman in a society that values and judges women by their reputation above anything else. She is feeling neglected in her marriage as her husband’s mindset is that “business must be preferred always before love”¹¹¹ so she looks for satisfaction outside of it, but she is secretive about it so it would not harm her honor and she overcompensates by presenting herself as virtuous as possible to the point where she acts scandalized after just hearing the word naked (“Sir Jasper! do not use that word naked.”¹¹²).

¹⁰⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “honour | honor, n., sense 1.a”, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7384368770>.

¹⁰⁹ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “honour,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/honour>

¹¹⁰ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 29.

¹¹¹ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 12.

¹¹² Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 29.

Despite having an affair with Horner she derogatorily calls him ‘beast’ and ‘toad’ and her group always acts appalled in Horner’s presence, especially if Sir Jasper Fidget is present.

MRS. DAIN. Stand off.

MRS. SQUEAM. Do not approach us.

MRS. DAIN. You herd with the wits, you are obscenity all over.¹¹³

As aforementioned Lady Fidget has an affair with the rake Mr. Horner. David B. Morris in his article on the notion of honor in *The Country Wife* describes Horner as a man with no virtue and thus no honor, further explaining that Horner “has rejected both the false honor of mere reputation and the true honor of virtue.”¹¹⁴ Horner comes up with an idea of pretending impotency to be able to spend time with married ladies without raising the suspicion of their jealous husbands. The genius of his plan lies in his awareness of how dependent and protective men are of their honor. The proud gentlemen really care about how they are perceived by other men so none of them would voluntarily humiliate himself with a rumor of impotency that would put him down in the eyes of other men and make him a laughing stock. Because of this nobody suspects Horner of lying. Horner is not bothered by his honor being damaged because as Morris states he has no honor. He is in fact amused when he is a target of mockery because he sees himself superior to the married men who are getting cheated on behind their backs.

Mr. Jasper Fidget is so thoroughly convinced of Horner’s impotency that he has no issue leaving his wife in his company. In fact he pushes her to do so because he is convinced he is rubbing the salt in Horner’s metaphorical wound this way. Horner further assures him by playing into conviction:

“HORN [...] if ever you suffer your wife to trouble me again here she shall carry you home a pair of horns; by my lord mayor she shall; though I cannot furnish you myself, you are sure, yet I’ll find a way.”¹¹⁵

In the infamous ‘china scene’ Horner gets away with having relations with Lady Fidget with her unsuspecting husband waiting right outside the door. Throughout the play ‘china’ is

¹¹³ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 29.

¹¹⁴ David B. Morris, “Language and Honor in ‘The Country Wife,’” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 37, no. 4 (1972): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3197360>.

¹¹⁵ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 60.

used as kind of a code word for adultery and sexual relations as Horner reveals in an aside “China-house! that’s my cue, I must take it.”¹¹⁶ In this scene it is used as a cover story for Jasper Fidget who believes Horner and Lady Fidget are simply discussing Horner’s china collection in the next room. Unlike the husband the ladies of the virtuous gang understand the china symbolism very well and want to use Horner for their sexual needs without endangering their reputations as well: “MRS. SQUEAM. O Lord, I’ll have some china too. Good Mr. Horner, don’t think to give other people china, and me none; come in with me too.”¹¹⁷ Per Morris’ analysis Wycherley through china portrays what he thinks of honor. China traditionally represents feminine beauty and fragile virginity of a woman. On one hand we have the irony of Lady Fidget presenting some piece of china in the play, but it also marks that honor, like china, is attractive, precious but very frail at the same time.¹¹⁸

Jealousy is in this play presented as a symptom of the corrupted vision of honor Wycherley criticizes. Men are acutely aware that their wife’s honor directly reflects on their own reputation and were they publicly declared a cuckold their reputation would suffer. I already discussed how through his scheme Horner was able to eradicate this fear of getting cheated on in Lady Fidget’s husband, but we can further analyze the idea of male fear of emasculation through cheating on the characters Pinchwife and Sparkish. The two men exhibit two contrasting ways of how men deal with this societal pressure. Pinchwife is the epitome of the overly jealous husband who thinks his reputation will be damaged if anyone as much as thinks his wife on cheats on him. His fear comes from having made other men cuckolds himself and he is afraid he will suffer the same fate. He becomes overly controlling which ironically pushes his wife into the arms of Mr. Horner. Sparkish, on the other side, fancies himself a wit and while he is as obsessed with honor as Pinchwife is he tries to prove himself superior to the jealous husbands: “Lord, how shy you are of your wife! But let me tell you, Brother, we men of wit have amongst us a saying that cuckolding, like the small-pox, comes with a fear.”¹¹⁹ He however overdoes it and gives his wife-to-be too much leeway to the point where it seems like he does not care about Alithea at all. His actions also end up pushing Alithea into the arms of another men and both him and Pinchwife end up fools. Wycherley puts the two men in a parallel as they argue about their stances:

¹¹⁶ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 60.

¹¹⁷ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 62.

¹¹⁸ Morris, “Language and Honor in ‘The Country Wife,’” 7.

¹¹⁹ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 68.

SPARK. Why, d'ye think I'll seem to be jealous, like a country bumpkin?

PINCH. No, rather be a cuckold, like a credulous cit.¹²⁰

Margery is in portrayal of honor a contrast to Horner, which makes them quite the interesting pair. She has naivety about her that is brought up by her country upbringing and is unprepared for the schemes and intrigues of the city folk. Morris explains that “she knows nothing of honor because she knows nothing of virtue” and points out that Margery represents rural innocence and Horner urbane cynicism.¹²¹ Margery is so ignorant to the ways of London relationships Alithea has to teach her:

MRS. PINCH. Pray, Sister, tell me why my husband looks so grum here in town, and keeps me up so close, and will not let me go a-walk-ing, nor let me wear my best gown yesterday.

ALITH. Oh, he's jealous, Sister.

MRS. PINCH. Jealous! what's that?

ALITH. He's afraid you should love another man.¹²²

Through Margery Wycherley also portrays how the false notion of honor endangers women. Horner in a fit of jealousy violently threatens his wife that he will “write whore with this penknife in [her] face” and “stab out those eyes that cause my mischief.”¹²³ Margery soon gets corrupted as she starts learning the London ways and starts to scheme to be able to meet with Horner behind her husband's back. Soon Alithea is caught in her schemes and her honor is in danger.

Alithea's name refers to ‘truth’ or ‘verity’ in Greek and describes her true character in a play full of hypocrites. She represents the true honor and what is should really stand for. She is loyal to Sparkish even when he shows her no emotions because she thinks it would be dishonorable to break off the match, and when Harcourt starts to court her she resists and even warns Sparkish against Harcourt's intentions. However Sparkish is arrogant and does not take her heeding seriously. Despite her intentions she cannot help it but become charmed by Harcourt when she is finally treated with love and admiration. Her reputation is then threatened by Margery who made it seem like she wants to marry Mr. Horner and is caught in

¹²⁰ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 26.

¹²¹ Morris, “Language and Honor in ‘The Country Wife,’” 5.

¹²² Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 21.

¹²³ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 55-56.

her clothes pretending to be her. Harcourt stands up for her and in his interaction with Horner we can see how Margery and Alithea are put into parallel:

HAR. This lady has her honour, and I will protect it.

HORN. My lady has not her honour, but has given it me to keep, and I will preserve it.¹²⁴

Through Alithea Wycherley portrays how people of true honor can get their reputation endangered by hypocrites. At the end of the play Alithea is rewarded by Wycherley for her respectable honor with a love match, though Harcourt had to act dishonorable and trick Sparkish who considered him a friend to be able to steal her from him.

In summary *The Country Wife* is a satiric comedy in which honor and the struggles of upkeeping a good reputation is an underlying theme we can identify throughout the whole play. Wycherley masterfully uses his wit to pose a critique of those who wrongfully use the notion of honor to better themselves in the eyes of society.

¹²⁴ Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, 82.

5 Canon and Criticism

Popularity of Restoration comedies started to decline towards the end of the 17th century. People started to tire of the bawdy, satirical genre and moved on the 18th century popular Sentimental comedies that brought back morality. In this chapter I offer a brief overview of how critics viewed Wycherley and Behn since then and whether and when were they part of the canon. My main source for this section was Robert Markley and his informative chapter on 'The canon and its critics' in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theater*.

Markley points out that only a few comedies, mostly by Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve, served as the foundation for generalizations about Restoration comedies as a genre. As a result two kind of canons emerged. The first consisted of the popular play that were continuously revived and adapted and the other featured the plays that may have not been produced anymore but that were recognized to have significant literary value.¹²⁵

The Restoration comedy genre as a whole was generally looked down upon by the critics and Behn was forgotten and left out of the canon until her reemergence in the 20th century. To look at what the canon looked like we might look at John Bell's *British Theatre* from the end of the 18th century. There is no play by Behn and Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* is only reprinted there in the form of Bickerstaff's adaptation. As Markley's text states this implies that Restoration comedies were at this time forgotten in favor of early 18th century playwrights. In 1840 Leigh Hunt came out with his title *The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar* in which he lists Wycherley as one of the most important Restoration writers. This book resulted in Thomas Babington Macaulay's attack on these Restoration writers whom he called 'a disgrace' in a quote I used at the beginning of my thesis in chapter 1. Furthermore Wycherley's work, namely *The Plain Dealer*, had been praised and acknowledged by the essayist and critic William Hazlitt in 1819.¹²⁶

Despite Restoration comedy's rocky reputation throughout time Wycherley was not completely forgotten but Behn had to wait for her re-emergence a while longer. In 1915 Montague Summers published an edition of her plays in a title *Works of Mrs. Aphra Behn*. Fourteen years later Virginia Woolf published her essay *A Room of One's Own* on women's

¹²⁵ Markley, "The canon and its critics," 226-227.

¹²⁶ Markley, "The canon and its critics," 232-233.

access and freedom to write and express themselves. In her essay she famously writes on Behn: “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.”¹²⁷ While she acknowledges Behn’s revolutionary status as the first English professional female writer she also recognizes the damage she had done to the reputation writing brings women:

“For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say, You need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen. Of course the answer for many years to come was, Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better! and the door was slammed faster than ever.”¹²⁸

That Behn was someone women did not desire to be associated with is proved by Elizabeth Browning who was, as Mermin points out, outraged when compared to Behn by a reviewer in 1857.¹²⁹ This attitude towards Behn might be explained by the critic Julia Kavanagh who in 1863 wrote: “The disgrace of Aphra Behn is that, instead of raising man to woman’s moral standard [she] sank woman to the level of man’s coarseness.”¹³⁰

Behn was rediscovered in the second half of the 20th century. Todd on this period of critique on Behn writes that despite her reemergence the Second Wave of feminism did not pay her much mind because “she did not conform to the notion of what a woman author should be, a suffering soul working against patriarchal oppression, in deep conflict with men.”¹³¹ This attitude started to change since the mid 1970s. At this time only one of her plays, *The Rover*, was in print.¹³² In 1997 Maureen Duffy published a first scholarly biography of Behn *The Passionate Shepherdess*. Nowadays several editions of her plays, poems as well as fiction are available. Markley furthermore states that “[a]ccording to the *MLA Bibliography*, between 1994 and 1996 twenty-six articles were published on Behn’s

¹²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931; Project Gutenberg Canada, 2015).

¹²⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*.

¹²⁹ Mermin, “Women Becoming Poets,” 353.

¹³⁰ Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters* (London, 1863), quoted in Todd, *A Secret Life*, 22.

¹³¹ Todd, *A Secret Life*, 23.

¹³² Markley, “The canon and its critics,” 237.

plays [...] [and] six on Wycherley's [...]" and suggests that *The Rover* is probably "the most widely revived Restoration play on stages in Great Britain and the United States."¹³³

Behn in the preface to one of her plays wrote: "I value Fame as much as if I had been born a Hero; and if you rob me of that, I can retire from the ungrateful World, and scorn its fickle Favours."¹³⁴ Several centuries later, her wish for fame and recognition has been granted.

¹³³ Markley, "The canon and its critics," 237.

¹³⁴ Behn, "The Lucky Chance," 7.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to compare Aphra Behn's *The Rover* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* in terms of staging gender. To achieve this goal I focused on the representation and characterization of gender and related social issues. I examined women and their presence and status throughout this whole thesis. I wrote of female authors, female characters but also on actresses and the presence of women in the audience.

Chapter one discusses the genre of Restoration comedy. I wrote on the influence on Restoration theater in terms of time setting, political happenings at that time and possible foreign theater influence as well as comparison to the preceding Elizabethan theater tradition. Furthermore I described the characteristics of the genre like its bawdy and satirical nature, play with language and the plot of intrigue, romance and cheating. I identified some of the prominent features of the genre which I focus later on in my analysis, namely character types like the rake, the cuckold, the mistress, the 'gay couple' and the 'sentimental couple' as well as some of the prominent themes like disguise, mistaken identity, female sexual desire or social critique. To explore the gender aspect of the genre in the second half of the first chapter I wrote actresses who were for the first time allowed to join the English stage and how their presence shaped the genre as well as women in the audience and their experience.

The following chapter is dedicated to the issue of female authorship in this era. I first identified different types and definitions of female writers and brought up some of the most important names of women who wrote in this era. My main focus was on the reputation that came with female authorship and how a female writer was considered a public profession. I highlighted Behn's uniqueness in her open pursuit of this career and how in comparison other women reacted to this kind of 'publicity.'

Before the beginning of my analysis I offer readers some literary context in form of an overview of the author's lives. In the literary context section I highlight some of the differences in Behn and Wycherley's lives, like Wycherley's studies and Behn's lack of formal education. I also familiarize readers with the plot and characters of *The Rover* and *The Country Wife*.

Chapter four contains the comparison and literary analysis of the two plays. First I compare the two plays in terms of setting. I believe it to be an interesting point of comparison because both plays are set in a completely different environment but also because the setting

of the plays allude to the themes and social critique present in the play. Wycherley sets his play in London and aims his critique at the London upper class and Behn through her setting expresses some political subtext. Her play taking place during a carnival also points to the masking and disguise theme present throughout the whole play. In my comparison of the characters I highlight the differences of how the two authors describe and portray the women and men in their plays as well as identify different character types, relationship dynamics and previously described themes. While both authors use some of the same character archetypes I argue that Behn gives her women more agency over their own fate and her male characters treat them more nobly in comparison to Wycherley's play.

In second half of my analysis I dedicate a subchapter to each play and in them, through a specific theme present in the plays, I examine what kind of social critique the authors focus on in each play. In *The Rover* I point out the paradoxical way Behn portrays reputation of virgins and of whores. In analysis of this theme we examine Behn's commentary on sex economy, her critique on forced marriages and how are women defined by sex. In Wycherley's play I write on the notion of honor and his critique of how the of upper class society hypocritically misuse the title as well as how it affects the characters, their lives and their behavior.

While both authors critique the notion of honor they do it different ways and focus on different aspects. Wycherley critiques and satirizes society as a whole but the main theme in *The Country Wife* that he uses as a vehicle for his critique is cheating and cuckolding. Behn in her play focuses more on women's honor and how it is defined by patriarchy, marriage and sex. While the themes in Wycherley's play could be interpreted as a critique of patriarchy he delivers his critique by making his female character victims of the world and men around them. On the other hand Behn opposes patriarchy by offering the audience and the readership intelligent, witty and complex female characters who stand up for themselves and try to be the rulers of their own lives.

The fifth and final chapter examines how differently were Wycherley and Behn treated by history since the Restoration period. While Wycherley was never completely forgotten in time Behn had to wait for her reemergence up until the 20th century. But even then she still had an unsavory reputation connected to her name and to her profession as well. Nowadays Behn's name is known again and she is appreciated for her pioneering role as a female writer from as previously perceived male dominated sphere of Restoration drama.

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Annotations

Annotation

Name and surname: Klára Žídková

Faculty and department: Faculty of Arts, Department of English and American Studies

Title of the thesis: Staging Gender in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*

Supervisor of the thesis: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 54

Number of signs: 100 502

Number of sources: 27

Key words: Restoration Comedy, England, Literary Analysis, Aphra Behn, William Wycherley, Female Writers

The aim of this thesis is a comparison of *The Rover* by Aphra Behn and *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley in terms of staging gender. The thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the genre of Restoration comedy and in its four subchapters focuses on the influence and characteristics of the genre as well as on actresses and the women in the audience. Second chapter is on the female writers of this era and on Behn's place among them. Chapter three offers the readership literary context in terms of description of the authors' life and of the plot of the two chosen plays. Chapter four contains the main body of the literary analysis. Final chapter describes the plays' post-Restoration era critique and whether and when were they part of the literary canon.

Anotace

Jméno a příjmení: Klára Žídková

Název katedry a fakulty: Filozofická fakulta, Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: Dramatizace genderu v dílech The Rover od Aphry Behn a The Country Wife od Williama Wycherleyho

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

Počet stran: 54

Počet znaků: 100 502

Počet titulů použité literatury: 27

Klíčová slova: Restaurační komedie, Anglie, literární analýza, Aphra Behn, Wiliam Wycherley, ženské spisovatelky

Cílem této bakalářské práce je porovnání her The Rover od Aphry Behn a The Country Wife od Williama Wycherleyho se zaměřením na dramatizaci genderu. Práce je rozdělena do pěti kapitol. První kapitola představuje žánr restaurační komedie a ve čtyř podkapitolách se zaměřuje na vliv na vývoj žánru, charakteristiku žánru, herečky a na ženy v publiku. Druhá kapitola se věnuje problematice ženských spisovatelek tohoto období a na přiblížení Aphry Behn jako spisovatelky. Třetí kapitola poskytuje čtenářům literární kontext v podobě života autorů a obeznámením s jejich dramaty. Čtvrtá kapitola obsahuje samotnou literární analýzu. Závěrečná kapitola se věnuje jak byla vybraná díla přijata pozdější kritikou a zda byli součástí literárního kánonu.