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"A Very Equal Well-Proportion'd Pair": Creative Collaboration in the Careers of Restoration Actress, Mrs Norris, and Playwright, Aphra Behn

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"A VERY EQUAL WELL-PROPORTION'D PAIR": CREATIVE COLLABORATION IN THE CAREERS OF RESTORATION ACTRESS, MRS NORRIS, AND PLAYWRIGHT, APHRA BEHN

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ABSTRACT

Despite a career spanning twenty-five years little is known about one of England's earliest professional actresses. Drawing upon new archival evidence, this study reveals the biographical details of a woman cited in cast lists as "Mrs Norris" as early as 1662. Not only was Norris the matriarch of an acting family that held a presence on the stage until 1737, she also won "considerable applause" for her comic displays of old age. Her performance of peripheral characters who harbour great bitterness and resentment towards a play's youthful protagonists spoke to a fashionable contemporary aversion to seniority. Appearing most often in the plays of Aphra Behn, Norris's career culminated in comic displays of older women in productions of "The Revenge" (1680) and "The Second Part of the Rover" (1681). By examining the contributions of a supporting player, as opposed to that of leading actors, this study expands our understanding of the broad network of significations at play through the character development of less studied roles. I argue that whilst Behn demonstrated sympathy for characters, particularly women, who are rejected wholesale by the theatrical mainstream, she consistently relies on an audience's contempt for Norris's characterisations of seniority to secure a dependable laugh.

KEYWORDS Restoration theatre; actresses; Aphra Behn; *The Revenge*; *The Second Part of the Rover*

Far from achieving the success of her contemporaries, Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Barry, the actress cited in cast lists as "Mrs Norris" has been all but forgotten. Listed just underneath the "Principal Actresses" Davenport, Davies, Saunderson, and Long, "Mrs Norris" appears in John Downes' record of the original members of Sir William Davenant's newly formed Duke's Company of 1660, marking her as one of the first professional actresses on

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the English stage.¹ In the explanatory notes to *The Works of Aphra Behn* (1915), Montague Summers describes Mrs Norris as “one of those useful and, indeed, indispensable performers who, without ever attaining any prominent position, contribute more essentially than is often realized to the success of a play”.² Whilst there have been several recent examinations of Restoration and early eighteenth-century actresses, including Elizabeth Howe’s *First English Actresses* (1992), Gilly Bush-Bailey’s *Treading the Bawds* (2006), Felicity Nussbaum’s *Rival Queens* (2010), and Elaine McGirr’s chapter “Authorial Performances: Actress, Author, Critic” (2017), the emphasis has invariably fallen on the celebrated stars of the period, such as Gwyn, Barry, Annie Bracegirdle, and Anne Oldfield. Although this work has begun a vital process of recontextualising the Restoration actress by prioritising her work over the mere conditions of her primacy, the focus on company stars continues to display these women in terms of exceptionalism as opposed to figures involved in a network of collaborative artistic professionals. This essay aims to begin the process of analysing the contributions of the supporting and less well-known actresses of the time to solidify our understanding of how performers and writers, working in collaboration, developed the comic form during this period. Seventeenth-century theatre companies tended to employ actors from the same families and performers usually reanimated recognisable lines across productions; therefore, an historicist approach to contextualising actresses’ careers through an examination of their familial and professional connections, playing ages, and known character types provides crucial insight into how performers were strategically cast to inform their characters.

Norris created a “special line” with her “capital impersonations of old women and angry dowagers” and this article considers the extent to which the characters Norris originated, as a collected body of work, informed the parts written for her by Aphra Behn.³ Norris’s roles represent all the neglected but ultimately vital women of the burgeoning Restoration stage. During her time with the Duke’s Company, she originated at least twenty-four characters in a career spanning as many years, predominantly women of old age, low status, and few prospects.⁴ As Robert D. Hume discusses, the stock nature of the famous comedies of the period required their content to be formulaic in the extreme.⁵ Rather than this depreciating the need for further study, the specific lines and character portrayals of individual actors that arise repeatedly across a range of similarly formatted plays, can be used to re-evaluate the way these formulae were stretched, manipulated, and renegotiated. Drawing upon Lisa Freeman’s work on eighteenth-century theatre, which stresses character development as both “manifold and incongruous”, we can use an actress’s repertory within this framework of renegotiation and collaboration to consider the wider significations recognisable in their parts over multiple productions.⁶ Similarly, we can form a new appreciation

for how each character evokes different, and often daring, challenges to the status quo, and the subtle diversity of Restoration plays.

Norris's previously undiscovered birth, marriage, and burial records reveal new details about her life. This biographical information illustrates specific significations in the roles she played that have previously gone unnoticed, particularly in relation to the age of her characters. Due to her proclivity towards playing ageing, mockable women, the trends and patterns of Norris's career illuminate the disparaging, even violent, ways in which Restoration convention treated its secondary female characters, whilst simultaneously illustrating Norris's skills in forming comic, complex portrayals of maligned women. When they are most deftly handled, Norris's characters reveal varied and challenging characterisations beyond the restrictive portrayals of gendered romance, sexuality, and morality applied to the genre's more conventional leading roles. Behn was by far the most successful dramatist to understand this potential and make use of the binary between a play's youthful, carefree female characters and the comic labouring of Norris's older women. From her early appearances as serving women, Norris's career would culminate in a string of successful roles developed in collaboration with Behn through the late 1670s and early 1680s. Focusing on *The Revenge* (1680) and *The Second Part of the Rover* (1681), this article examines the ways in which Aphra Behn and Mrs Norris created supporting characters who manipulated the standards forced upon Restoration comedy's forsaken older women to great comic success.

Restoration Rehearsal Practices

As this study is predominantly concerned with the representation of character and the co-authorial relationship between actor and writer, it is first important to explore the conventions of Restoration rehearsal practices to clarify the degree to which Norris was responsible for developing her roles. Within the small world of seventeenth-century theatre, playwrights largely wrote parts with specific actors in mind. In the dramatis personae of his comedy, *The Damoiselles a la Mode* (1667), Richard Flecknoe writes, "Together with the Persons Represented in this Comedy, I have set down the Comedians, whom I intended shou'd Represent them".⁷ The practice of adhering to authorial casting wherever possible was expected throughout the period, as demonstrated by the claim in the dedication to Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter* (1690) that the play failed because "many of the Parts [were] false Cast, and given to those whose Tallants and Genius's suited not our Authors Intention".⁸ Once parts were given, they were then considered the property and responsibility of that actor, to be recast only with the permission of the actor or on the actor's departure from the stage. Thomas Betterton's biographer, Robert Lowe, references this phenomenon in an anecdote concerning Barry and Bracegirdle, writing that the latter

refused to take the senior actress's roles when offered to her by penny-pinching managers, "for Mrs. Bracegirdle was too wise to interfere with her famous companion's characters, and positively declined to play any part that was the acknowledged property of Mrs. Barry".⁹ Lowe continues that "no considerations whatever will reconcile the public to accept an inferior actor in a part for which a better representative is still on the stage".¹⁰ For this reason, Restoration players had parts written to complement their specific skills. In the preface to *Woman's Wit* (1697), Colley Cibber laments that having "prepar'd my Characters to the taste of those Actors" in Thomas Betterton's rebel company, he then needed to "confine the Business of my Persons to the Capacity of different people" after moving it to the other playhouse.¹¹ This move was not entirely detrimental, however, as Cibber admits that so as "not to miss the Advantage of Mr. Dogget's Excellent Action; I prepar'd a low Character".¹² Whilst writing a comic part for a comic actor was by no means a new practice, it did mean that, for the first time, comic actresses were being written for in a manner specifically suited to their skills.

Once cast, the performer held an integral role in developing their character. Deborah Payne uses the story of John Wilmot's Pygmalion-like transformation of Elizabeth Barry to suggest that "playwrights worked closely with the companies during rehearsal, teaching parts, answering questions, and, in response to suggestions from the players, changing lines [...] far from functioning as passive objects in a spectacle, actresses shaped plays in rehearsal and performance".¹³ Whilst Payne's basis for this assertion is anecdotal, Tiffany Stern helpfully interrogates the issue in her work *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (2000). Stern reiterates this idea, suggesting that because parts were written for specific players and those players then owned those parts, the performance of characters were largely the purview of individual players; the originator's version of a character remained the ideal, even if a part were to be inherited by another actor.¹⁴ Stern notes how "authors' dependency on their actors gave the actors powerful status in the actor-author struggle; the actors' 'right' to parts written for them gave them considerable freedom in the way they manifested those parts on the stage".¹⁵ This possessive actor/character relationship is not surprising, given the way in which a performer was expected to practice and develop their role. As Stern elucidates, once a play had been accepted, it was read to the full company by the playwright. In many cases, this reading would be the only chance for a writer to convey how they envisioned the play's performance before each actor was handed their parts, or "sides", and went off to study in isolation.¹⁶ For many, particularly secondary performers such as Mrs Norris, these readings would be all their instruction until a final full company rehearsal, meaning most character development and independent blocking would be done by the actors themselves.

Principal actors might benefit from instruction by fellow actors, company managers, or even interested amateurs, whilst secondary players were expected to muddle through on their own. Contrary to expectation, this enabled secondary performers to develop their characters in line with their own skills and interpretations to a greater degree than the principals. Charles Gildon, ventriloquising Thomas Betterton, writes that this period of solo study was required “to enter thoroughly into the Nature of the Part, or to consider the Variation of the Voice, Looks, and Gestures”, suggesting that the extratextual development of the performance lay in the hands of the actor.¹⁷ Even where the original written script was concerned, provided their cues remained recognisable to their fellow performers, an actor had a surprising amount of liberty to influence their speech.¹⁸ Extemporisation was a common “crime” committed by actors.¹⁹ In his treatise *The Actor* (1750), Sir John Hill claims the “celebrated” Henry Norris, son of Mrs Norris, “introduc’d a thousand occasional pleasantries into every one of the ridiculous characters he was famous for playing”.²⁰

The issue for the modern scholar becomes a matter of extracting the player’s influence on the character from the textual influence of the poet, not to mention the censor and the printer who were responsible for producing the final edition. Whilst this cannot be done with exactitude, by marrying the textual representation of similar characters across separate plays with the extratextual significations of their performer, we can begin to recognise specific performance styles and draw out the influence of the player. In her analysis of the careers of two celebrated actresses of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, Nell Gwyn and Susannah Cibber, Elaine McGirr emphasises the actresses’ work as displays of “performative authorship”.²¹ In other words, McGirr recognises that the performance of character can have as much influence on the production of meaning as the initial writing, and uses a method of textual recovery to prioritise the contributions of the actress. McGirr’s contention that “playwrights are not puppetmasters, and actresses do not passively mouth the lines given them” is invaluable in recognising the importance of these early pioneers, as “the actress’s creation of a role provided a reading of the play, an interpretation of character and significance”.²² A reliable and seasoned supporting actress such as Mrs Norris, appearing in a recognisable line of roles, would have had considerable freedom to develop her characters once they had been handed over by Behn.

Reconstructing the Life and Career of Elizabeth Norris, 1636–1682

Until now, little has been discovered about the life of Mrs Norris, a woman who made her living as perennial foil to the lead actors of her

time. Mrs Norris was baptised Elizabeth Topping, her birth recorded in the parish registers of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, for May 1636. Her parents were Peter and Elizabeth.²³ At the age of twenty five, Elizabeth married the bit-part actor, Henry Norris, and lived with him in a property on Longacre, a stone's throw from the theatres in which the pair would spend their lives working.²⁴ One of the few concrete facts to survive about Elizabeth is that she was the mother of the celebrated comic actor, the aforementioned Henry Norris, who was more widely remembered as "Jubilee Dicky" due to his winning performance in George Farquhar's *The Constant Couple* (1699). Before having her son, Elizabeth gave birth to a daughter who was baptised Mary on the 24th of August 1662 at St. Martin-In-The-Fields.²⁵ Like the rest of her family, Mary would also embark on a career in theatre. Contrary to Summers's assertion that the role must have gone to Mrs Price, it was Mary Norris who first played the "Girl" Lucia in the 1681 production of *The Second Part of the Rover*, whilst her mother took on the role of Petronella Elenora, thereby accounting for the double appearance of the actresses' shared name in the *dramatis personae*.²⁶ Elizabeth Norris was buried on the 17th of May 1682, just a month after she appeared as Mrs Clacket in Behn's *The City Heiress* (1682).²⁷ The recovery of Norris's death date indicates that later mentions of "Mrs Norris" in cast lists, as Chloris in a 1683 production of Thomas Otway's *The Atheist*, Amie in the 1684 revival of Richard Brome's *The Jovial Crew* (1652), and as a singer in Otway's *The Cheats of Scapin* (1685), are references to Mary Norris and not her mother, as previously believed.²⁸ Although Norris died in 1682 and her daughter only played a few small parts, there remained a Norris on the stage until 1737 when Elizabeth Norris, great-granddaughter to focus of this study, left the stage.²⁹ Throughout the 1660s, Elizabeth Norris played a variety of small parts, acting as serving women, maids, and companions, including Cariola in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1615) when it was revived in 1662; the latter was her first known role. It was not until the 1667 production of the immensely successful John Dryden comedy, *Sir Martin Mar-all*, in which Norris performed the part of the Old Lady Dupe, that she first displayed her propensity for playing humorous, readily mockable, older women, despite being just thirty-one at the time. It did not take long for other writers to make use of her skills. Over the course of her career, Norris accumulated such parts as Goody Fells, the litigious widow in Edward Revet's *The Town-Shifts* (1671); Goody Rash, an ageing herb-woman in John Crowne's *The Country Wit* (1675); Nuarcha, an old maid "almost undone for want of a Husband" in Lewis Maidwell's *The Loving Enemies* (1680); and, in the final years of her career, a variety of conniving, amoral, and complex figures at the hands of Behn.³⁰

Attitudes to Ageing in Restoration Comedies

Painting the elderly as mockable, disposable figures was a common Restoration trope. In a passage exploring Restoration comedy in *The English Humourists* (1867), William Makepeace Thackeray writes, “Money is for youth, love is for youth, away with the old people”.³¹ Espousing, at least ostensibly, the libertine values of Charles II’s court, the comedies that became prodigiously popular in the mid-1660s and 1670s were decidedly unkind to their elderly characters. The works of playwrights such as William Wycherley and George Etherege are littered with old men who share the sexual politics of their youthful sons and are savagely mocked and often jilted, such as Sir Feeble Fainwou’d in Aphra Behn’s *The Luckey Chance* (1687). Ageing women, widowed or unmarried, must scheme and trick their way into younger company only to find themselves the oblivious target of boyish jests, a fate recognisable in Lady Flippant of Wycherley’s *Love in a Wood* (1672). Hypocritical puritans who preach and prattle at the play’s charming youths are later found in compromising displays of sexual exposure, such as Tickletext in Behn’s *The Feign’d Curtizans* (1679). As R. C. Sharma highlights, here “there is nowhere any recognition of the goodness, nobility and wisdom of old age” but rather the constant reminder of a feeble and creeping infirmity.³² These characters are the antithesis of the Restoration libertine and must be appropriately punished for their continued existence through a cruel but greatly effective ridicule. In his book, *Staging Ageing* (2013), Michael Mangan describes the Restoration attitude as “youth obsessed”, pointing out that whilst “the upper classes tended to age less early than the lower, in all sectors of society women tended to be defined as ‘old’ earlier than men”.³³ Whilst works such as Lynne Bothelo’s and Pat Thane’s *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500* (2001) have gone a long way in helping us to understand the broad nuances and complexities of age and ageing across the early modern period, Restoration theatre saw ageing as a trait to be scorned.³⁴ Elderly women, especially those of few prospects, were the most ideal targets for this form of age-averse comedy.

Restoration comedies did not just depict the elderly as obstructions or rivals for “real” couples to overcome, but rather used old age itself as intrinsically entertaining. In the anonymous 1682 play, *Mr Turbulent*, the aptly named Lady Medlar, upon being accused of ageing honourably, retorts, “Age is good for nothing, but to spoil good Faces, brisk Wits, and active Bodies; to bring Wrinkles, gray Hairs, moist Eyes [...] Age I say, is a most wicked and abominable thing”.³⁵ Aging, in the very least at an outward level, translated to easy comedy on the stage, and was often the target of verbal and physical abuse. As perennial victims of cuckolding, jilting, impotence, and embarrassment, the men of Restoration comedy are forced to

confront their own aggrandised self-importance in a world which has long since ceased to need them. As for the older women, they are consigned to be vain, jealous, conniving, and ridiculous in their desperation. Although variations exist, the intergenerational clashes which make up so much of the conflict in Restoration comedy fall largely into two categories: the elderly characters who fear replacements snapping at their heels and therefore attempt to dominate and control them, such as Mr Pinchwife or Old Lady Squeamish in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675), and the jealous profligates desperate to retain the beauty and libido embodied in their young companions, recognisable in Old Fumble of Thomas D'Urfey's *The Fond Husband* (1677) and Lady Flippant of Wycherley's *Love in a Wood* (1672). Of these successful comic characters, only Michael Mohun in the role of Pinchwife, as a veteran actor of the pre-civil war theatres, would have been of an appropriate age to match his character's seniority.³⁶ Largely, these older parts were taken on by relatively young actors, enabling a form of imitative mockery seen in Norris's portrayal of the Old Lady Dupe. Acted by Norris at the age of thirty-one, Dupe is described as "The old Lady" in the *dramatis personae* of the 1668 folio.³⁷ Aside from the suggestion of tokenism provided by the employment of the definite article, this demarcation of Norris's character in print is indicative of the appealing penchant for creating an otherness between a text's protagonists and its elder characters, a discrimination employed with particular virulence towards women. Lady Dupe is at once a cunning facilitator, cheating jilt, and primarily, according to the *dramatis personae*, an old lady with all the mockable qualities associated therein. To some, such as Sir Martin and his servant Warner, she is "the greatest Jilt in Nature" who "loves nothing but herself and draws all lines to that corrupted centre", but to her niece, Mrs Christian, at least at first, she is a teacher and guide to the ways of sexual intrigue.³⁸ Playing off her age from the start, Dupe declares, "But to our business; Cousin: you are young, but I am old, and have had all the Love-experience that a discreet Lady ought to have; and therefore let me instruct you".³⁹ These themes of sexual instruction and gendered manipulation were to become a staple of the genre but also deeply informed Norris's characterisations of liminal women, hovering as much at the edge of appropriateness, as the scene itself.

Elizabeth Norris and Aphra Behn

By the late 1670s, Norris had been a member of the Duke's Company for nearly two decades and her ability to perform lewd, conniving old women had become a recurrent feature of the stage at Dorset Garden. However, it was not until 1677 that Norris first performed a character created by another woman when she played Callis in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677). Callis acts as a simple but heartfelt custodian to Elizabeth Barry's Hellena

and Mary Betterton's Florinda, who decide to disguise themselves to sneak away and enjoy the Carnival where they meet the English libertines Willmore and Belvile. For her pains, the character of Callis is ultimately "toppled" into a "great Chest" by Florinda's kinswoman Valeria.⁴⁰ Despite "bawling for help", the duenna is locked in to prevent her telling her charges' domineering brother of their plans to marry. Although this action happens offstage and cannot be claimed to be aided by Norris's performance, Behn's treatment of Callis is indicative of the Restoration theatre's pervasive attitude towards its elder characters. In the years following, Norris performed in at least five plays known, or thought, to have been written by Aphra Behn, more than any other playwright over the course of her career. Other than Callis, her Behn roles included Phillippa in *The Feign'd Curtizans*, Mrs Dunwell in *The Revenge*, Petronella Elenora in *The Second Part of The Rover*, and Mrs Clacket in *The City Heiress*. In the first four of these plays, Norris was partnered with the theatre's rising star, Elizabeth Barry, creating a dynamic that relied heavily on the popular trope of intergenerational conflict.⁴¹ In the early years, the nature of their on-stage relationship implied some form of maternal surrogacy as Norris took on the parts of governess, duenna, and companion to the younger star. However, as the partnership developed and Behn's writing became more invested in explorations of denigrated women, the affiliation between the two actresses evolved into bittersweet portrayals of sexual commodity as the two performed as elderly bawd and desirable courtesan. The collaboration between Norris and Barry would have been a recognisable union. The contrasting image of the aged, sexually unappealing matron pitched against Barry's youthful vivacity was a trope repeatedly revisited by Behn, suggesting a conscious attempt to exploit the two actresses' opposing but complementary on-stage personae, informed by the twenty-two-year age gap between them, and the previous roles performed by Norris.

The prologue to *The Second Part of the Rover* sees William Smith in character as the titular "Rover", Willmore, chastise the play's author for attempting to "play the old Game o're again" following the enormous success of the original four years prior.⁴² Smith's pre-emptive admission that the author is aware of her blatant reproduction and is actively pandering to popular appeal undermines any accusations of appropriation similar to those levelled at her following the triumph of *The Rover*. There is an underlying admission in these words that once she is in possession of a winning formula, Behn will exploit it without restraint. The combination of Elizabeth Barry as empathetic heroine, at the age of nineteen, coupled with Norris, by then in her mid-forties, as supporting accomplice and comic foil was a persuasive partnership and one Behn intended to develop. That is not to say that Behn's creations or the actresses' characterisations were in danger of becoming stale reproductions of tired stereotypes. Inspired by Barry's on-stage success as

the tragic protagonist of Thomas Otway's *The Orphan* (1680), Behn wrote the part of Corina in *The Revenge* (1680) for her and thrust her embittered tale of vengeance into an otherwise blithe retelling of John Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan* (1604). The development of the Barry/Norris partnership we begin to see in the late 1670s with *The Rover* and *The Feign'd Curtizans* accelerates dramatically and antagonistically into their on-stage relationship in *The Revenge*. Although this was published anonymously, Elizabeth Howe, Derek Hughes, and Janet Todd all avow the play's connection to Behn citing "credible contemporary evidence" and "the internal evidence for Behn's hand".⁴³ Certainly, the way the mutually dependent but ultimately harmful affiliation between the ageing bawd, Mrs Dunwell, and the tragic prostitute, Corina, plays out acts as a precursor to the jealousy-fuelled actions of Norris's Petronella Elenora in the sequel to *The Rover* just six months later. The parallels between these two characters are striking, especially when considering their proximity to two of Barry's most celebrated displays of sexual commodity. Both are depicted as former prostitutes who have taken to instruction in their majority. Dunwell and Petronella harbour resentment towards their youthful charges whilst realising the necessity of maintaining their control by keeping them unwed. Both of their young charges' narrative arcs, one culminating in tragedy and the other conspicuous for its comic success, demonstrate Behn's enduring sympathy for young female characters forced, coerced, or voluntarily disposed towards prostitution, even whilst she admonishes her older characters in the same industry. Norris's bawds supply both the impetus for Barry's characters participation in the industry as well as the dissenting voice against following love over financial and professional security. These two relationships, performed by the same women six months apart, express mirroring effect indicative of Behn's reprocessing of a successful device. La Nuche's accusation of Petronella in act four that "from childhood thou hast trained me up in cunning, read lectures to me of the use of Man, but kept me from knowledge of the right; taught me to jilt, to flatter and deceive" is reminiscent of Corina's tirade against Dunwell in act two of *Revenge*, "'Twas you, Heaven curse ye for't, that first seduc'd me, swore that he lov'd me, wou'd eternally; and when my Vertue had resolv'd me good, damn'd Witch, whose trade is Lying and Confusion, you hard besieg'd it round with tales of Wellman".⁴⁴ Both La Nuche and Corina ultimately choose to reject their bawd's advice and embark on their unprofitable journeys of love and revenge, removed from the theatrically compelling but ultimately negative influence of Norris's characters. Where Norris's earlier Behn roles tended towards simple but ultimately likeable companions, Dunwell and Petronella exhibit darker traits informed by jealousy, manipulation, and self-preservation.

Although they offer different methods on "how to couzen a dull phlegmatic greasy brain'd English man", the comic function of the two bawds

operates in similar ways.⁴⁵ Within these texts, Norris's specific contribution to the creation of comic meaning can be categorised into two forms. On one level, Norris procured laughter due to her presence as foil to the beauty and youth of Barry. This comedy works in an innately physical manner, entrenched in the grotesque Bakhtinian humour of the human body and, for Norris, only requires her on-stage presence as a visual exhibition employed for a cruel one-off joke. For example, the joke of Dunwell's entrance, or more appropriately her discovery, in *The Revenge* derives from nothing more than her physical occupation of a space on the stage. Prior to Norris's entrance, Joseph William's character, Friendly, stands on the forestage across from Smith's Wellman, discussing the notion of accompanying him to a "Bawdy-house, to visit an impudent prostitute", before asserting that "The worst object the world can shew me, is an immodest vulgar woman".⁴⁶ No sooner does Friendly reluctantly agree to follow his companion than the "SCENE draws to a House" and "Enters Mrs Dunwell".⁴⁷ Before Norris has had a chance to speak or even move, the timeliness of her reveal, combined with her occupancy of the available space, has exposed her to be the immodest and vulgar figure of Friendly's nightmares. This, alongside her identifiable countenance of age and infirmity, no doubt exaggerated through stage make-up and stature, sets her up to be the perfect target. In *The Second Part of the Rover*, Norris's contributions to the success of this joke are even more stark as the play sees her ageing bawd character become a spectacle of mockery for the public consumption of the play-world characters, as well as the theatrical audience. As the crowds gather to view a visiting mountebank, or more accurately Willmore in disguise, Petronella enters being "carried in a Chair, Dress'd like a Girl of fifteen".⁴⁸ Ned Blunt asks who comes before them "muz'd by old Gaffer time" and is told that it is Petronella Elenora, "the famous outworn curtizan" who "may be that of Troy for her Antiquity, tho fitter for God Priapus to ravish than Paris".⁴⁹ The comedy of this exhibition relies on the ludicrous incongruity between her dress and appearance, a disparity that is emphasised by Willmore's insistence that his miraculous bath will transform "these Gray Hairs" and "wither'd limbs".⁵⁰ One can assume that, at the age of forty-five, Norris was required to physically alter her form to achieve a spectacle of age beyond her years, to exaggerate this effect. Whilst critics are perpetually in disagreement over the extent to which Behn espoused an ideology of libertinism, it is difficult to deny that her plays reinforce certain aspects of a creed that inherently supports the sexual virility and tenacity of youth.⁵¹ Despite in many areas demonstrating a sympathy for women who are rejected wholesale by the theatrical mainstream, Behn consistently relies on the mockery of seniority to secure a laugh for her ageing comic, whilst Norris's skills in the visual and physical representation of this mockery were vital in causing the joke to land. In both *The Revenge* and *The*

Second Part, Behn is depending on Norris, as perennial bawd and aged undesirable, to provoke laughter based on the visual disparity between her and the company's star, Elizabeth Barry.

By feeding into the deep-rooted gerontophobia of a Carolean audience, Behn is aiding an age-dependent form of misogyny that attacks and ostracises the older woman. Despite this, Behn's use of Norris's skill and reputation is not wholeheartedly dependent on entrenched systems of prejudice. To ignore the intentional casting of Norris and Barry, both individually and together, is to do a disservice to the collaborative efforts of the two performers and the second way Behn uses her secondary characters. The shift between the first and second parts of *The Rover* sees the decidedly unreformed Willmore bewail "with a sham sadness" the death of his wife Hellena.⁵² Within the play-world, this callous, but not entirely out of character, demeanour appears to be indicative of a lack of imagination on Behn's part. By simply killing off Hellena, Behn clears the way for Willmore to embark on a fresh conquest by using what scraps of plot were left of Thomas Killigrew's *Thomaso* (1664). When considering the casting of *The Second Part*, however, one can see a pattern that transcends the material components of the plot and addresses Behn's broader approach to her female characters, both major and minor. As the only characters to appear in both parts, it is natural that William Smith and Cave Underhill should reanimate their roles as Willmore and Blunt. The only other male actor to appear in both the 1677 and 1681 productions, Mr Richards, appeared in minor roles. As for the women, only Barry and Norris were recast in the sequel. In casting Barry in both productions, Behn provides a tangible link between the witty, innocent heroine of part one and the desirable, but necessarily flawed, figure of La Nuche in part two. Rather than having Barry play Ariadne, a character far closer to Hellena in terms of position and literary archetype, the star is cast in the more provocative, controversial role of the denigrated woman. By casting Barry as Hellena and as La Nuche, Behn is insisting on reimagining both characters as the sympathetic central figure, and the ultimate desire of Willmore, on equal terms. Through this consolidation of a single feminine identity spanning separate characters, Barry constructs a personality beyond the confines of the play's text and insists on a fair judgement for each of the roles she inhabits. Less central but equally as deliberate is the parallel assimilation of Norris's characters over the span of the two plays, as well as the interim productions of *The Feign'd Curtizans* and *The Revenge*, revealing the second way in which Norris's persona and talents are used to evoke significations beyond the immediate satisfaction of seeing her elderly characters abused. Just as Barry's career sees her turn from girlish wit to alluring courtesan, so too does Norris evolve from the maternal guardian Callis, living in fear of the remonstrations of the play's dominant male characters, to an unapologetically licentious bawd

capable of commanding the scene, all within the single figure of the comedian. In forging this link, Behn deliberately instils the aspects of maternity and surrogacy presented by Callis and Phillipa into the later characters of Dunwell and Petronella, thereby complicating the unhealthy and detrimental relationships between bawd and protégé. Whilst it cannot be claimed that Behn's creation or Norris's presentation of these women is kind or even fair, this process does allow for a more complex display of the breadth of female experience.

The onstage partnership between Barry and Norris is softly satirised in a moment between the pair in the first act of *The Second Part of the Rover*. Upon spying an appropriate gull in the affected form of Fetherfool, Petronella turns to her young courtesan and, in a manner that suggests the steadfast repetition of schoolroom drills, forces her to recite a plan to cozen the "English rich fool".⁵³ Attempting to tease out a response from the distracted La Nuche, Petronella prompts, "And accosting him thus – Tell him –", to which La Nuche finally snaps back with the expected answer whilst "[*Speaking so fast, [Petronella] offering to put in her word, is still prevented by tothers running on*]".⁵⁴ This comic moment highlights the gaping difference between La Nuche's tenacious youth and Petronella's creeping, aged wisdom whilst gently stressing the deeper performative connection between the two actresses. So rehearsed are they in their respective roles that, whilst the fiery youth becomes impatient with her matronly instruction and yearns to test her skills elsewhere, Petronella sarcastically bemoans the fact that "I have taught ye your trade to become my instructor".⁵⁵ Returning to Lisa Freeman's idea of theatrical characterisations being "manifold", this interaction is deeply informed by the relationship between its animators. Barry and Norris play up to the image of the young and celebrated star shrugging off advice from the ageing comic. Freeman writes that in eighteenth-century theatre, "the fictional persona created by a playwright often had to compete with the persona or public reputation of the actor or actress taking that part".⁵⁶ Within the context of Barry and Norris's partnership, however, it is not the characters' place to compete with their performers but rather it is the implications of the performers' pre-existing dramatic relationship that enforces and strengthens the significance of their characters. By viewing this interaction through the lens of the performers as opposed to the text, the metatheatricity displayed here emphasises the control and agency the two actresses possess. By highlighting the ongoing collaboration between Norris and Barry as performers and giving primacy to their onstage relationship, Behn creates significations and instils meaning in her characters that transcend the boundaries of a single production and contribute to the ongoing development of female characterisation in comedy. Due to their established connection and cognisant performance, the audience are invited to see beyond the individual portrayals into the broader system of

representations set up by Behn and enacted by the pair, including the mock-jealousy of the elder towards her attractive companion, the performance of which reinforces Norris's comic skills.

Unlike her earlier roles acting opposite Barry, such as Callis in *The Rover*, Norris's later characterisations in Behn's plays are not sympathetic, but there is a degree to which they may be seen as pitiable or at least theatrically intriguing beyond the simple classification of villain. Rather than being disregarded as simply immoral, Dunwell and Petronella are instead important comic additions to plays that might have disposed of them as easily as Callis was locked in her chest. Instead, the two women are both paired off, albeit in an unsettling display of cruel mockery by the other members of the play. Where Petronella might be punished for stealing La Nuche's jewels, she is instead married off to the dunderheaded spark, Ned Blunt, whilst Dunwell is similarly paired off to Trickwell. By reconsidering these characters through their performance by a single actress with a longstanding comic reputation, an established collaboration with Behn, and a recognisable onstage partnership with Barry, it is possible to reimagine and reinvigorate our understanding of the broader contextual significations at play. Just as Barry garners sympathy from her multiple characters, teasing inspiration from her previous tragic performances and instilling facets of her earlier virtuous parts to create understandable figures of her fallen women, Norris's former characters bleed life into her later roles, complicating the audience response to women who might otherwise be entirely vilified. Dunwell and Petronella are important supporting characters in both *The Revenge* and *The Second Part of the Rover* not because they are likeable or charitable depictions of older women, but precisely because they are not. Not only do their positions greatly inform and shape their younger partners' but their representation by a single comedian lends a performative complexity to otherwise greatly abused female characters.

Conclusion

By examining the intersection of performance history, literary analysis, and biography, this study reconsiders the creation of comic meaning through the collaboration between the marginalised actress, Elizabeth Norris, and the playwright, Aphra Behn. Supporting roles were generally not confined by the limitations necessarily imposed onto Restoration comedies' female protagonists. Examining the discrepancy between mainstream portrayals of femininity and the supporting comic roles in which Norris excelled can broaden our understanding of what differing female representations of age, sexuality, religion, and class meant to a contemporary audience. By repeatedly casting Norris whilst subtly complicating the archetypal model of the rejected elderly woman, Behn endows in her the potential for a

subversive rejection of theatrical convention even whilst playing into audience expectation that Norris be comically abused and disregarded in favour of her celebrated colleagues. By acknowledging the theatrical contexts of company dynamics and the recognisable line developed by Norris over her career, Behn wrote characters which made use of Norris's skills and reputation to convey significance on a metatheatrical level whilst greatly benefiting the comedy of her plays.

Notes

1. John Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus*, ed. by Montague Summers (London: Fortune Press, 1928), p. 20.
2. Montague Summers, *The Works of Aphra Behn*, Vol. 1 (London: W. Heinemann, 1915), p. 445.
3. Montague Summers, "Explanatory Notes", in John Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus*.
4. In order to ascertain the number of roles in which Norris performed throughout her career, I drew on and correlated several sources including: William Van Lennep et al., vol. 2 of *The History of the London Stage, 1660–1700* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1960); J. H. Wilson's *All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Philip H. Highfill, vol. 2 of *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987); Gilli Bush-Bailey, *Treading the Bawds: Actresses and Playwrights on the Late-Stuart Stage* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006).
5. Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth-Century* (London: Oxford UP, 1976), p. 128.
6. Lisa A. Freeman, *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 18.
7. Ibid.
8. G. J in Aphra Behn, *The Widdow Ranter* (London: James Knapton, 1690) (Sig. A2v).
9. Robert Lowe, *Thomas Betterton* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1891), 143.
10. Ibid.
11. Colley Cibber, *Woman's Wit* (London: John Surton, 1697) (Sig. A2v – A3r).
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14. Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 212–213.
15. Ibid 151.
16. Ibid 148.
17. Charles Gildon, *The Life of Thomas Betterton* (London: Robert Gosling, 1710), p. 15.

18. Stern 141.
19. John Hill, *The Actor* (London: R. Griffiths, 1750), p. 214.
20. Ibid.
21. Elaine McGirr, "Authorial Performances: Actress, Author, Critic", *Women's Writing: 1660-1830: Feminisms and Futures*, ed. Jennie Batchelor and Gillian Dow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 97-115 (99).
22. Ibid.
23. "Elizabeth Topping," *Baptism of Elizabeth Topping, 18th May 1636* (St. Martin-In-The-Fields, Westminster, London (UK), Parish Records 1529-1900).
24. "Henricus Norris and Elizabethae Topping," *Marriage of Henry Norris and Elizabeth Topping, 20th October 1661* (St-Martin-In-The-Fields, Westminster, London (UK) Parish Records 1529-1900); "Henry Norris," *Henry Norris, Northside, Longacre, 1658 - 1699* (Westminster Rate Books, London (UK) 1634-1900).
25. In the Explanatory Notes to his transcription of "Satyr on the Players" (c.1682), Summers writes, "The son of Mrs. Norris, 'Jubilee Dicky', was famous, but I believe her daughter has not been identified. If the younger lady were married she would, of course, appear in the printed casts under her husband's name, and she may have been one of the many minor performers concerning whom nothing is known save that they played some small roles of trifling importance". Summers, *Roscus Anglicanus* 286; "Maria Norris," *Baptism of Mary Norris to Henry and Elizabeth Norris, 24th August 1662* (St-Martin-In-The-Fields, Westminster, London, (UK) Parish Records 1529-1900).
26. Summers, *The Works of Aphra Behn*, Vol. 1, 445; Aphra Behn, *The Second Part of the Rover* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1681) (Sig. A3r).
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29. Ibid 47.
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32. R. C. Sharma, *Themes and Conventions in the Comedy of Manners* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1965), p. 126.
33. Michael Mangan, *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013), p. 99.
34. Lynne Bothelo and Pat Thane, *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500* (London: Routledge, 2001).
35. Anon., *Mr Turbulent* (London: Simon Neal, 1682), 70.
36. Highfill suggests Michael Mohun was born in 1616 making him 59 when he performed the role of Pinchwife. Highfill, vol. 10 of *Biographical Dictionary*, 271.
37. John Dryden, *Sir Martin Mar-all* (London: H. Herringman, 1668) (Sig. A2v).
38. Ibid 39.
39. Ibid 2.
40. Aphra Behn, *The Rover* (London: John Amery, 1677), p. 61.
41. Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), pp. 108-28; Kate Hamilton, "The 'Famous Mrs Barry': Elizabeth

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 43. Janet Todd and Derek Hughes, “Tragedy and tragicomedy,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 83–97, 91.
 44. Behn, *Second Part of the Rover* 60; *The Revenge* (London: W.Cademan, 1680), p. 16.
 45. Behn, *Second Part of the Rover* 13.
 46. Behn, *Revenge* 4.
 47. *Ibid* 5.
 48. Behn, *Second Part of the Rover* 25.
 49. *Ibid*.
 50. Behn, *Second Part of the Rover* 27.
 51. Ros Ballaster, “Taking Liberties: Revisiting Behn’s Libertinism,” *Women’s Writing*, 19.2 (2012): 165–7; Jeremy W. Webster, “In and Out of the Bed-chamber: Staging Libertine Desire in Restoration Comedy,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 12.2 (2012): 77–96.
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 53. *Ibid* 12.
 54. *Ibid* 13.
 55. *Ibid* 13.
 56. Freeman 18.

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