
Article:
James, C. (2024) Elizabeth Currer: religious non-conformity in John Dryden's The Kind-Keeper and Aphra Behn's The Widdow Ranter. The Seventeenth Century, 39 (2). pp. 291-310. ISSN 0268-117X

https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2023.2276199

Elizabeth Currer: Religious Non-conformity in John Dryden's *The Kind-Keeper* and Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter*

Cora James

corajames246@gmail.com

Twitter: CoraCJames

Word Count: 8966

Author Biography: Cora James is an Early Career Researcher in the field of Restoration and eighteenth-century theatre. A recent graduate from the University of Sheffield, Cora's research interests include women in theatre, the development of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century provincial theatres, and professional stage families.

Elizabeth Currer: Religious Non-conformity in John Dryden's *The Kind-Keeper* and Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter*

In many ways, Elizabeth Currer's career typifies modern assumptions about Restoration actresses. In her mistress roles, we might recognise the "lusty young wench" of John Harold Wilson's 1958 study.[i] In her provocative prologues, we can read the uneasy voyeurism Elizabeth Howe describes when she writes of how an actress's "rapport with spectators" could lead to "gratuitous titillation".[ii] In her trapped wives, we can understand how the libertine ideals of Charles's court uses and abuses its women. However, beyond her depiction of sexually explicit comic characters, the comedian, Currer, came to represent a specifically eroticised threat of religious dissent during periods of political crisis. By exploring the development of this line from John Dryden's *The Kind-Keeper* (1680) to Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter* (1690), this paper demonstrates how Currer's career both contributed to and challenged a theatrical dialogue surrounding the national anxieties of political unrest and ideological non-conformity.

Keywords: Restoration Theatre; Aphra Behn; John Dryden; *The Kind-Keeper*; *The Widdow Ranter*

Introduction

The comic actress Elizabeth Currer was known for her portrayals of mistresses, prostitutes, and adulterous wives in the bawdy sex comedies of the Restoration stage. During a career spanning 1675–1689, Currer secured a reputation for coarse, pragmatic characters who understood the value of sex as a commodity and actively engaged in its exchange. Discussing the comedian's arrival to the Duke's Company in 1675, Janet Todd writes that the "pert, vivacious Currer […] was one of the new actresses at the Duke's, her whorish reputation

offstage being eminently exploitable in the double entendres of prologues and epilogues".[iii] In spite of the excellent work produced in recent years dedicated to the acknowledgement and re-examination of the first women in professional English theatre by critics such as Elizabeth Howe, Gilli Bush-Bailey, and Diana Solomon, this trifling assessment of Elizabeth Currer's career has remained obstinately unchallenged. Currer is time and time again consigned to the role of bawdy comedian with little deeper examination. If she is mentioned at all, it is to reflect briefly on her as the epitome of the actress/whore archetype, with Howe going so far as to subtitle her brief section on the actress, "Elizabeth Currer as Whore 1675–1679".[iv] Whilst Howe and Bush-Bailey have produced the most thorough recent accounts of Currer's career, beyond their simple acknowledgements of her skill in bawdy roles and her "growing status in the company", as evidenced by her being awarded the prologues and epilogues in several plays, little more is said of the comedian's contributions.[v] This paper considers the deeper significance of Currer's career to contemporary audiences, beyond that of a highly sexualised and ostensibly immodest woman. Addressing concerns of national instability and non-establishment ideology, Currer's roles demonstrate the increasing potential for late-seventeenth century actresses to belittle, embody, and challenge the anxieties of a fragile nation.

This article will examine the ways in which Currer's characters, and the 'Whore of Babylon' persona she embodied, were employed to reflect and parody contemporary unease around issues of religious non-conformity and the controversies surrounding monarchic absolutism. Currer's position as a comedian permitted her license to enact anxiety-inducing displays of national discord whilst simultaneously ridiculing their significance. Throughout her career, Currer was tied time and time again to the mythical Whore of Babylon and this article explores the theatricalization of Currer's biblical counterpart as the incarnation of a threatening sexualised femininity. During this period, Currer used her role as prologist in

Aphra Behn's *The Feign'd Curtizans* in 1679 to mock the hysteria surrounding the exclusion of James, the Duke of York, for fear of his Catholic influence, by tying her performative sexuality to the precarious state of the nation. This article will also explore Currer's origination of Tricksy in John Dryden's *The Kind-Keeper*, in which her sexuality was used as the symbolic embodiment of a feminised, Catholicised threat. In Dryden's cynical portrayal of contemporary London, the rapacious Tricksy is presented as a pseudo-Catholic temptress who uses her sexuality to barter affection for goods and coin from her besotted keeper in a blatant satirisation of Charles I's Catholic mistress, the Duchess of Portsmouth. The final section of this article will discuss the titular breeches role in Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter* (1690), Currer's final known performance. Set against the backdrop of the consciously exotic and mercantile setting of the New World, Currer's adventures as the widow represent Behn's attempts to move towards an optimistic portrayal of female liberation in which a woman, named for the semi-mythical radical sect whose practices she personifies, can negotiate on equal terms with her male associates. By examining the link between Currer, the biblical Whore of Babylon, and the anarchic Ranters, I will demonstrate how the actress enacted a cheerful, eroticised onstage persona to both embody and challenge the pervasive threat of religious dissidence that consumed the world of contemporary civic politics. Currer's various roles demonstrate that Todd's brief comment in *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life* (2017) that the comedian grew "notorious for tough, unconventional women" hits far closer to the mark than Howe or Bush-Bailey's limited evaluations.[vi]

Currer as the 'Whore of Babylon'

Although most sources agree she is likely to have joined the Duke's Company earlier, the first recorded role for Currer was as the young girl, Alcinda, in Elkanah Settle's *The Conquest of China* (1675).[vii] When Currer landed the role of Betty Frisque, "the young jilting Wench, kept by Lord *Drybone*", in John Crowne's *The Countrey Wit* (1675), the trajectory of

her career began to take shape.[viii] During the late 1670s, Currer won acclaim playing devious mistresses and adulterous wives before performing the increasingly politicised characters written for her in light of the emerging Exclusion Crisis. Her final known part was the vibrant Widow Ranter of Behn's play of the same name, first performed in 1689, a fitting end for a provocative career. Although the frustrating tendency of contemporary manuscripts and subsequent published quartos to omit actors' names in cast lists means we cannot definitively attribute some key roles believed to have been performed by Currer, we can use other methods to fill in some of the gaps in her career. A brief examination of her characters' names aids the process of attribution given the tendency of Restoration playwrights to recycle names and rely on aptronyms for quick character recognition. For example, it seems probable that the rookie comedian who played Betty Frisque would be chosen eight months later to take on the role of Betty Flauntit, a "tawdry, mercenary whore" in Aphra Behn's *The Town Fopp* (1677).[ix] Elizabeth Howe also raises the point that "Currer was a 'Betty' herself and the repetition of this Christian name in Behn's play surely makes the possibility that she played Flauntit more likely".[x] A similar argument can be made for the attribution of John Dryden's character, Mrs Tricksy, mistress to the titular Kind-Keeper in the 1678 production of his play. Performed the same year as Behn's *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678), in which Currer played the cunning, adulterous wife Lady Fancy, *The Kind-Keeper*'s Mrs Tricksy falls very neatly into the same line of duplicitous women. The next role Currer is known to have played was Madam Trickwell in Thomas D'Urfey's *Squire Oldsapp* (1679), for which Currer was given the epilogue. During this period, Currer also played the parts of the jilt, Jenny Wheedle, in Thomas D'Urfey's *The Virtuous Wife* (1679); the kept mistress, Diana, in Aphra Behn's *The City Heiress* (1682); and the courtesan, Aquilina, in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (1682).

Whilst it is true that these roles demonstrate how Currer came to personify the transactional exchange of sex and affection for patronage, more often than not, these parts held the potential to both typify and playfully dismantle concerns far beyond the supposed moral iniquity of sex work. Many of these anxieties were centred around the interplay between Currer as a popular comedian and her embodiment as the Whore of Babylon, highlighting the complex implications of the figure during this period. Throughout her career, the connection between Currer and the biblical "Mother of Harlots" occurred time and time again.[xi] Of all the theatrical references to the Whore of Babylon that were made during the period 1660 to 1700, roughly a third are in relation to one of Currer's characters.[xii] Three of these references are believed to have occurred within six months of each other, first in Behn's *Sir Patient Fancy*, then in Dryden's *Kind-Keeper*, and finally in D'Urfey's *Squire Oldsapp*, emphasising just how recognisable the connection between Currer and the epithet would have been to a contemporary audience.

According to the Book of Revelation, the Whore of Babylon was a bejewelled harlot who rode a scarlet beast and seduced the kings of the world. In biblical mythology, "the inhabitants of the earth" were "made drunk with the wine of her fornication".[xiii] This term had been in use long before the Reformation to denounce the abuses and corruption of the Catholic Church.[xiv] As Frances Dolan interrogates in her *Whores of Babylon* (1999), a representation of this menace on stage or in print as an explicitly female threat was "a quick and dirty way to invest it with a whole range of qualities, to insist on it as simultaneously familiar and apocalyptic, and to place it within an even broader sense of anxiety about the gender order".[xv] In England, the associations between Catholicism and women ran deep throughout the seventeenth century, with Dolan highlighting the widely held belief that "Catholicism lured women with its ritual paraphernalia, offering them trinkets and toys rather than a Bible they could not read".[xvi] The Catholic church's purported emphasis on spectacle

and extrascriptural practice was translated by literary opponents into a critique of women's material greed and vanity. Gendered, exotic, opulent, and threatening, the Whore of Babylon denunciation was capitalised on by English Protestants during the Restoration as a generic catch-all for the wide-reaching influence of Rome throughout Europe and deep into the royal court of Charles II.

According to Laura M. Stevens, however, by the time of the late-seventeenth century "the whore came to stand less for the Roman Catholic Church and more for Protestants' own tendencies to drift towards beliefs and practices that resembled Catholicism, especially through an emphasis on external displays over spiritual substance".[xvii] Embedded in imagery of excess and indulgence, the whore, and consequently Currer as her archetypal inheritor, was used in the theatre of this period to personify both an encroaching and overtly sexualised feminine threat of foreign power and the fear of that influence insinuating itself within the English populace. However, it was also used by some, and Aphra Behn in particular, to highlight and mock the fanaticism and hypocrisy of those who would use the term with sincere alarm. For example, Currer's Lady Fancy is presented, ostensibly, as the born inheritor and natural next step to the likes of Betty Frisque, a manipulative and unfaithful villain. Her step-nephew, Leander, surmises as much with his lament in the first act that his father married a younger woman 'To keep up his Title of Cuckold, I think, for she has beauty enough for temptation, and no doubt makes the right use on't'.[xviii] The mercenary mistresses of Currer's early career evolve into unfaithful wives in order to obtain the financial security of older men, all the while seeking the passionate attentions of roaming libertines. However, when the titular Sir Patient Fancy of Behn's comedy denounces his adulterous wife as a "greater Whore than she of Babylon" and an "abomination to thy Sex", Behn is not actually denouncing Lady Fancy but emphasising that Sir Patient is outmoded and hysterical.[xix] Although it is Currer's character being insulted here, it is Sir Patient who is displayed as

obsolete and alienated by a modern world he detests, and it is ultimately he who Behn is setting up as the figure of mockery. Sir Patient's use of the term 'Whore of Babylon' demonstrates that he is not just anti-popery, he resides on the far side of fanatical puritanism. This extreme ideology is further evidenced when Sir Patient says to his nephew Leander, "they say thou art a Papist too, or at least a Church of *England* man, and I profess there's not a pin to chuse".[xx] It is Patient's radical paranoia that is the focus of the play's scorn and, while Lady Fancy might be read, on one level, as a simple indictment of female subversion and hypersexuality, Behn manages to complicate this reading by turning the burden of criticism back onto the hypocrisy and pretended piety of the play's patriarch. The evolution of Currer's earlier sexualised roles and their connection to the Whore of Babylon demonstrate the variety of ways the whore monicker could be appropriated by contemporary playwrights to compel, deny, condemn, and belittle readings of female sexuality as a destabilising force within the contexts of national weakness and religious uncertainty.

Prologue to The Feign'd Curtizans

Currer's prologue to *The Feign'd Curtizans*, first performed in 1679, best demonstrates the way in which her sexualised persona was used to both embody and satirise the concerns of religion and politics that plagued Restoration London. The prologue begins, "The devil take this cursed plotting Age,/'T has ruin'd all our Plots upon the Stage". As explored in both John Kenyon's comprehensive account, *The Popish Plot* (1972), and Tim Harris's more recent examination of the Exclusion Crisis in his *Restoration* (2006), this period was fraught with paranoia, mistrust, and rising hysteria.[xxi] The relationship between Charles II's government and an increasingly divided parliament rapidly declined throughout the 1670s, culminating in the crisis that lasted from 1679 to 1681. Following the execution of their father, Charles I, at the hands of Cromwell's parliament in 1649, Charles II and his younger brother, James the Duke of York, spent the majority of their time in European exile until Charles's restoration in 1660.

With no money and few options, the brothers moved from country to country, alternately finding hospitality amongst French, Spanish, Irish, and Dutch allies, most of whom were Catholic. Upon their return to England, an overwhelmingly Royalist and pro-Anglican parliament set about ensuring the stability of the crown in alignment with the Church of England through what would come to be known as the Clarendon laws. However, as the 1670s began and it became more likely that James would succeed his brother to the throne, none of Charles's thirteen living children being able to claim legitimacy, increasing fears of Roman Catholic influence at Court led to the factious and strained politics that would mark this decade and greatly influence the theatre produced during its zenith. This encroaching popery was not just occurring in clandestine meetings but openly in public spaces, law courts, and within Charles's personal circles. Complaints arose of "popish books and trinkets" being offered for sale in London's market places, a convent being opened within the walls of St. James's palace, and Catholics flouting the restrictions of the Test Acts and freely taking office.[xxii] Charles supported religious toleration for dissenters as a way of providing greater freedoms for Roman Catholics, but his efforts were thwarted by parliament, culminating in the 1673 Test Act that demanded increased proof that all office-holders practised Anglican rites and denied the doctrine of transubstantiation.[xxiii] This resulted in James being outed as a converted Catholic, which forced Charles on the defensive and, amidst accusations of arbitrary and absolutist government, he begrudgingly acquiesced to the demands of an increasingly hostile parliament. The following years saw increased restrictions on Catholic and non-Anglican dissenters, the rise of spurious reports of plots and treasons, and increased pressure to exclude the now openly Catholic James from succession. It was amidst this heady battle over sovereignty, ideology, and financing that Titus Oates and Israel Tonge chose to implement their bizarre and chaotic conspiracy to create a fictitious Catholic plot against the king's life. The so called 'Popish Plot'

of 1678 sparked a parliamentary war over the correct line of succession that ultimately cemented partisan factions as a staple of English politics.

It was in response to these dangerous times that Currer took to the stage at Dorset Gardens and delivered the prologue to *The Feign'd Curtizans*, which bemoaned the paranoia and hysteria of her waning audience. This play is thought to have premiered in March 1679, the same month as Lord Danby's impeachment by the newly convened parliament, one of the first major events of the Exclusion Crisis.[xxiv] In reference to the political trouble and conspiracies brewing outside the walls of the theatre, Currer's prologue continues,

> Suspicions, New Elections, Jealousies,
>
> Fresh Information, New discoveries,
>
> Do so employ the busy fearful Town,
>
> Our honest calling here is useless grown.[xxv]

This humorous take on contemporary events, pitching the murky, far-reaching world of civic politics against the microcosm of the Duke's Company and its waning ticket sales, hints towards Behn's (and Currer as orator) undermining of the controversy-driven frenzy. The prologue paints the streets of London as bursting with conspiracy and corruption, with each "fool" calling for new regulations to suit his own factious ends, and the theatre, at the centre of it all, as an innocent victim of the rising tide of popular hysteria.[xxvi] Currer, turning the focus on the audience, declares,

> But Wit, as if t'were Jesuiticall,
>
> Is an abomination to ye all:
>
> To what a wretched pass will poor Plays come,

This must be damn'd, the Plot is laid in Rome[xxvii]

By linking the innocent "Plot" of the play with the religious and political plotting enraging the external world, this prologue reinforces Currer's position as the entreating actress, doing her bit for the suffering company. More importantly, however, it pokes fun at the theatrics of the political stage attempting to rival the professional dramatists, suggesting a scornful dismissal of the overblown melodrama being played out in parliament. The sarcastic connection of "Wit" to the "Jesuiticall" extreme of dissident religion is used here to mock the suspicious anti-Catholic factions. This prologue offers a social critique of the fanaticism that was supposedly consuming the population, one which recognises that this panic was being orchestrated by political players who would benefit from further discrimination against Catholics and their allies at court. By comparing her "honest calling" to the machinations of the conspirators, Currer is calling out the hysteria for what it is: pure theatre.

This prologue is greatly informed by Currer's on-stage personality, effortlessly blending religious metaphor with sexual euphemism. Beginning on a macro-scale, bemoaning the "plotting Age" and "State affairs", the prologue twists Currer's rhetoric towards the personal with a seemingly spontaneous shift in tone,

For my own principles, faith, let me tell ye

I'me still of the Religion of my Cully,

And till these dangerous times they'd none to fix on,

But now are something in meer contradiction,

And piously pretend, these are not days,

For keeping Mistresses and seeing Plays.[xxviii]

Playing off the seemingly submissive but ultimately transactional relationship of Currer and her "Cully", a gullible dupe easily seduced, the prologue allows her to criticise the hypocrisy of her suitors' newfound consciences whilst tying her personal fortunes to that of the industry she represents.[xxix] Currer's flirtatious prologues are intimate in the extreme, with her going so far as to refer to herself by name, a rarity in Restoration prologues, as she asks 'Who says this age a Reformation wants,/ When *Betty Currer*'s lovers all turn Saints?'[xxx] In entreating her male audience away from grand but sanctimonious notions of "Reformation", Currer, or rather Currer's onstage persona, attacks the dangers of political factionalism whilst gently and humorously promoting both her on and off stage vocations.[xxxi] By citing a perhaps optimistically utopian time where religion was not dangerously fixed to political allegiance and manipulated by the governing class to force "Suspicions, New Elections, Jealousies", the prologue highlights the menace that anti-Catholic feeling poses to the nation, the theatre, and to Currer herself in explicitly sexual terms.[xxxii] As prologist, Currer comically moves into a pitiable bargaining position by emphasising that, despite being "handsome still, still young and mad", she wants for "New Supplies" from lovers lost to the temptations of pretended piety. Through Behn's words, Currer uses her stage time to publicly advertise her desire for sexual patronage whilst exercising her performative sexuality and public position to challenge the "hellish times" where she "shou'd be neglected at eighteen" because of the power-hungry cabals who cite piety to defend their plotting.[xxxiii] Currer finishes by pouting, "That Youth and Beauty should be quite undone,/ A Pox upon the Whore of Babylon".[xxxiv] Spoken by any other actress, this line would be a simple condemnation of the Catholic threat and its influence over her professional and private lives. In Currer's personalised prologue, however, this tongue-in-cheek comment signals to the audience that she is fully aware of her own associations with the figure and will happily wear the costume of disruptor and promiscuous temptress in order to mock the very crowds who fear it. Dripping with irony,

this statement reduces the anti-Catholic sentiments that prevailed during the Exclusion Crisis to their most ludicrously petty conclusion.

The Kind Keeper

A year before Currer took to the stage to deliver this scathing rebuke of contemporary politics, Dryden's comedy, *The Kind-Keeper*, was already stirring up controversy for its reflection of national anxieties. In this play, we see a clear example of how the playwright uses the threat of female sexuality to simulate the more existential threats believed to be at work in the court of Charles II. Three months after the term was first linked to Currer's Lady Fancy, the titular character of Dryden's *The Kind-Keeper* can be heard bemoaning of his lover, "Let her be a Mistress for a *Pope*, like a Whore of Babylon, as she is".[xxxv] Although the cast of *The Kind-Keeper* is unknown, following on from her success as Betty Frisque earlier in the decade, Currer has been put forward as the most likely candidate to take on the similar role of Mrs Tricksy in Dryden's comedy, with Howe calling her "an extreme version of Betty Frisque", and the character's comparison here to the Whore of Babylon only consolidates this theory.[xxxvi] Like Frisque, Tricksy is a devious, mercenary mistress who spends the play manipulating her kind-keeper while tempting the eligible Woodall away from his honest match with Mrs Pleasance.[xxxvii] Tricksy is selfish, cunning, and greedy. Her subplot revolves around her increasingly audacious but ultimately successful attempts to use sex and affection to wheedle money, jewels, and control from her submissive keeper, Limberham. The idea of an authoritative figure being manipulated by a sinful, materialistic woman may have hit slightly too close to home for Charles II and his mistress, the Duchess of Portsmouth. Although the King had originally requested Dryden to write this play, it was stopped "after three nights, by royal command".[xxxviii] This discrepancy likely lies in the influence of his mistress. Famously despised for her French Catholicism and her interference in the king's political affairs, Louise de Kérouaille has understandably been likened to Tricksy time and

time again for their similarities in character, position, and religious significance.[xxxix] In her essay on contract theory in *The Kind-Keeper*, Peggy Thompson has argued for the likelihood of Tricksy being a deliberate representation of Kérouaille, especially considering the specific reference by Father Aldo that Tricksy "shoul'd eat Pearl, if she wou'd have 'em".[xl] Pearl-eating was famously associated with the decadence of Cleopatra and her seduction of Antony, and the Duchess of Portsmouth, who reportedly "had very expensive tastes, and reaped large sums of money from Charles to satisfy her greed and extravagance", had previously been linked with Cleopatra through verses attributed to Dryden.[xli] Thompson concludes that Dryden uses the image of a pearl to compel associations between Tricksy, the temptress Cleopatra, and the Catholic Duchess of Portsmouth, claiming this particular allusion represents "how costly, unnatural, and undeniable Tricksy's appetites are".[xlii] Additionally, the pearl motif provides a strong link to the Whore of Babylon and subsequently the actress Currer. It is written in the book of Revelation that the Whore of Babylon, notorious for her opulence, "was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication".[xliii] In the final scene of *The Kind-Keeper*, attention is drawn to Tricksy's jewels. Limberham cries, "behold this Orient Neck-lace, *Pug!* […] But, oh, 'tis the Falsest Neck that ere was hang'd in Pearl".[xliv] Shortly thereafter, Limberham's fears of losing Tricksy overwhelm him and he accedes to her demands "with all submission" including a £400 a year maintenance.[xlv] Whilst there can be no doubt that Tricksy's character is a problematically gendered representation of female lust and mercenary greed, Dryden insists on linking the character's sexual domination to external displays of wealth as emblematic of the Catholic mistress and her influence over the nation's patriarch.

The Kind-Keeper, a licentious comedy set entirely in a boarding house, was written, in Dryden's own words, as "an honest *Satyre* against our crying sin of *Keeping*".[xlvi] The play

only lasted three nights and, in order to publish the printed edition of 1680, Dryden was forced to make copious cuts and changes, leaving the extant copy a much changed creature from the one that was performed in 1678.[xlvii] Even after the editing, it is easy to understand why a certain faction of the town would be disgusted at a farce that displayed, if satirically, many recognisable characters of dissenting religion and the promiscuity of libertine ideology. The protagonist, young Aldo, a libertine rogue, returns to England on the understanding he is to marry an eligible and respectable young woman. Fearing this fate, he disguises himself under the name Woodall and lodges in the boarding house of the "Hypocritical Fanatick" landlady, Mrs Saintly.[xlviii] Hereafter ensues a series of increasingly farcical scenes in which Woodall, under the guidance of his lecherous father, attempts to juggle ongoing affairs with Mrs Saintly, the maid Judith, the married Mrs Brainsick, the "Termagent kept Mistress" Mrs Tricksy, and Mrs Pleasance, the woman who would turn out to be his betrothed.[xlix] Dryden's play alludes to a variety of contemporary concerns: the capability of fatherhood, the threat of religious dissent, and the overall degradation of morality, all within the swamped, claustrophobic space of Saintly's lodging house.

Set against the backdrop of plotting, assassinations, pope-burnings, and treason that marked 1670s London, *The Kind-Keeper* is a far cry from the bombastic, moralising heroic dramas that shaped Dryden's early career. There is nothing in *Kind-Keeper* to champion honour, disseminate a national sense of hope, or propagate a doctrine of Stuart supremacy. Rather than championing any one faction, the play maps out a sordid and lost community in which no character is truly virtuous or redeemable and instead distorts and parodies the threats to propriety, both foreign and domestic, that plague the nation. Where Saintly's character speaks to an underlying anxiety concerning the rise of dissenting Protestant factions as a threat to the 'true' Anglican Church and Charles II at its head, Tricksy represents the other side of this coin. Thompson demonstrates how Tricksy "represents the potential for

widespread feminine insubordination" and a threat of "political radicalism".[l] What Thompson falls short of, however, is linking the likely casting of Elizabeth Currer as Tricksy to the symbolically Catholic threat the mistress character represents. Throughout the play, Tricksy is time and time again placed within a framework of anti-Catholic and anti-European sentiments that are inextricably linked to Tricksy's dominance over her keeper, in clear reference to the power wielded by the Duchess of Portsmouth. Tricksy's opening song is a provocative ballad, arguing for her freedom to treat with other men once her keeper's "dull appetites o're".[li] Naturally this entices Woodall, who begins to recount the fantastical "Love-Adventure" of a French cavalier in his attempts to seduce the mistress of the Dey of Tripoli.[lii] Their flirtatious interaction is interrupted by the arrival of Limberham, Tricksy's keeper. In order to escape suspicion, the quick-thinking Tricksy insists on Woodall pretending the part of an Italian merchant who has come to sell her essences. Despite knowing very little Italian, Woodall carries off the rest of the scene in an attempted "*Lingua Franca*".[liii] This interaction operates by openly mocking both the "dull" Italian peddling his wares, as a clear denunciation of Roman influence, and Limberham, as an ignorant English buffoon who pretends to understand the garbled language. Dryden places the cunning deception of Tricksy as the lynch pin of a farce that manages to deftly insult an exaggerated caricature of Italian mercantilism whilst emphasising the overblown foolishness of English paranoia.

This is not the only scene in which Dryden relies on the dependable, audience-pleasing trope of abusing Catholic nations as he manages to impose the nationalistic francophobia rife in 1670s England onto Tricksy, specifically through her sexuality. Father Aldo describes Tricksy as "so Termagent an Empress! and he so submissive, so tame, so led a Keeper, and as proud of his Slavery as a *French* man".[liv] In a clear attack on the absolutist governing of Louis XIV and the Catholic nation who bow under his divine connection to God, Dryden extends the mercenary whore trope crafted by Currer in her previous roles and

identifies Tricksy with France and its imperialist power over Europe. Tricksy's immense control over Limberham and the extent of her manipulative prowess is further entrenched within the threat of Catholic heresy. In act two, their passionate argument spills out onto the stage and Tricksy swears to defy her keeper or else "go into a Nunnery", to which the furious Limberham replies, "Don't hinder her, good Father Aldo; I'm sure she'll come back from *France*, before she gets halfway o're to *Calais*".[lv] With Aldo's intervention and careful bargaining, however, Limberham quickly retreats from his position and, humbled, agrees to settle £400 on his mistress to win back her affections. Upon his departure and having been assured she will receive this agreement in writing, Tricksy quickly drops her façade of indignation and laughs at her lover's gullibility, "That he shou'd be so silly to imagine I wou'd go into a Nunnery! 'tis likely; I have much Nun's Flesh about me!"[lvi] The sexual threat is magnified by the false threat of conversion and is enough to secure Tricksy the financial security she desires.

The image of Tricksy threatening to sequester herself in a Nunnery in order to secure financial gratification from her besotted lover endured in public memory. In a Republican speech given in 1787 criticizing the English Secretary for bribing members of the House with double pensions, the Master of the Rolls for the Irish House of Commons, John Philpot Curran, asked, "Was the Secretary afraid of their becoming converts? […] Was there really so much danger that little Tricksey would repent and go into a Nunnery, that the kind keeper must come down with another hundred, to save her from becoming honest?"[lvii] Whilst the shadowy threat of Catholicism creeping into the nation was by no means resolved following the Glorious Revolution, Dryden's joke that at the heart of this threat lay the manipulation and deceit of female greed still held a persuasive comic currency over a century later. As a role that was most likely originated by Currer, the character of Tricksy would have been deeply informed by the actress's development of highly sexualised, determined, and

economically motivated women, thereby compounding the threat of national disruption she represented. In both instances of Tricksy's theatrical functions, the first in her comparison to the tyrannical Sun King, enslaving the gullible wretch Limberham, and the second in which she openly threatens celibacy through conversion in order to manipulate him into promising her more money, Dryden is painting Currer's character as a site of patriarchal disruption. As both the usurper of Limberham's god-given supremacy, demonstrated when she asserts, "I have gain'd an absolute Dominion over him", and as heretical temptress, draining him of his wealth, strength, and authority, Tricksy represents the fears of the nation and the disruption to the natural order through a particularly Catholicised threat.[lviii] Within this framework, Limberham necessarily becomes a weak leader whose power is being part manipulated and part forced away from him—a sensitive subject for a fragile nation.

The Widow Ranter

The Kind-Keeper would not be the last time Currer played the part of a woman who embodied the ideological spirit of religious non-conformity. The rowdy, genial Widow Ranter, in Behn's play of the same name, would be Elizabeth Currer's last known part. Written sometime before the events of the Glorious Revolution, Behn's tragicomedy tells a fictionalised version of Nathaniel Bacon's rebellion of 1676. Set in colonial Jamestown, the play's high, tragic plot follows the doomed love affair of the honourable Bacon and the Pamunkey Queen, Semernia, whilst the comic action is largely provided by the town Justices, a whiggish cabal of petty thieves turned colonial governors. Currer's character, a boorish but popular widow whose time in the New World sees her become a wealthy community heavyweight, serves as a sort of social axis around which the play's minor plots of rivalries and romances can revolve.

Heidi Hutner writes of Currer's character, that "In an odd twist for the class conscious Behn, […] Ranter is a positively portrayed lower-born woman […] she drinks, swears, and smokes a pipe, but she also negotiates her desires effectively and remains, in contrast to all of the other female characters in the play, uncontrolled and unvictimized by men".[lix] Whilst it is undeniable that Behn's preoccupation with class is a mainstay of all her works, to write with incredulity that Behn should positively portray a morally licentious lower-born woman with explicitly transgressive habits is to ignore the steady catalogue of characters she had specifically created for Currer in the thirteen years of their association. As for negotiating her desires effectively, Behn's treatment of Lady Fancy in *Sir Patient Fancy*, Lady Desbro in *The Roundheads* (1682), and even Diana of *The City Heiress* should give some indication that Behn did not shy away from writing women capable of creating their own victories even in the face of all narrative logic.

As the last known part Currer would play for the London stage, Ranter personifies the wild, liberated she-gallant as a direct inheritor to characters such as Moll Cutpurse in Thomas Dekker's and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl; or, Moll Cutpurse* (1611). Ranter's adventures in the consciously exotic setting of the New World demonstrate Behn's attempts to move towards an optimistic fantasy of female liberation as her career progressed. Currer's Widow Ranter might not be a wholly new form of female representation, but she is a completely unapologetic amalgamation of all the independent, flawed, and resourceful women Behn had created for Currer over the years. More importantly, Ranter represents a subversion of cultural and ideological conformity in the form of an anti-conservative meritocracy. These ideals, inherent to the seditious form of Protestantism invoked by the name, Ranter, contravene those traditionally ascribed to Behn. Gilberta Golinelli uses *Widdow Ranter* and Behn's novella *Oroonoko* (1688) to suggest that, for Behn, the New World colonies are both "ideal and at the same time real spaces".[lx] In Behn's creation of the

wild Ranter, existing against a backdrop of historical, if highly embellished, events, we see Behn's attempts to transmute the ideal onto the real through the semi-mythical principles of Ranterism. By once again inhabiting a role synonymous with the radical extremes of ideology, Currer could embody Behn's fantastical portrayal of a New World unity, in which a boundary-violating woman could be readily matched on equal terms with a nobly born, legitimate partner who symbolised the Old World royalism that Behn so admired.

Since the resurgence in scholarly interest in *Ranter*, following the work of Margo Hendricks and Margaret Ferguson in the 1990s, there has been very little agreement as to what exactly Behn was thinking when she wrote her Virginian tragicomedy. There are those that have read *Ranter* as an essentially conservative text, the natural conclusion to a career of pro-Stuart royalism, in which Behn's presentation of the Justices, "being too self-interested, too ignorant, and too blind to rule" serves as an allegory for the political tensions and Whig ascendency in post-revolution, post-Stuart England.[lxi] Despite this being a relatively neat reading of Behn's play, which satisfactorily ties up her established conservative leanings, her support of the Stuart line, and her elitist dedication to appropriate hierarchies, it fails to account for the unexpectedly meritocratic stance the play exhibits. In the opening scene, Behn has Hazard, newly arrived in Virginia, claim, "great Souls are born in common men, sometimes as well as Princes", a sentiment that sets the tone for the colonial world of opportunities in which pick-pockets can become privy-councillors and it is a great affront "to call a woman Mistris, tho' but a retale Brandy-munger".[lxii] The play's ending betrays a similarly hopeful view of the collapse of social hierarchies. It sees the Justices pardoned for their cowardice and treachery, an (admittedly high-born) council of peers ruling in lieu of a state-appointed figure, and the indentured servant turned ideological dissident, Ranter, happily married to her Cavalier lover, Dareing, in a thrilling subversion of theatrical convention.

Due to these inconsistencies, critics such as Jennifer Frangos and Margaret Ferguson have asserted that, by using the heroic genre's predilection for exotic settings and Behn's own personal connection to the New World, Behn is attempting to explore and fracture traditional power systems that cannot be effectively transcribed onto inherently innovative, if not wholly progressive, colonial communities. *Widdow Ranter* not only highlights a convergence of multiple anxieties concerning identity, power, economics, and ideology, but actively challenges them by relocating them to a fantasy world, especially through the carnivalesque vitality and boundary-violating activities of its titular heroine. Derek Hughes' description of the play's "sense of dissolution […] in which a vacuum of authority and collision of cultures create a confusion of criteria" is helpful insofar as it attempts to pinpoint the driving factors particular to this play's complexity but would benefit from considering *Ranter* not as an idiosyncratic curiosity written by an ailing woman at the end of her life but as an extension of her previous works and within the community of the existing theatrical company.[lxiii] Whilst this play will undoubtedly endure as a peculiar swansong for Aphra Behn's pioneering career, a deeper examination into its title character, as a beneficiary of the many faces of Elizabeth Currer, can elucidate the uncharacteristic choices Behn made for her play.

The reason for this play's ambiguity can be found in the particular time, both in theatrical and political history, in which it was produced. Depending on one's view, the end of the 1680s saw the dying embers of the last fully legitimised absolute monarchy England would know, or a Glorious Revolution that symbolised the waxing powers of democracy and the rise of an emerging empire based on mercantilism and trade. The strange political leanings of *The Widdow Ranter* aside, any study of Behn would have to assume she could be readily placed into the former camp. During the propaganda war that took place on the stage during the Exclusion Crisis, Behn was very much at the forefront of the Tory charge. Behn

produced many of her greatest works during this period, including *The Feign'd Curtizans*, *The Roundheads*, and *The City Heiress*, all of which starred Elizabeth Currer and all of which viciously satirised the puritanical Whigs and their dispositions of hypocrisy that necessarily limited and trapped women in the name of religious morality. However, perhaps the decade that passed between the supposed Tory victory of the Exclusion Crisis and the events that inspired *The Widdow Ranter* had dampened Behn's loyalty and caused her to look elsewhere for systems that might prove more liberating for an independent woman. Following the death of Charles II and the failure of the Monmouth Rebellion in 1685, the worst fears of the Whig faction had been realised: a Catholic sat on the throne of England. James was not just a Catholic, but an absolutist who suspended both English and Scottish parliaments and who, in 1688, sired the male heir required to ensure the dreaded Catholic dynasty. Amidst an outbreak of anti-Catholic riots, a Whig-led cabal invited James's protestant daughter, Mary, and her husband, William, to invade England and take the throne, leaving James little option but to abdicate his rights and flee to France in fear for his life. It is unknown when exactly Behn wrote *The Widdow Ranter* during these events, but it was amidst this chaos that she set her eyes on the distant shores of colonial Jamestown and created her tale of a rebellious hero engaged against a familiar group of immoral and undeserving councilmen and a curious widow famed for her revelry and eccentric generosity.

As for Currer, *A Duke and No Duke* (1684), performed through the latter half of 1684, would be her last known production in London for five years. Following her performance as Isabella, she disappeared from cast lists until her comeback performance as the titular Ranter in 1689. Perhaps the rise of young comic stars, Charlotte Butler and Susannah Mountfort, or the generic shift towards sentimental she-tragedies left little room for Currer's particular skills. It is also possible that Currer was scouted by John Ogilby and Joseph Ashbury, the managers of the Smock Alley Players in Dublin, who were known to travel to London to

recruit “English actors aspiring to perform in larger and more complex roles”.[lxiv] It seems probable that Currer’s absence from the London stage can be explained by her developing her talents further afield given her return in 1689, shortly after the closure of the Smock Alley Theatre, to perform in the posthumous production of *Ranter*.

Since Margo Hendricks’ superb discussion on civility and barbarism in *Ranter*, criticism has tended to focus more on the high, tragic plot between Bacon and Semernia.[lxv] If the lower, comic plot is discussed, it is usually in terms of a foil for its principal counterpart. Similarly, the widow herself is most often mentioned in relation to her place as a comic foil to Semernia, as both women dress in breeches and engage in duels with their would-be lovers, one ending in tragedy and the other notable for its success. However, these readings do not do justice to the space Behn creates for Currer’s characters, both in terms of theatrical influence and within the play-world. Despite her relatively limited role in terms of stage time, the character of Ranter is emphasised by Behn by giving her primacy over Bacon in the full title of the play, *The Widdow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia*, suggesting, if nothing else, a personal desire to highlight the woman’s narrative from indentured servant to fully accomplished master of her fate.

The two parts of her name, “Widdow” and “Ranter” best demonstrate the ways in which Behn extends Currer’s previous mistress roles to instil in her protagonist a radical power, made possible by the fantastical space of the New World, in order to challenge the national anxieties that she had previously embodied. As a young widow, Ranter inhabits an unusual position as both trader and traded. This tension is demonstrated when Friendly describes, “the Widdow Ranter, a Woman bought from the Ship by Old Colonel Ranter; she serv’d him half a year, and then he Marry’d her, and dying in a year more, left her worth Fifty thousand Pound Sterling, besides Plate and Jewells”.[lxvi] From the moment she arrives in Virginia, Ranter becomes part and parcel of the mercantile processes that fund the colony.

Having been bought off the ship by her future husband and entered into his service, Ranter essentially becomes a paid-for bride, similar to Currer's Diana at the end of *The City Heiress.* It was hardly rare for one of Currer's characters to be discussed in terms of commodification. As we have seen in *The Kind-Keeper*, the Catholicised symbolism of Tricksy's decadence was intrinsically connected to displays of material wealth and finery as an attack on the excesses of the Duchess of Portsmouth and, more broadly, the feminisation of the Catholic church and its preoccupation with "toys and trinkets".[lxvii] Elsewhere in Currer's back catalogue of roles, we can see the language of commodity being used to define her relationships, usually with her body as the site of exchange. For example, in an attempt to dismiss his mistress, Betty Frisque, Lord Drybone of Crowne's *Countrey Wit* declares, "if I have not paid dear enough for you to have you be mine, I am sure I have bought and paid enough for all that is in the Trunks to dispose of them".[lxviii] Similarly, in *The City Heiress*, Diana scoffs at her would be lover Wilding, "Love me! what if you do? how far will that go at the Exchange for Poynt? Will the Mercer take it for currant Coin?".[lxix]

Although, like her contemporaries, Behn is guilty of explicating Currer's characters through this language of exchange, in her work it is often the characters themselves who recognise their position within this framework of monetisation, demonstrating Behn's bleak but honest reflections on the limited options for financially insecure women. Behn recreates this self-knowledge in the character of Ranter as she recognises, "we rich Widdows are the best Commodity this Country affords".[lxx] Her wealth gives her power but also makes her a desirable catch for fortune-seeking younger brothers. Where Ranter differs from Currer's previous roles is in the opportunities provided by the New World. Once she possesses her husband's fortune, Ranter actively engages with the town's economy. Upon their first meeting, Ranter demands of Hazard, "what Cargo, what goods have ye? any Poynts, Lace, rich Stuffs; Jewells; if you have I'le be your Chafferer".[lxxi] As chafferer, or negotiator, for

newly arrived merchants, Ranter takes control over the commerce that funds Jamestown and actively promotes the trends and fashions of the town. Not only is she a low-born woman who rose to social prominence through a cross-class marriage, but with her accumulated power she chooses to engage in trade, which in turn offers her power and authority within her community. Although Ranter can never truly escape the language of exchange that defines female characters in Restoration comedies, it is fitting that after years of playing the grasping mistress and the unloved wife, Behn should write a part for Currer that sees her dominate this mercantile world of wealth and exchange.

Her name "Ranter", meanwhile, is indicative of the peculiar confederacy of loosely related dissidents who rose to a sort of mythical prominence during the Interregnum. Contemporary accounts written around the time Behn produced her Virginian tragicomedy warn of "Ranters that will sit drinking of healths for so long till they have quite drank away their own health" and "the drunken debauched spirit of *Ranterism* and fleshly Liberty".[lxxii] Although the term Ranter might not be applicable to a tangible counter-culture, by the 1680s, the term was used to incite horror in the law-abiding masses based on the Ranters' "antinomian denial of the reality of sin".[lxxiii] As a sect, they became representative of a chaotic form of revelry and disorder, connected to overindulgence and vulgarity. Just as Dryden used the aptronym "Tricksy" to inform Currer's manipulative mistress, the Widow Ranter's name speaks to her spirit of dissent, this time in the form of the anarchic sect of anti-establishment heretics who threatened social order through their revelling and anti-social behaviour. Ranter interacts with men on free and equal terms, cheerfully engages with the murkier side of moral iniquity, and is portrayed as a heavy drinker, prodigious smoker, and indulgent eater. Upon entering Ranter's home in act two, Surelove, the model of appropriate femininity, complains, "This Madam *Ranter* is so prodigious a Treater—oh! I hate a room that smells of a great Dinner, and what's worse a desert of punch and tobacco".[lxxiv]

Similarly, whilst it was not unusual for breeches roles to swagger and threaten violence whilst in disguise, Ranter has the privilege of being as foul-mouthed and publicly violent out of breeches as she ever is in them. In her introductory scene, she threatens to "pistol" Friendly should he attempt to harm her beloved Dareing in the fighting and brashly insults her confederates with curses of "Ye Drunken Dog" and "Son of Baboone".[lxxv] Everything about Ranter speaks of distasteful, bodily pleasures readily associated with negative portrayals of womanhood and the indulgences and blasphemies of Ranterism, bar the fact that she is an utterly positive character. Whilst filling Hazard in on the great and the good of foundling Virginia, Friendly describes the Widow Ranter as a "great Gallant, But assuming the Humour of the Country Gentry, her Extravagancy is very pleasant, she retains something of her Primitive Quality still, but is good natur'd and Generous".[lxxvi] Despite the trappings of a grotesque, not to mention low-born, figure, Ranter is presented as witty, brave, resourceful, and deeply deserving of love. The tongue-in-cheek salaciousness of Dareing and Ranter's interaction as the former intentionally insults her, knowing her to be in disguise as a rival, harkens back to the euphemism of Currer's heyday:

> Dar. There's not a Blockhead in the Country that has not—
>
> Ran. —What—
>
> Dar. —Been Drunk with her.
>
> Ran. I thought you had meant something else Sir.[lxxvii]

Where Currer's previous sexualised characters were negatively linked through the Whore of Babylon motif to the continental threat of Catholicism, her final known part exhibits an opposing, equally disruptive, but positive figure of ideological dissidence. Currer's Widow Ranter becomes representative of a radicalised and specifically New World order that threatens and destabilises hierarchical structures of power.

Within the play's attitude to consumption and revelry, we see Behn's complicated and contradictory narrative choice to set her unusual heroine apart from her male contemporaries. In her own home, Ranter resides over festivities in which a punch bowl is paraded into her guests in a startling display of indulgence. For the exuberant widow, this is a joyful example of her generosity, but when this exercise is repeated in a later scene and "*a Bowl of Punch, and a great Ladle or two in it*" is brought in to satiate the Justices' interminable appetites as they hold court and negotiate any number of petty and personal grievances, the carnivalesque spectacle spills over into a dangerous reflection on ill-governance.[lxxviii] Whilst the untenable heroics of the Cavalier Bacon and the poor governance of the common Justices can be easily ascribed with the qualities of the Tory/Whig division of the Old World, Behn chooses to make something new of her socially unsettling heroine. Unlike the threatening dynamic between Dryden's Tricksy and Limberham, in pairing Ranter with Dareing, Behn takes a raucous figure of disruption and creates a unity that exemplifies, rather than diminishes, a renegotiated system of governance and power.

Ranter and Dareing's union, representative as it is of Behn's historic loyalties to Old World Royalism and her desire to find a fairer, if not truly meritocratic, social order in colonial Jamestown, is entrenched in the light-hearted comedy for which her plays are known. The exciting possibilities of their new kind of partnership are best demonstrated in the comic timing emulated by the printed version of Dareing's vow, "Give me thy hand Widow, I am thine—and so intirely, I will never—be drunk out of thy Company".[lxxix] The dramatic promise of Heroic love language is disrupted by a mischievously pregnant pause before Dareing's punchline, forcefully reminding the audience they can no longer expect adherence to the conventional rules of oppressive courtship in Behn's festive, riotous new world. The audience need to get used to these new "Territories" in which Ranter bars "Love-making" as "'tis inconsistent with the Punch-Bowle".[lxxx] By giving primacy to one of

Ranter's many social foibles, linked as it is with her innate Ranterism, as the cornerstone of their burgeoning partnership, Behn is consolidating the authority of proper governance with the promise of a changing and adapting status quo. Whilst it is satisfying and entertaining to read into Ranter an optimistic confluence of Behn's response to the frustrations of power systems that unfairly oppress and restrict women, it is important to see beyond the conditions of the character's sex. After years of inhabiting the roles created for her by Behn, Currer's last character is radical not because she is a sexual, humorous woman who aggressively pursues what she wants, but rather because she represents a wholly disruptive, antithetical ideology to the conservatism for which Behn is known. Unlike Tricksy and Lady Fancy, Ranter is capable of rejecting wholesale the negative associations of dissent to which her previous characters were tied. Behn once again uses Currer's pre-established line of non-conforming, eroticised women to enact a gleefully disruptive figure but then goes further in creating a unionising force out of her relationship with Dareing, representative of a renegotiated system in the New World.

From playing a coarse bit-part in John Crowne's *Country Wit*, Elizabeth Currer became a prominent comic performer in both the Duke's Company and its successor, using her performed identity and onstage persona to develop a successful line of sexual women who not only flirted with the boundaries of morality but actively undermined their stringency. When the political stage looked set to outstrip the theatrical one, Currer was an essential contributor to the company's attempts to stay current with the topical conversations of the day and provide compelling entertainment whilst simultaneously satirising and challenging the religious disruption that threatened the nation's stability. Whilst any one role performed by Currer might be dismissed as the token product of Restoration comedy's reliance on formulaic character types, by considering the influence of the actress across multiple productions, trends and significations become apparent that might be lost when individual

performances are taken in isolation. As Mrs Tricksy in Dryden's London comedy, we see a prime example of Currer's sexualised form of comedy and her reoccurring connection to the biblical Whore of Babylon being used to personify the encroaching Popish threat purportedly feared by the nation and embodied within the figure of Charles II's Catholic mistress. Ten years later, in her origination of the inimitable Widow Ranter, Currer's prior associations with these sexualised and ideologically non-conforming roles are used by Behn to develop a character that complicates and invigorates the tired tropes of the female grotesque, the witty heroine, and the moneyed widow by combining them into a fantastic portrayal of female potential in a vibrant New World setting, providing a salve for the tensions that pervade Behn's and her contemporaries' earlier work. Through both her social status as wealthy tradesperson and ideological inheritor to the anti-establishment Ranters, Behn finally creates for Currer a character who can break the cycle of grasping mistress to unloved wife to desirable widow. In doing so, Currer's portrayal of Ranter can undermine and even resolve the Restoration stage's insistence on linking the anxieties of religious controversy with the menace of female power.

---

[i] Wilson, *All the King's Ladies,* 2.
[ii] Howe, *First English Actresses,* 171.
[iii] Todd, *A Secret Life,* 215.
[iv] Howe, *First English Actresses,* 78.
[v] Bush-Bailey, *Treading the Bawds*, 39.
[vi] Todd, *A Secret Life*, 237.
[vii] Howe, *First English Actresses*, 78; Highfill, *Biographical Dictionary*. Vol. 4 of A *Biographical Dictionary of Actors*, 99; Bush-Bailey, *Treading the Bawds,* 39.
[viii] Crowne, *The Countrey Wit*, sig. A4r.
[ix] Behn, *The Town-Fopp*, 49.
[x] Howe, *First English Actresses*, 79.
[xi] Rev, 17:5.
[xii] Collecting data from EEBO and LION, I have found the term "Whore of Babylon" or synonyms thereof used twenty-one times in eighteen plays during the period 1660 to 1700. Of the twenty-one references, seven are said either to, about, or by one of Currer's characters. Of the other references, six are directly describing the influence of Rome and Popery, six are used to describe other characters, both male and female, and two are general oaths.
[xiii] Rev, 17:2.
[xiv] Dolan, *Whores of Babylon,* 6.
[xv] Ibid., 85.

[xvi] Ibid., 27.
[xvii] Stevens, "Healing a Whorish Heart", 71.
[xviii] Behn, *Sir Patient* Fancy, 13.
[xix] Behn, *Sir Patient Fancy,* 89.
[xx] Ibid., 72.
[xxi] Kenyon, *Popish Plot*; Harris, *Restoration*, 139–146.
[xxii] Kenyon, *Popish Plot*, 14.
[xxiii] Ibid., 1.
[xxiv] Van Lennep, *The London Stage*. Vol.1 of *The London Stage*, 276; Harris, *Restoration*, 176.
[xxv] Behn, *The Feign'd Curtizans*, sig. A4r.
[xxvi] Ibid.
[xxvii] Ibid.
[xxviii] Ibid.
[xxix] Ibid.
[xxx] Ibid.
[xxxi] Ibid.
[xxxii] Ibid.
[xxxiii] Behn, *The Feign'd Curtizans*, sig. A4v.
[xxxiv] Ibid.
[xxxv] Dryden, *The Kind-Keeper*, 16.
[xxxvi] Howe, *First English Actresses*, 79.
[xxxvii] Ibid.
[xxxviii] Ward, *The Letters of John Dryden*, 148.
[xxxix] Dearing and Roper, *Works of John Dryden*, 375; Thompson, *Coyness and Crime*, 50.
[xl] Dryden, *The Kind-Keeper*, 16.
[xli] Ray, *Andrew Marvell Companion*, 95.
[xlii] Thompson, *Coyness and Crime,* 50.
[xliii] Rev, 17:4.
[xliv] Dryden, *The Kind-Keeper*, 60.
[xlv] Ibid., 61.
[xlvi] Dryden, *The Kind-Keeper*, sig. A3v; "Keeping" being the act of financially maintaining a sexual partner in a usually lavish lifestyle. This term is most often, but not always, used to refer to men of means supporting their mistresses.
[xlvii] Van Lennep, *The London Stage,* Vol. 1 of *The London Stage*, 269.
[xlviii] Dryden, *The Kind-Keeper*, sig. A4v.
[xlix] Ibid.
[l] Thompson, *Coyness and Crime,* 45; 48.
[li] Dryden, *The Kind-Keeper*, 8.
[lii] Ibid., 9.
[liii] Ibid., 12, 11.
[liv] Ibid., 6.
[lv] Ibid., 15–16.
[lvi][lvi] Ibid., 17.
[lvii] Philpot Curran, *Collection of Speeches*, 243.
[lviii] Dryden, *The Kind-Keeper*, 56.
[lix] Hutner, *Colonial Women*, 104.
[lx] Golinelli, "Women's Contribution", 373; 380–381.
[lxi] Lowenthal, *Performing Identities,* 71-72; Musselwhite, "What Town's this Boy?", 279.
[lxii] Behn. *The Widdow Ranter*, 14.
[lxiii] Hughes, *The Theatre of Aphra Behn,* 188.
[lxiv] Tuite, *Theatre of Crisis*, 64.
[lxv] Hendricks, "Civility, Barbarism, and Aphra Behn's the Widow Ranter", 225–239.
[lxvi] Behn, *The Widdow Ranter*, 3.
[lxvii] Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, 27.
[lxviii] John Crowne, *The Countrey Wit*, 51.

[lxix] Behn, *The City Heiress*, 17.
[lxx] Behn, *The Widdow Ranter*, 12.
[lxxi] Ibid.
[lxxii] Oldfield, *Sincerity*, 215-216; Whitehead, *A Christian Epistle*, 6.
[lxxiii] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, 14.
[lxxiv] Behn, *The Widdow Ranter*, 17.
[lxxv] Ibid., 13, 10.
[lxxvi] Ibid., 3.
[lxxvii] Ibid., 45.
[lxxviii] Ibid., 27.
[lxxix] Ibid., 45.
[lxxx] Ibid.,18.

Disclosure Statement: The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding: This work was supported by the University of Sheffield and the Arts and Humanities Research Council through the White Rose College for the Arts & Humanities under Grant AH/L503848/1

Bibliography

Behn, Aphra, *The City Heiress*. London, D. Brown, 1682.

- *The False Count*. London: Jacob Tonson, 1682.
- *The Feign'd Curtizans*. London: Jacob Tonson, 1679.
- *The Town Fopp*. London: James Magnus, 1677.
- *The Widdow Ranter*. London: James Knapton, 1690.

Bush-Bailey, Gilli, *Treading the Bawds: Actresses and Playwrights on the Late-Stuart Stage.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.

Crowne, John, *The Countrey Wit.* London: James Magnus, 1675.

Davis, James Colin, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Dearing, Vinton A. and Alan Roper, *Plays.* Vol. 14 of *The Works of John Dryden*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992.

Dolan, Frances E., *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture*. London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Dryden, John, *The Kind-Keeper; or Mr Limberham*. London: R. Bentley, 1680.

D'Urfey, Thomas, *The Virtuous Wife*. London: R. Bentley, 1680.

Ferguson, Margaret, "New World Scenes from a Female Pen", *Dido's Daughters: Literary, Gender and Empire in Early Modern England and France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Frangos, Jennifer, "The Early Modern Queer Atlantic: Narratives of Sex and Gender on New World Soil" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies*, ed. by Leslie Eckel and Clare Elliott. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Golinelli, Gilberta, “Women's Contribution to Early Modern Utopian Speculations on the New World: *Oroonoko* and *The Widow Ranter* by Aphra Behn”, *Viagem e Cosmopolitismo: da Ilha ao Mundo* (2021): 371-384. url: https://cris.unibo.it/handle/11585/820363?mode=full.3053 [last accessed 23.10.23]

Harris, Tim, *Restoration: Charles II and his Kingdoms*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.

Hendricks, Margo, “Civility, Barbarism, and Aphra Behn's the Widow Ranter”, *Women, “Race”, and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker. London: Routledge, 1994.

Highfill, Philip H., A *Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800,* 16 vols. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Howe, Elizabeth, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660–1700.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Hughes, Derek, *The Theatre of Aphra Behn*. Baskingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.

Hutner, Heidi, *Colonial Women: Race and Culture in Stuart Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Jonson, Ben, *Bartholmew Fayre*. London: Robert Allott, 1631.

Lowenthal, Cynthia, *Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

Musselwhite, Paul, “‘What Town’s this Boy?’: English Civic Politics, Virginia’s Urban Debate, and Aphra Behn’s *The Widow Ranter*”, *Atlantic Studies* 8, no. 3 (2011): 279–299. doi: 10.1080/14788810.2011.589694.

Oldfield, James, *Sincerity, or, The Upright Mans Walk to Heaven*. London, Edward Giles, 1687.

Philpot Curran, John, *A New and Enlarged Collection of Speeches by the Right Honourable John Philpot Curran, Late Master of the Rolls in Ireland*. London: William Hone, 1819.

Ray, Robert H., *An Andrew Marvell Companion*. London: Garland Publishing, 1998.

Stevens, Laura M., “‘Healing a Whorish Heart’: The Whore of Babylon and Protestant Interiority in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Britain”, *European Studies* 31 (2013): 71–84. doi: 10.1163/9789401209632_006.

Tate, Nahum, *The Loyal General*. London: Henry Bowicke, 1680.

Thompson, Peggy, *Coyness and Crime in Restoration Comedy*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012.

Todd, Janet, *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life.* London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

- “Introduction” to *Aphra Behn: Oroonoko, The Rover and Other Works*. St Ives: Penguin Publishing, 1992.

Tuite, Patrick, *Theatre of Crisis: The Performance of Power in the Kingdom of Ireland: 1641–1691.* Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010.

Van Lennep, William, *The London Stage 1660-1800, part 1: 1660–1700*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965.

Ward Charles E., *The Letters of John Dryden: With Letters Addressed to Him*. Durham, N.C.: Seeman Printery, 1942.

Whitehead, George, *A Christian Epistle to Friends*. London, Andrew Sole, 1689.

Wilson, John Harold, *All the King's Ladies*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1958.