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A Woman Alone: Aphra Behn and the Symbolic Power of Widowhood

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Seventeenth century playwright, Aphra Behn, is often considered one of theatre's "greats," as her plays are still widely discussed and produced. Interestingly, all contemporary scholars really know about Behn is her career, for her early life still remains a patchwork of possible theories. One such theory is that she never actually married. Instead, she may have invented a husband and faked his death in order to use the benefits of widowhood to build herself a respectable life as a "woman alone." This research project is interested in Behn's potential subterfuge. In what way might Aphra Behn have felt about widowhood if she decided it was necessary for her survival to invent a false narrative about her background? This thesis, in no way, intends to either prove or disprove her marriage; rather it investigates how Behn's plays showcase the symbolic power of widowhood. Using an historical analysis of the early modern understanding of womanhood and widowhood, alongside a literary analysis of the female characters in *The Widow Ranter*, *The Rover*, and *The Luckey Chance*, this thesis argues that Aphra Behn viewed the widow as a symbol of ultimate feminine power. Building a contrast between Widow Ranter in *The Widow Ranter* and Florinda, Hellena, Julia, and Leticia from *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance*, this paper highlights how widowhood bestowed autonomy and freedom on early modern women, thus marking widowed women as unusually powerful.

KEYWORDS: Aphra Behn, Widowhood, The Widow Ranter, The Rover, The Luckey Chance, Feme Sole

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INTRODUCTION

"Four times the nuptial bed she warmed,
And every time so well performed,
That when death spoiled each husband's billing
He left the widow every shilling" (Lovell vix).

This silly rhyme penned by Horace Walpole is quite often the only information people know about Bess of Hardwick: her multiple marriages. Bess of Hardwick, who lived 1527 to 1608, had four different husbands and, due to those marriages, she was able to climb the social ladder amassing quite a bit of wealth. In the sixteenth century, remarriage was quite common as the likelihood of the early death of a partner was high (Laurence 33). And, seeing as Bess was very young when she entered her first marriage—most likely under the age of sixteen—it stands to reason that she would have encountered the possibility of remarrying. Yet it was unusual for a woman to not only accumulate wealth, but to also move through the strict English social hierarchy in the way Bess did. Because of these unusual circumstances, Bess has historically been positioned as a career wife. And, as Walpole's rhyme shows, the narratives surrounding Bess of Hardwick tend to suggest that she might have been sexually aggressive and manipulative, or that her marriages were a ploy to somehow gain social, political, and economic favor. And thus, Bess's accomplishments are often whittled down to her four marriages.

However, Bess of Hardwick was more than just a wife. In her 80 years, she became a beloved mother, Mary Queen of Scots's keeper, and a prisoner in the Tower of London for a short time. She advantageously married her daughter to Charles Stuart, entwining her family with eventual English royalty. She was also a patron of architecture and art. One of the grandest examples of Elizabethan architecture was Hardwick Hall, the last home that Bess lived in. The

Hall was built because of Bess's patronage and with her input. The Hall is three stories of imposing stone decorated with countless windows and, at the very top, adorned with Bess's initials. The windows, themselves, are so plentiful and so eye-catching that the popular slogan—"Hardwick Hall: More glass than wall!"—has been used to describe its grandeur. The English country manor's design speaks of authority, sophistication, prosperity, and importance. Truthfully, Bess's home is nothing short of impressive. That impressiveness, I would argue, is intimately tied to Bess of Hardwick's widowhood. In a way, Hardwick Hall acts a tangible representation of Bess's widowhood. If we read Hardwick Hall as an extension of Bess's action, behavior, and appearance, then Bess acted in direct opposition to feminine propriety of the time. Early modern women were expected to be bashful and timid. They needed to be quiet and docile. Bess's home, and by extension—herself, begs spectators to indulge in looking. The gleam of the myriad of windows draws attention to opulence, for enormous amounts of wealth must have been spent on each individual glass pane used for them. The turrets point towards the authority and sophistication of the master of Hall, or mistress in this case. And, maybe most importantly, the letters "E" and "S" adorning the top of each turret act as a signature acknowledging Bess's power because they are the initials to her name—Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury.

Bess's widow status gave her a legal and financial independence unheard of for the average early modern woman. She was unimaginably wealthy, she had the ability to make decisions regarding her children's security, and she held the power to disinherit her descendants from her wealth. Widowhood gave her the allowance to be extraordinary and her home represented that. What Bess and Hardwick Hall can illuminate is that widowhood is both a powerful agent and an important symbol in addressing early modern female autonomy.

Bess of Hardwick certainly was not the only woman to benefit from and utilize her widowhood to her advantage and the advantages of those around her. Throughout history, widows have been responsible for change and advancement. From Eliza Hamilton to Jacqueline Kennedy, widows have been able to use their unusual position as outliers of the patriarchy to speak out about unjust treatment in hopes of making life easier for themselves and others. Widowhood can provide women with a voice in an otherwise hostile environment in which they are meant to remain silent.

If widowhood provides opportunities and advantages for women who have to precariously navigate a patriarchal world, have there been women that found it necessary to invent a widow narrative for themselves in order to survive? While surely there might be multiple cases and instances of this happening, this study is concerned with one in particular—seventeenth century playwright, Aphra Behn. Due to the scarcity of records from this time period, Behn's marriage has never been completely supported nor completely denied. Some scholars firmly believe that she did marry a man who died shortly after their wedding, leaving her to be a young widow. Other scholars fully support the notion that Aphra Behn was forced to invent a false widowhood in order to gain the autonomy necessary for being a female playwright. Truthfully, scholars will probably never know either way. No matter the truth regarding Aphra Behn's marriage, it is interesting to think about the necessity behind such a lie. Would creating a fake widow backstory really have given Aphra Behn an opportunity to live and choose a life for herself? What is the symbolic function of the widow archetype if she holds such power and persuasion? It is important to note that I, in no way, shape, or form, intend to either prove or disprove that Behn's marriage was real. However, I do think that by situating Aphra Behn as a young woman who might have lied about being married and widowed amongst the historical

information regarding widowhood in this time period, we might be able to better understand the symbolic potential of the widow archetype.

Purpose of the Project

In the last several decades, English Restoration playwright Aphra Behn has finally made her way into mainstream academic study. Her life, works, and impact have been examined in several contexts including the fields of theatre, literature, history, and even gender studies. Aphra Behn has become one of modern scholars' greatest assets in understanding the unique position that female writers found themselves in during the English Restoration. However, despite the great deal of research that has been done on Aphra Behn, there is still much conjecture on her early life—specifically on her marriage…or, lack thereof. Some scholars fully support the idea that Behn was married, though they remain unsure on who exactly the elusive Mr. Behn was. Other scholars propose that Behn fabricated both the husband and his death in order to achieve the social and economic autonomy that widows were allotted during this time period and that single women were not.

What intrigues me most is this idea of Behn's subterfuge. Why would Aphra Behn make up her own widowhood? What does that say about the widow as both a real status and a symbol in Behn's life? Moreover, what does this signify about the widow in Restoration England? I believe that the answers to my questions lie in the dramatic literature Behn produced. Only at the intersection of her own biography, historical understandings of early modern society, and the plays she wrote, can we then understand the importance of the symbolic widow in both Behn's own life and the greater world around her. Through an examination of the widow character's various freedoms in Behn's *The Widow Ranter* in contrast to the forced marriages and sexual commoditization that the female characters in *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance* face, one can

note that to Aphra Behn, the widow is a representation of ultimate female power in the Restoration world.

Ultimately, my project will offer a new discourse in Aphra Behn studies. In this paper, I seek to understand and analyze the way Behn thought about widowhood and its representation of a paradigm shift in Restoration gender hierarchy. The significance of my work lies in its ability to spark a conversation about the symbolic importance of widowhood in Aphra Behn's works and why her interpretation of widowhood better allows contemporary scholars to understand the world in which she was living. I am hopeful that my work can add another layer to the ever-evolving feminist understanding of Behn and the women she writes about.

Scope of the Project

For the scope of this project, I will only be focusing on a small number of Aphra Behn's plays. Historians have attributed a total of 18 plays written solely by Aphra Behn and they suspect that she might have assisted in the composition of several more. However, due to both the limited number of pages allotted in this project and to the very nature of what I am writing about, I will only focus on three of Aphra Behn's plays. The three plays I am analyzing are *The Widow Ranter* (published posthumously in 1689), *The Rover* (published in 1677), and *The Luckey Chance* (published in 1686). I have chosen just to work with these specific plays for several reasons, the first being that *The Widow Ranter* is technically Behn's only play that has a distinct widow character. Obviously, in order to analyze how Behn saw the widow as a symbol of feminine power, I need to analyze the way she wrote her widow characters. However, *The Widow Ranter*, itself, is also a limitation. Since it is Behn's only work with a distinct widow character, it is also her only work that I can directly apply my theory to. In order to combat this issue, I will be comparing Widow Ranter's character and freedom to notions about marriage and sexual

assault that run through *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance*. I have chosen *The Rover* because Behn uses this script to offer a scathing commentary on the confinement of forced marriages, and I have chosen *The Luckey Chance* because it condemns the arranged marriages of young women to older men, as well as criticizes society for its allowance of sexual assault. I should also note that all of these plays were written within a period of roughly ten years. That is a very specific and small window for analyzing broader cultural aspects of the widow. Another limitation that is important to state is that I will only be focusing on the cultural understanding of the widow in England during the latter half of the seventeenth century. Due to the fact that Aphra Behn was English and that her plays are all situated in an English context, my research consisting of the historical background on widowhood will only be concentrated on English perceptions. It is important to understand that different cultures and different writers from this time period saw widowhood in different lights that I will not be discussing.

Literature Review

Over the course of this thesis, I use a multitude of sources to help analyze Behn's biography, historical notions of widowhood, and sociocultural or thematic understandings of Behn's plays. Though not an exhaustive summary, what follows are books I have found important and most helpful in the crafting of my argument.

The book I most frequently use to understand Behn's biography is Janet Todd's *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life*, published in 2017. Todd is a powerhouse in Aphra Behn studies. The majority of biographical publications and historical analyses about Behn that exist are Todd's works. In particular, *Secret Life* offers a comprehensive overview about Behn's life and the Restoration period. Over 20 years earlier, Todd published her first edition of this biography titled *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (1996). Due to more recent research and examinations of Aphra

Behn, Todd decided to return to her 1996 publication and reexamine what she had written. *A Secret Life* (Todd's 2017 edition) is a comprehensive biography that not only details Behn's fascinating life, but also examines the social, political, and economic world of late seventeenth century London in order to contextualize Behn's biographical information. For instance, Todd's first chapter of the book provides a narrative of Behn's childhood in Kent. Todd is quick to explain that much of Behn's early information is speculative (even having to guess on her true birth year, placing it somewhere between 1637 and 1643) but she does an excellent job of providing and expanding upon the slim facts that historians do have. Alongside life facts, Todd also explains period-relevant facts on Kent, social status, and political feelings. For each chapter in the book, she takes a similar approach to analyzing both biography and environment. This ensures that the reader is expertly able to situate Behn and the importance of her biographer. Additionally, Todd has several chapters in this book dedicated to Behn's plays. As Todd chronologically makes her way through biography and environment, she simultaneously provides literary analysis on all of Behn's major dramatic works. Ultimately, through her book, Todd provides a wonderful cornerstone for Behn-related research. Her work helps illuminate who Behn was as a woman living in early modern England.

As for providing context into the historical understanding of widowhood, I utilize several history books written by early modern scholars well versed in law and society. The book I refer to most often for information on the societal positioning of women is Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford's *Women in Early Modern England 1500-1720*, published in 1998. Mendelson and Crawford use their book to outline the expectations and experiences early modern life would have brought women. They have a section dedicated to marriage in which they offer facts about women's legal status after marriage, as well as societal expectations of wives. Mendelson and

Crawford also give extensive information on the appropriate conduct of women during this time period. Additionally, Mendelson and Crawford give an excellent overview on the widow's positioning as an outlier in the early modern patriarchy. They discuss the law of coverture, its erasure upon widowhood, and the certain legal, societal, and economic freedoms widows are able to gain after the death of their husband. Overall, I utilize Mendelson and Crawford's book to situate the sort of behavior early modern women were expected to present, as well as the understanding over the types of opportunities widows could gain that other women could not.

Kate Aughterson's *Renaissance Woman, Constructions of Femininity in England: A Sourcebook*, published in 1995, is another book I frequently utilize in the analysis of my first chapter. Aughterson's book is separated into several different sections which include: physiology, conduct, sexuality, motherhood, marriage, law, and education. Each of these sections includes writings from the early modern period about women and their place in the world. Aughterson includes essays by early modern physicians, philosophers, preachers, and politicians who outline the way women should behave, think, and work. Specifically, I use Aughterson's sourcebook to craft an understanding of women's subservience in relation to their innate biological "failings."

Finally, as I move into chapters two and three, I use literature that seeks to articulate understandings of theatre and Behn's theatrical works. Derek Hughes' book, *The Theatre of Aphra Behn*, published in 2001, provides a detailed study of the plays written by Behn, how they're influenced by greater society, and how they fit into Restoration theatre. Chronologically, Hughes makes his way through the 18 plays attributed to Behn and works to contextualize them through the way that politics, culture, and gender hierarchy had an effect on Behn's writing. Most of this book is dedicated to understanding Behn's expertise of Restoration Theatre. Hughes argues that Behn had "supreme skill" (Hughes 11) in using all of the resources offered by theatre

for storytelling. So, Hughes most often showcases how Behn used actors and the space to convey the messages of her plays. However, he also spends time understanding their cultural relevance outside of theatre too. For instance, in Hughes' chapter on *The Rover*, he expertly navigates discussions on how Behn's play was an adaptation of Middleton's *Thomaso* and how Behn actually made it more culturally relevant by changing the setting and time. Alongside his theatrical analysis, Hughes also analyzes the social categories that defined Restoration women, effectively combining his theatrical analysis with a cultural analysis. And, while there's no mention of widowhood in Hughes' work, his understanding of the connection between theatre and society has been helpful.

One final book of importance that I have used in my research is Asuka Kimura's *Performing Widowhood on The Early Modern English Stage*, published in 2023. Kimura's brand-new work is one of the only comprehensive studies on widowhood and how it appears on the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline stages. Though this book does not actually ever delve into the Restoration era, it provides an excellent cornerstone for possible influences of widowhood imagery in the Restoration era. Kimura investigates the theatrical representation of widows from 1576-1642 by focusing on costumes, props, gestures, actors, theatre structure, and play texts. Ultimately, Kimura explains that there has been a long interest in widowhood in early modern theatre due to their ambiguous position in early modern society—that is that widows are women who have a small amount of autonomy during a time when women were rarely afforded any so they tend to stick around in popular imagination. Kimura starts off her book with a chapter on widow's costumes and accessories on the early modern stage. Within this chapter, she analyzes the actual representation of widows in society and how that is reflected on stage. At the end of this chapter, Kimura draws the conclusion that widow costumes reflect their complex social

position. Each chapter in this book follows a very similar pattern. Kimura introduces an idea about widowhood on stage, explains how greater society had an impact on it, examines it in context of a few theatrical scripts, and then draws conclusions that point towards the ambiguous position widows held in society.

Overall, I found Kimura's work helpful in understanding the "lusty widow" stereotype and its reinforcement in staged works. Kimura's book explains that the trope is born out of fragility—the fragility of patrilineal succession. As widows were often left in charge of presiding over their young children's inheritance, a fear of over who would and could receive inheritance blossomed. Kimura's book explains how the "lusty widow" acts as a controlling image in order to combat the fear over a blatant show of female power.

Ultimately, this book provides excellent analysis of widowhood representation. While Aphra Behn is never explicitly mentioned, Kimura's work is necessary in understanding Behn's point about widowhood, for if we can understand the way widows were historically represented, then we can begin to evaluate what Behn kept and changed within her own representations.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One offers an historical analysis of the early modern gender hierarchy, women's expected roles, and the ambiguous positions of widowhood in the patriarchy. In this chapter, I utilize various historian's understanding and analysis of the time period, as well as several written sources from the early modern period in order to craft my own understanding of how widows functioned socially, economically, and politically during this period. Additionally, I use this chapter to try to understand Aphra Behn's positioning on the widow. I juxtapose her early biography alongside this historical information in order to understand why the widow would have represented such a shift in the gender hierarchy to her.

Chapter Two offers a literary analysis and close reading of Behn's *The Widow Ranter*. I analyze who Widow Ranter is in this play, why she acts in certain ways, why she dresses in certain ways, and why she is a central character in a play about Bacon's Rebellion. In tying my close readings to the historical understanding of widowhood I discuss in Chapter One, as well as a broader understanding of Restoration drama aesthetic, I ultimately conclude that widowhood gives Ranter a freedom no other woman is allotted. Widow Ranter becomes Behn's symbol for the power that women did not yet have, but one day could.

Finally, Chapter Three works to contrast Widow Ranter, her freedom and her position within the world of *The Widow Ranter* with ideas of marriage, romantic relationships, and the female body within Behn's *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance*. I offer close readings of the female characters in both The Rover and The Luckey Chance with special regard to their commentaries on marriage as an oppressive function and the way that their bodies are commoditized. Ultimately, I conclude that the women in *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance* are representations of the life that women in the seventeenth century are forced to endure. They are symbolically the present, while Ranter is symbolically the future. In doing this, I showcase Behn's thoughts on the power of a widow from a different angle.

CHAPTER I: WOMANHOOD AND WIDOWHOOD

Widows have played an important part in storytelling for thousands of years. From the Roman "Widow of Ephesus" to German fairytales, widow characters make frequent appearances. Being positionally ambiguous within society, widows have the ability to be compelling characters in works of fiction. Do we sympathize with widows for their loss of a husband? Do we condemn them for existing outside of traditional gender norms? Do we praise them for being resilient in times of hardship? Ultimately, the widow can function in narratives not only as a symbol capable of reflecting social values and gender norms, but also as a symbol capable of imparting messages of potential, power, and strength.

Take the famous Brothers Grimm fairytale, "The Wedding of Mrs. Fox." In this story, Mr. Fox, who fears his wife (Mrs. Fox) might not be faithful to him, decides to fake his death to test her fidelity. Now a widow, Mrs. Fox has several suitors that line up to ask for her hand in marriage. She continuously sends them away until a younger fox looking exactly like her former husband proposes marriage. Overjoyed, Mrs. Fox agrees and they start planning the wedding. However, before any wedding can commence, Mr. Fox jumps up, reveals he is not dead, condemns his wife for her actions, and kicks her out of the house—thus, ending the story (Grimm). What this fairytale does is punish a "lusty widow" character in order to carefully make a point about society's expectations and attitudes towards women. Mrs. Fox disobeys her husband, acts on her lust, and thus symbolizes why women need to be controlled. The readers mark Mrs. Fox as the villain, recall what they know about widows in their real lives, and can now easily condemn infidelity and wily women. In combining Mrs. Fox's widowhood with the public's uncertainty over a widow's ambiguous position in gender hierarchy, this fairytale has focused the way audiences should code femininity. In this case, femininity equates destruction.

Widows reflect the way society sees women. As interesting female archetypes, they can act as place holders for, in some stories, a patriarchal fear of women and, in other stories, a feminine strength and honor. Widows are complex, and thus interpretations of them are complex. In Mrs. Fox's case, her widowhood reads as deviance, so she symbolizes all the patriarchy has to fear. But, Mrs. Fox is only one story's utilization of a symbolic widow, and other stories have categorized the symbolic widow in a myriad of different ways.

While the Grimm Brothers chose to harness the symbolic widow as a representation of wily, disobedient women, Aphra Behn used the symbolic nature of the widow in a very different way. She saw the widow as a symbol of feminine power, which is reflected in the plays she wrote and even her debated personal biography. But what does that mean? Who were widows historically? Widows are living, breathing beings, not just fictitious stock characters. They are women who have led real lives and contributed to culture and society. They have left an historical impact. And in order to understand how Aphra Behn saw widows as symbols of ultimate feminine power, one must first understand how the widow functioned as an historical figure. In the following chapter, I will outline the historical significance of the widow during Aphra Behn's time in order to provide understanding for how widows functioned symbolically in her narratives.

Part One: A Woman's Place

Early modern England was an incredibly hierarchal world. For centuries leading up to the one in which Aphra Behn lived, English citizens believed in the Divine Right of Kings—that is, that monarchs were ordained to rule the kingdom by God himself. The King, then, had the highest authority in the land and everyone else fell in subcategories beneath him. This hierarchal way of thinking effected not only social class and politics, but also the understanding and

performance of gender during this time period as well. Due to the patriarchal structure, women were meant to defer to men. As historian, Susan Kingsley Kent, states:

> Hierarchies of gender mirrored those of status based on land ownership in rural areas and on guild structures in the towns. Just as subjects of the crown knew themselves to be subordinate to their monarch, farmers knew themselves to be fully subordinate to their landlords, and apprentices and journeymen and -women to their guild masters, so too women understood themselves to be subordinate to their fathers and their husbands. (6)

Men were the authority in family and private life. And as godly-ordained heads of their households, fathers and husbands made all decisions for their daughters and wives, such as who they might marry or how exactly their earnings could be spent. Women truly had next to no autonomy during the early modern period. Additionally, women were expected to align themselves with very specific roles in society. They were to marry. They were to produce children. If they worked to help provide for the family, it was expected that they would work within the realm of the home. In rural areas, a woman might work at dairying, brewing, baking, and cultivating vegetable gardens. In more urban areas, women often helped sell the goods that their family produced (Kent 8). Above all, their character was strictly shaped. Men could be active, energetic, brave, and strong, but women could be none of those characteristics. They needed to be gentle, tender, kind, timorous (Mendleson and Crawford 20). Ultimately, women had very specific and particular places within society that were cultivated in accordance to their gender.

But what made gender differences so prevalent in society? Why were women expected to hold subordinate positions in their family and relationships? Much of that had to do with the scientific understanding of gender in the early modern world. Women were inferior because

female was scientifically seen as the inferior sex. Medical texts and understandings of physiology directly impacted the way that both men and women understood the gender hierarchy enforced during the early modern period because physicians emphasized the "otherness" or the "wrongness" of the female body. Anatomically speaking, the female body was thought to be the deficient version of the male body. According to Aristotle and Galen (whose physiological texts were still the most widely understood and taught during this time), the ovaries were "smaller, less perfect testes" and female reproductive organs were just male reproductive organs deformed and trapped inside a woman's body due to her lack of heat (Aughterson 47-48). Furthermore, women menstruated because they could not purify blood like men could and thus needed a way to shed their dirty blood (Mendelson and Crawford 21). Physiological texts and practices enforced the notion that female bodies functioned in a deformed state. Coding female bodies as the inferior sex fundamentally made women lesser. If, at a biological level, women are deformed, then it stands to reason they cannot function as proper citizens—human beings—in a societal matter. Associating femaleness with deformity and maleness with perfection automatically sets women up to have a subordinate place within the early modern world and most definitely contributed to the understanding of women as socially lesser as well.

Additionally, the comprehension of biology through a religious lens helped to categorize women in this way as well. As Susan Kingsley Kent states, "Eve's transgressions had stained all women with her sin" (5). And, as women were thought to be descendants of Eve, their bodies now bore the consequences of her crimes. To many early modern physicians, labor and childbirth were punishments from God. Because Eve tempted Adam and caused him to be cast out of the Garden of Eden, all women were now condemned to bring forth children in "sorrow" (Mendelson and Crawford 18). Essentially, labor pains acted as a tangible justification for female

inferiority. Not only were labor pains biological proof that Eve committed the ultimate sin and damned all women for the rest of eternity, but they were also proof that women should be equated with Eve and deemed less than.

These medical texts and physiological theories had a far-reaching effect on what it meant to be a woman during the early modern era. Due to their biological inferiority, women were expected to conduct themselves in a way that reflected their lower status, and consequently, docile behavior and submissiveness to men became pillars of early modern womanhood. One popular proverb published in 1678 encompasses these ideas about who women were meant to be in this time period. The proverb states: "A little house well-filled, a little land well-tilled and a little wife well-willed" (qtd. in Aughterson 67). What this proverb indicates is two-fold. One, it highlights what men should strive for—an heir, prosperous land (or maybe more basely a prosperous vocation), and a wife who he could control. This proverb also indicates how women should behave for their husbands. They need to be obedient to him. Notions of femininity were constructed around characteristics that became known as ideal feminine virtues. Women must be chaste. Women must be obedient. Women must be humble. Women must be silent. (67). These virtues became so centralized in understanding early modern femininity, for both men and women, that sets of societal rules were invented for how women were expected to act in both private and in public so that they could adhere to these virtues.

Authors like Juan Luis Vives produced countless writings on feminine conduct in order to publicize expected female roles and behaviors. In fact, Vives book, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, became the most widely circulated book about proper feminine conduct and covered everything from virtues to virginity to marriage. Originally commissioned by Queen Catherine of Aragon for her daughter Mary in 1523, Vives book was soon translated in several different

languages and became an important teaching tool for young women during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Aughterson 69). Ultimately, women were bombarded with ideas and rules that specifically defined both femininity and a woman's place within society. They were expected to act accordingly with these strict teachings or face shame and damnation.

Undoubtedly, early modern women experienced a strict policing of their conduct. Could this enforcement of propriety elucidate a sociological undercurrent? Evidently, these countless writings on conduct and the strict emphasis on feminine virtues suggest that there were certain anxieties surrounding gender hierarchy—specifically women's place in the gender hierarchy—during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Clearly, men were uncomfortable with and maybe even scared of women who did not submissively fall into the hierarchal order of early modern society. If the fragile cornerstone of early modern patriarchy is to continuously and publicly demand that women be submissive to men because of their biological deformity, then one must question what (or who) necessitated the cornerstone in the first place. Who were the women that fractured hierarchy and order? This is a question I intend to answer later in this chapter.

But, let us first turn our attention to maybe the most important function placed upon women during this time period—being wives. In accordance to proper early modern feminine behavior, a woman's main goal was to get married and produce children. At its core, marriage was a source of social and financial security. There were very few options for women to financially sustain themselves, and if they did have the luxury of having a job, wage rates for women were so dismal that they could not sustain a living alone (Laurence 55). So, many women entered into marriages not only because it was expected of them, but because it often guaranteed an economic safety and sustainability that other options would not.

Additionally, economic survival was not the only benefit a woman could gain from marriage. For the early modern woman, marriage was a part of her identity. It marked the official transition into adulthood, turning a maiden into a matron. Historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford write:

> Women conceptualized female maturity mainly in terms of being married, with a household to run, and possibly with children to rear and servants to oversee…Marriage marked a break with the dependence of childhood. (124)

For most women, marriage became an important life stage because it acted as a marker of success. It became a way to measure maturity, as well as a way to gain certain social advantages and status. A married woman was much more respected than a single woman, for she entered a new and loftier sort of caste. Due to her adult status, a married woman assumed weightier responsibilities and could be afforded the respect that came along with them. For instance, in church, matrons could sit together in front of the single women to mark their higher status (131). In this way, marriage acted as a method of demonstrating the social hierarchy that dominated early modern Europe. While men ultimately had the highest ranking in the gender hierarchy, married women could laud a higher standing over single women. Essentially, marriage may have been the expected route for a young early modern woman to take, but it also certainly provided economic and social securities that unmarried women were not privy to.

Despite this, however, marriage was not always a positive experience for women. Subjugation was expected to carry over into marriage as well. In their 1598 book on marital conduct, *A Godly Form of Household Government*, clergymen Robert Dod and John Clever write about the duty of a wife to her husband. They state, “First that she reverence her husband. Secondly, that she submit herself and be obedient unto him” (qtd. in Aughterson 80). Thus, a

good and pious wife was a devoutly obedient wife. When women were married in early modern England, their husbands essentially took over where their fathers left off. A husband was not thought of as an equitable partner, but instead a teacher, protector, and provider. Much like the way that kings were thought to be godly ordained heads ruling over their subjects, husbands were thought to be godly ordained heads ruling over their wives.

Further, a sign of wifely love towards a husband was obedience (Mendelson and Crawford 133). So, the only way for a woman to truly show love and respect to her spouse was to be completely submissive to his will and allow him to rule over her. Fusing love and obedience into one ensured that the gender hierarchy was stable within a marriage, and therefore stable within society. Additionally, these strict patriarchal tenets of marriage often defined any form of disobedience as a show of not loving one's husband. And since marriage matches were a part of God's will, not loving one's husband was intolerable. Scripture and law dictated that husbands were responsible for "lawful and reasonable correction" (140). In other words, husbands could legally—and in God's eyes—beat their wives when they felt their wives were being disobedient. This legal understanding of "correction" indicates that domestic violence was probably seen as not only justifiable but natural in marriages during this time. Ultimately, marriage was the indication of proper feminine behavior and the expected step to be taken for a life of security and safety. But at the same time, marriage could be dangerous, as the threat of persistent violence was an ever-present shadow. In so many ways, a woman's only salvation could also be her living hell.

Moreover, marriage legally invalidated any small amount of autonomy that a woman could have. Unique to England was the law of coverture. When a woman got married, she became what was known as a "feme coverte." And as a magistrate's law digest from the time

states, “After marriage, all the will of the wife in judgement of the law is subject to the will of the husband; and it is commonly said a feme coverte hath no will” (qtd. in Laurence 227). Essentially, when a woman got married, her husband became her keeper in place of her father. She had no legal rights, as she existed as only an extension of her husband. Furthermore, she had no ownership over goods. Anything that once belonged to her became her husband’s upon marriage. The 1632 legal handbook, *The Law’s Resolution of Women’s Rights: or, The Law’s Provisions for Women* compiles all of the laws regarding English women’s legal rights during the early modern period. Within the handbook it states:

> That which the wife hath is the husband’s. For thus it is, if before marriage the woman were possessed of horses, neat, sheep, corn, wool, money, plate, and jewels, all manner of movable substance is presently by conjunction the husband’s to sell, keep, or bequeath if he die. (qtd. in Klein 47)

Women were so legally infantilized that they could not even retain their possessions upon marriage. She was not her own person, but much more a piece of his property. The law of coverture prevented married women from legal rights to property, to earnings, to freedom of movement, to their own children, and hauntingly, even to their own bodies. For instance, if a woman was raped, the crime was seen as theft. But that theft was not from her, but rather from her husband (Kent 6). The courts did not care that she experienced the most invasive form of theft—the theft of security and safety within her own body. The courts only cared that a man’s property was damaged. Evidently, early modern English women, especially married women, had no autonomy. So, as much as marriage offered a sense of economic security and social standing, it was intrinsically a tool meant for enforcing the strict gender hierarchy. And, if marriage was the expected path a woman had to take, then her life was meant to be nothing more than one of

submission and servitude. Every person had a specific place in early modern English cosmology. A woman's was to be devoutly obedient.

In summary, sixteenth and seventeenth century England cultivated a strict environment in which all people, but especially women, were expected to act in accordance with enforced gender rules and roles. The physiological understanding of the female body as an inverted or "wrong" version of the male body, coupled with the theological understanding that all women needed to be punished for Eve's transgressions, created the narrative that women were inferior to men. As a result, society demanded that women also had to act as if they were inferior to men. Their personalities were defined by virtue and obedience. Their lives were spent in total subjugation as marriage left them legally infantilized. Essentially, early modern women were coerced into lives that left them no autonomy and no freedom.

Not every single early modern woman, however, became a victim of the patriarchy's severe control. A few women, in being shoved to casteless positions in the outskirts of patriarchy, actually found a freedom otherwise unheard of. These women were, of course, widows.

Part Two: The Early Modern Widow

The word "widow" might come from the Old English "widewe," a derivative of an Indo-European base word meaning "to separate" or "to divide." It might also be a derivative of the Latin "vidua," meaning "to be deprived of" (Cavallo and Warner 4). In any case, these definitions can help one understand a widow as a woman who has been separated, divided, or deprived of her husband through death. Extrapolating these definitions further, a widow is also a woman who, due to the death of her husband, has been separated, divided, or deprived of community in that they no longer belong. Widow is "other." For in a time where religious teachings dominated the sense of self and purpose, the primary function of marriage was

procreation, and motherhood was seen as the greatest blessing a woman could receive (Mendelson and Crawford 148). So, if a woman was not married, there was no chance of children, and if there was no chance of children, she was not fulfilling her duty in the eyes of the church and society at large.

Even if she was once married, her current lack of husband prevents her from having any more children and still, she becomes an abnormality. As historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford write, "A widow found herself an anomaly in a society which expected all women to be either married or about to be married" (175). Inherently, just by nature of early modern feminine propriety, widows become separated or divided from other women because they are no longer in the "being married" class nor are they necessarily in the "about to be married" class. Widows are classless in that they cannot be easily classified. And in a society as heavily dependent upon both social and gender hierarchy as early modern England was, the inability to classify widows poses a problem. How is the patriarchy meant to treat the women who are not defined by their obedience to a man? On the one hand, widows were women who were once married. They had abided by societal rules. They had assumed the traditional role of wife—a role that all early modern women were expected to play at some point in their life. It was *God's* will that her husband be taken from her, not her own. On the other hand, widows held an ambiguous societal position and that ambiguous position afforded these women a certain level of power and independence that most other women could only ever dream of. Specifically, widows were afforded both legal and economic rights that women were not usually allowed to have.

As mentioned earlier, the law of coverture essentially ensured that married women lost any semblance of legal autonomy. However, when a woman was widowed, "she shed the restrictive bonds imposed by coverture and regained her independent legal status" (Stretton 193).

That is, widows were no longer considered "feme covertes," no longer had a to be subjugated to a husband's will, and had several legal and financial rights. Various historians have speculated that between 6 and 12 percent of widows headed their households (Mendelson and Crawford 174). Additionally, a widow could own property. When a woman's husband died, she was entitled to, minimally, one-third of his total estate and, if there were no children, she was entitled to half. Furthermore, many widows came to own freehold land through widowright—essentially, they were entitled to own the land because their now-deceased husbands were the previous tenants (Laurence 229). As outlined in *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights: or, The Law's Provisions for Women*:

> …whether there were a will or none, in some places she shall have a third part of all her late husband's goods…the custom of the court is that women ought to have *rationabilem partem de bonis & catallis vivorum* [a reasonable part of the goods and chattels of her husband]…A woman that is at her own commandment may make a will…she that is *sub potestate viri* [under the power of her husband] can make no will… (qtd. in Klein 51)

So, by nature of English law, widows were essentially given a certain amount of power that had previously been understood to only exist as the right of men. There is no strictly documented reason as to why English law provided for widows. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford suggest that, during the Elizabethan era, the court of Chancery developed procedures to protect and enforce the rights of wealthy married women, which included property rights, settlements, and the use of trusts (40). For wealthy, landowning families, in particular, a strict settlement and trust would probably better secure rights of primogeniture for the eldest male son. So, perhaps the law's provision to widows was rooted heavily in a patriarchal notion of inheritance. No

matter the intention of the law, however, it is remarkable to note as it gave widows a legal right no single or married woman could possess.

Widows also participated in legal action, as many widows were named the executors of their husband's wills. Richard Wall's study over the bequests made by individuals with the last name Farrer indicates that between the years 1500-1549, 33 percent of testators named their widows as sole executors. And between 1550-1599, 50 percent of testators named their widows as sole executors (Wall 225). Wall suggests that there might have been several reasons as to why widows were named executors. For one, it might have been these husbands trusted their wives to appropriately distribute their assets. Or maybe widows were granted the ability to act as executors to ensure that their children would receive ample inheritance before any other family members (Wall 222). Despite whatever the reasons were for allowing widows to serve as executors of their husband's wills, this ability was still one that widows had and single or married women did not. What these examples indicate is that widows were not ordinary early modern English women. They were allotted an independence that allowed them to move more fluidly through the strict gender hierarchy.

Admittedly, as stressed by Olwen Hufton, experiences of widowhood varied greatly. Class and stipulations in a husband's will could affect the level of independence widows were afforded (232). But just the fact that widows potentially could have legal rights and own property made them vastly different than most women during this time. It also made them a threat. Widows were abnormalities in terms of women's abilities. They threatened to undermine the patriarchy that crafted every inch of early modern life. How then is the patriarchy meant to treat the women who do not fall in line with the traditional understanding of a woman's place within society? It creates derogatory narratives of widowhood meant to cover up the anxieties

concerning the ambiguous, yet powerful position that widows held. Historian Charles Carlton states:

> That Tudor and Stuart Englishmen would try to resolve the problem of the widow, with all its attendant guilt, paradoxes, projections, and fears, by creating a myth or a widow's tale, is not surprising, since widowhood combines two of the most fundamental tensions within the male psyche—the contemplation of their woman's sexuality (perhaps with someone else) and their own death. (129)

Widows were the physicalization of every way that early modern cosmology could be broken, dismantled, or realigned. They were the very embodiment of what would happen should the patriarchy ever fail. And so, the creation of a caricature was necessary—a caricature that could devalue the intrinsic power of female independence.

One of the most popular caricatures of widowhood from the time is defined through the "lusty widow" or "merry widow" trope. This trope was incredibly popular in contemporary drama, and well-known playwrights from Shakespeare, to Middleton, to Webster utilized the trope in some capacity. Asuka Kimura describes the "lusty widow" as a sexually hungry widow looking to remarry a younger and more virile man after her husband's death (2023, 3). She is rich. She is sexually aggressive. She is looking to appease her sensual appetite. Since she has experienced sex already, her libido is out of control and there is no husband to neutralize the threat (Hufton 226). Evidently, this narrative of a widow who is driven by lust and quickly remarries ties together female lasciviousness with remarriage. It looks to epitomize chaste and loyal widows who do not undermine their dead husbands by remarrying.

But, one might say, if a woman were to remarry, she would once again be a "feme coverte." Is that not what the patriarchy would have wanted? An easy answer is yes. The more

complex reality however was that a widow was experienced. She had been married before and was quite likely very familiar with the law of coverture, which in and of itself diminished the control of the law. In theory, all a widow owned would have become her new husband's. In practice, widows were often wiser the second time around. Widows were twice as likely as a young, unmarried woman to make settlements. These settlements often ensured that a widow's estate was preserved in her name (Foyster 115). So, emasculating wives threatened the cosmology just as much as widows did. An image was needed to control any woman that possessed a power unnatural to the early modern world. The "lusty widow" became a controlling image meant to orient women into specific roles within society. However, it also exposes the types of anxieties brimming within Englishmen.

The "lusty widow" trope points to a fear of fragility in patrilineal succession. In early modern England, inheritance was passed along the male line, effectively moving money and land from father to son and so on and so forth. Since women had no legal or financial rights, they were ineligible from receiving any familial land or wealth. But, since widows can receive one-third of their husband's estate—and sometimes more—they have suddenly found themselves inheriting money and land. This abnormality goes directly against the function of patrilineal succession. Additionally, widows were often appointed the guardians of young children's inheritance as well (Kimura 2023, 5). If the "lusty widow" remarries, all of the money and land willed to her could potentially go to her new husband, and she loses the ability to dictate what happens to the inheritance given to the children from her first marriage. Essentially, the "lusty widow" has thrown away what centuries of family members have worked hard for—all in an attempt to curb her insatiable sex drive.

In addition to an anxiety over patrilineal succession, the "lusty widow" also represents a fear of what Charles Carlton refers to as "posthumous cuckoldry" (125). In other words, the image of a sexually autonomous widow is frightening because a man is confronted with his own inadequacy. The "lusty" widow is often looking to remarry a man who is both younger and more virile than her previous husband. This new husband represents everything that the previous husband lacked, and the widow's remarriage suggests that she was left unsatisfied in her previous marriage. Sixteenth century humanist Juan Luis Vives implored widows to, "consider that [their] husband…is still alive with the life of the soul" (qtd. in Kimura 2011, 14). So, a remarriage to a younger and more virile man is not only just the widow being unfaithful, but also the widow spitting in the face of everything her previous husband had provided for her. Ultimately, the "lusty widow" villainized women, especially widows, because early modern Englishmen recognized a fragility in their masculinity and they needed a monster, so to speak, to ensure that they always were in control.

To understand the way that this trope functioned narratively and socially, let us examine one of the most popular examples of the "lusty widow" in early modern English drama—Queen Gertrude from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Queen Gertrude is Prince Hamlet's mother, who despite only losing her husband a few months prior to the play's opening, has married her former brother-in-law, thus making him the king of Denmark, and infuriating her son to no end. Gertrude is the epitome of the "lusty widow" because her remarriage to Claudius (her former brother-in-law) is specifically tied to lust. That is, Gertrude's husband's body was barely cold before she married and had a sexual relationship with his brother. When the Ghost of the former king asks Hamlet to avenge him, he states, "O wicked wit and gifts that have the power so to seduce—won to his shameful lust the will of my most seeming-virtuous queen…so lust, though

to a radiant angel linked, will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage" (Shakespeare 1.5.44-57). While the Ghost clearly blames Claudius for seducing Gertrude, he does not hide the fact that Gertrude allowed herself to be seduced. As Asuka Kimura points out, "will" in this case has a double meaning. It certainly can be defined as "intention"—as in Gertrude's intention to stay loyal to her husband. However, "will" can also mean sexual desire (2023, 132). So, while Claudius may have expressed desire for Gertrude, it was her willing acceptance that turned her into a "lusty widow." According to the Ghost's account, her immediate jump into a sexual relationship with Claudius has all but destroyed her "seeming" virtue and devalued her not only as a woman, but a Queen.

Hamlet also is not shy about hiding his disgust for what his mother has done. In one of the most famous soliloquies from the play, Hamlet is lamenting his mother's insufficient grief. He lists all of the ways his father cared for his mother and exclaims, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (Shakespeare 1.2.146). This phrase, now a famous one in the modern lexicon, expresses that Hamlet believes women to be far weaker than men, especially when sex is involved. He full-heartedly believes that Gertrude's weakness for sexual intimacy is what drove her to completely forsake the king and marry Claudius. In Hamlet's scenario, Claudius is not the one to blame. Queen Gertrude is the monster for being weak enough to act upon her sexual desire instead of staying loyal to her dead husband. She becomes the personification of lust, weakness, and the fallibility of women with power.

It would be remiss to forget to acknowledge that the audience's views of Queen Gertrude are shaped through the dialogue given by her grieving son and the ghost of her dead husband. It stands to reason that they are completely unreliable narrators when it comes to the series of events and Gertrude's compromised virtue. However, let Gertrude symbolize the widow as a

whole and Hamlet and the Ghost symbolize early modern men in power. The men in power have created a false narrative villainizing vulnerable women because they need someone to blame for a world of chaos and instability. What the "lusty widow," Queen Gertrude, highlights, is man's readiness to disgrace widows for their unnatural power. In Hamlet's eyes, Queen Gertrude was not strong enough to be a woman with financial, social, and economic power. The "lusty widow" narrative placed upon her was meant to discredit her ability as queen. The "lusty widow" trope in early modern English society works much the same way—it is a tactic meant to normalize a woman's inability to function independently.

Evidently, the widow seems to sit at a nebulous crossroads somewhere between "too powerful without the control of her husband" and "too powerful when remarried to another." This general uncertainty regarding the early modern understandings of widowhood seems to stem from the widow's ambiguity in social and gender order. They simultaneously need to be controlled and need to remain unmarried because their power exists outside of the carefully constructed realm of early modern possibility. Women are meant to be married, but at the same time wives are not meant to be more powerful (or at least more legally aware) than their husbands. And, what the popularity of controlling images like the "lusty Widow" trope can convey to modern day scholars is that fear and anxiety surrounding the potential power of widows were very real emotions to early modern Englishmen during this time period. As popular cultural trends are wont to do, the "lusty Widow" trope asks scholars to take a deeper look at what was churning under the surface of a highly hierarchical society. This trope suggests that widows had very legitimate and very unorthodox abilities to not only live independently from men, but prosper independently from them as well.

Part Three: Potential

The ambiguity associated with early modern English widowhood gives the symbolic widow great narrative potential. As seen through the "lusty Widow" trope, a widow can represent more than just a woman whose husband has died. In some respects, the narrative potential of the symbolic widow is one of destruction and intimidation. She is a callous monster intent on appeasing her sexual appetite over all else. She is a woman unfit to have financial and social autonomy. She is a controlling image meant to frighten women into specifically curated social boxes. But what happens if the widow becomes a symbol of positivity—a symbol of resistance? How does her narrative potential change? What sort of ability does she wield when she is not a monster, but instead a heroine? I argue that she becomes the symbolic representation of ultimate early modern feminine power. And perhaps, understanding Aphra Behn might allow us to see the symbolic potential of the early modern widow.

In the Summer of 1666, Aphra Behn was twenty-six and already a young widow. It has been theorized that the Great Plague had come to London and, by the time it had left, it had taken Mr. Behn with it, leaving his young widow to fend for herself…supposedly. Most of what is known about Aphra's life before her writing career is almost all scholarly speculation. Historians surmise what they can about her parents, her childhood, her spying career, her life in Surinam, and her marriage. However, evidence only provides best estimations—not concrete answers. Some historians believe that Aphra was married shortly after returning from Surinam. His name was possibly Johan or John, he might have been a Dutch or German merchant, he was probably a member of the crew aboard a ship called the *King David*, he was potentially in Surinam around the same time as Behn, and their marriage was unfortunately short as the plague most likely killed him quickly only a year or two into their life together (Todd 2017, 63).

Other historians think that Aphra's marriage to Johan/John Behn was merely a matter of convenience. Her father had died while in Surinam, she had no brothers, and she had no dowry (Goreau 85). Without a father, brother, or dowry, Behn most likely had very limited financial possibilities. And as discussed previously, it was not easy for a young unmarried woman to find a means of supporting herself in Restoration London. Additionally, Behn's single life may have ostracized her from any community support. As historian Angeline Goreau states:

> Single people generally were regarded with suspicion and mistrust by their contemporaries. At a time when most people belonged to some sort of family group, those who did not were considered oddities…thirty-seven percent of inhabitants [in London] were husbands and wives, two percent widowers, seven percent widows, thirty-three percent children, thirteen percent servants, and only eight percent sojourners and single persons. (77)

Perhaps her marriage to the elusive Behn was more of a forced one in that it offered certain financial security and protection that Aphra would not have received as a single woman. Maybe given different circumstances, Aphra never would have chosen marriage for herself.

Yet another faction of historians posit a different theory about Aphra's marriage. Interestingly, they suggest that Johan Behn never even existed. Or, at least, Johan Behn, husband of esteemed playwright, Aphra Behn, never existed. They support that there is just too little evidence to definitively say that Aphra Behn was ever married to anyone. Janet Todd, a leading historian on Aphra's life and career, is quick to point out that no record of a legally binding marriage between a Behn and Aphra exists anywhere in London—though she concedes that record keeping was far from great during the seventeenth century (2017, 64). However, the lack of evidence has certainly proved to be thought provoking, as many theorists have wondered

whether Aphra Behn invented a dead husband in order to procure some semblance of autonomy in an otherwise hostile world. As Janet Todd declares of Johan/John Behn, "…perhaps, he was a necessary invention to provide widowed respectability" (Todd 1992, 5). Ultimately all anyone can do is speculate over Aphra's fascinatingly mysterious early life. For the small amount that historians think they know about Johan/John Behn does not amount to much and, if he ever did exist, it was only to appear as small footnote in his wife's successful life.

Mystery and speculation are intricately interwoven into what has been recorded about Aphra Behn, and frankly, that is what makes her life so compelling to study. But what offers, perhaps, a more fascinating study is not whether Mr. Johan/John Behn existed, but instead what Aphra's potential subterfuge can tell modern day scholars. What could Aphra Behn have gained by constructing a false narrative of widowhood? She could have lived the independence of a single woman with the relative respectability of a widow, for she would have theoretically been able to convince her community that she fulfilled her duty as an early modern woman, while still having the liberty to pursue not only a career, but a writing career at that. As Janet Todd so humorously notes, her husband's "…demise was happy for literature, since a seventeenth century husband is unlikely to have accepted a commercially play-writing wife" (2017, 71). So, while marriage would have cultivated a specific box within which to place Aphra Behn, widowhood potentially would have allowed her to fluidly move within Restoration England's strict gender and social hierarchy to become a financially successful playwright. A false narrative concentrated on widowhood might have been Aphra's greatest tool in developing a life in which she could have both independence and respect within her community. Additionally, engaging with discussions on why Aphra Behn might have wanted to create an embellished narrative centering herself as a young widow brings up another equally fascinating inquiry. What might

her inventiveness suggest about the way she symbolically saw widows? If Aphra Behn, a young, middle-class woman living in Restoration London, found it necessary to lie about a deceased husband, then perhaps she too saw the narrative potential in widowhood. Feasibly, Aphra Behn saw the widow as a symbol of the ultimate feminine power achieved in the early modern world. As such, the symbolic widow could potentially serve as a figurehead for the liberated woman in seventeenth century England.

CHAPTER II: WIDOW RANTER'S LIBERATION

The 1670s were a time of unrest in the American colonies. Long before the famed Revolution that birthed the United States as a sovereign entity, tension bubbled between leaders working for the Crown and colonial citizens. One notable example of this unrest has colloquially been known as Bacon's Rebellion. In the spring of 1676, Nathanial Bacon, unhappy with the Governor's decision to form friendly relationships with the neighboring Native tribes, gathered up a militia of Virginia colonists and preceded to raid, loot, and slaughter the Indigenous people as he saw fit. Later, Bacon drafted the Declaration of the People, in which he justified his actions and maintained that he was protecting the rights of English settlers in the Virginia colony (Stock 35). For centuries, Bacon's Rebellion has been seen as the first true precursor to the American Revolution and Nathanial Bacon, despite his hot-headedness and violent disposition, has been lauded as an American hero and a protector of unalienable rights.

Interestingly, this event serves as the backdrop of Aphra Behn's 1690 play, *The Widow Ranter, or The History of Bacon in Virginia*. In a much more romanticized version of Bacon's supposed heroism, Behn uses the political unrest of 1670s Virginia to explore the political turbulence of late 1680s London. For decades, scholars have broken down *Ranter* in an attempt to understand Behn's position on the political Whig vs. Tory debate, and most have concluded that *Ranter's* purpose is to reflect upon the naiveté of England's newest monarch, King James II. As literature historian, Derek Hughes, states:

> *The Widow Ranter* is born from this moment of danger and transition, when an inflexibly and stupidly idealistic King was about to become an enemy and alien to his hereditary kingdom…this play offers no coded representations of real persons or events, but it does reflect a sense of dissolution, in which history offers no guide to the present, and in which

> a vacuum of authority and collision of cultures create a confusion of criteria, whereby every configuration of authority or disobedience is replicated in contradictory variants… (188)

As she does in most of her other plays, Behn uses *Ranter* and her ability as a playwright to question the world around her; to demand a better England than the one she lived in. There is no denying that *The Widow Ranter* is an extension of Behn herself and an intimate look into her understanding of late seventeenth century English politics.

But what if engaging with *Ranter* from a different angle opens up another understanding of Behn's most important values? While scholars have expertly decoded *Ranter's* position on the political unrest in England at the time, most have not stopped to question the play's titular character. Why, in a play about politics set in the Virginia Colony during Bacon's Rebellion, is the titular character a widow? So few have tried to understand why Behn, a playwright known for imbuing her works with scathing reviews of the early modern gender hierarchy, would choose to make a significantly important character in this particular work a widow. A deeper analysis of Widow Ranter's speech, dress, and characterization provide insight into the way that Aphra Behn understood early modern widowhood. Ranter's empowerment through her widowhood exemplifies the way in which Aphra Behn saw widowhood as a symbol of ultimate feminine power. In this chapter, I will analyze the intricacies of the Widow Ranter in order to highlight how she represents Behn's interpretation of widowhood as ultimate feminine power.

Part One: Who is the Widow Ranter?

The audience is first introduced to the Widow Ranter in the very first scene of the play—or at least the audience hears about her from two characters plotting how they can become wealthy. Hazard, a younger brother who has financially ruined himself through gaming and

gambling, arrives in the New World bemoaning his lack of fortune. Upon running into an old acquaintance, Friendly, they devise a scheme for Hazard to get rich by seducing and marrying a wealthy widow. Hazard declares that his first choice is the soon-to-be-widowed Mrs. Surelove, but if that should fail, he will set his sights on the Widow Ranter:

> a woman bought from the ship by old Colonel Ranter; she served him half a year, and then he married her, and dying in a year more, left her worth fifty-thousand pounds sterling, besides plate and jewels: she's a great gallant, but assuming the humour of the country gentry, her extravagancy is very pleasant, she remains something of her primitive quality still, but is good-natured and generous. (Behn 1992, 255)

From this brief description, the audience learns much about the Widow Ranter before she even sets foot on stage. Her background is described, revealing that Widow Ranter was an indentured servant whose wealthy employer married her, died suddenly, and left her an extravagant inheritance. Additionally, aspects of her personality and character are also given. From Hazard and Friendly's conversation, we learn that Widow Ranter is quiet an unorthodox woman. Widowhood and exorbitant wealth aside, Widow Ranter does not behave in the way wealthy, early modern women should. While a more modern understanding of gallant invokes ideas of chivalry, respect, and heroism, according to Oxford English Dictionary, an archaic understanding of gallant is flirtatious or showy ("Gallant, 3b"). So, Widow Ranter can be understood as a woman who is a great flirt, acts in complete opposition to how gentile women were expected to behave, all the while still retaining a good sense of humor and generous nature where her neighbors are concerned.

Her first actual appearance to the audience cements these ideas. In just a matter of a few lines, Widow Ranter showcases a crude personality the minute she enters Mrs. Surelove's house.

Upon her entrance, Ranter manages to call the coachman a "drunken dog," Mrs. Surelove's servant boy a "son of baboon," and admits that she is most likely already drunk as she jovially states that she "…must smoke and drink in the morning, or [she is] maukish all day" (Behn 1992, 265). It becomes easily apparent just from her first few moments on stage that Widow Ranter is everything Hazard and Friendly say she is to be. But, in investigating her actions and words on a deeper level, a more interesting revelation may be made. Behind Widow Ranter's crude vocabulary and jarring personality are freedoms no other woman in the play has the liberty to possess. She can curse, smoke, drink, and spend her money any way she sees fit without any reprimand from a man in her life. Conversely, early modern conduct books preach the importance of womanly "shamefastness." Women are expected to be demure, bashful, and modest in action, behavior, and appearance. They needed to keep their heads down and not draw attention to themselves. For instance, as Juan Luis Vives writes in his sixteenth century book, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, "Of shamefastness cometh demureness and measurableness: that whether she think she ought, or say, or do; nothing shall be outrageous, neither in passions of mind, nor words, nor deeds…" (qtd. in Aughterson 70). At best, women should barely be seen and should definitely never be heard. However, Widow Ranter has defied every law that conduct writers like Vives have ever written. Her cursing and love for alcohol almost beg others to look at her. Her character is a spectacle with which to be engaged. She is no ordinary woman, and if early modern female decorum existed on a sliding scale, the Widow Ranter would be as far away as possible from any decorum displayed by a "feme coverte."

It is only obvious, then, that it must be some unique aspect of Widow Ranter's life that acts as her source of power. What gives the Widow Ranter the ability to forsake every rule of decorum? What gives the Widow Ranter the ability to purposefully set herself apart from

ordinary early modern women? Her widowhood, of course. As stated in chapter one, married women had absolutely no political, social, or economic autonomy. Due to the law of coverture, married women existed only as "feme coverte." They are nothing but extensions of their husbands. They cannot own property, they have no legal say over goods or even their own bodies, and they certainly had no access to money. Everything that once was hers infallibly becomes his. But widows, on the other hand, leave their "feme coverte" status behind them upon their husband's death. Legally, early modern widows were documented as "feme sole"—sole a derivative of the Latin word *solus*, meaning alone and feme a derivative of the Latin word *femina*, meaning woman. Widows were "women alone." They had no husband and, therefore, were able to escape the confines of submissiveness. As early colonial historian, Vivian Bruce Conger, writes, "As a *feme sole*, a widow regained her legal identity. She could do things that she could not do as a married woman…such responsibilities provided her with power" (53). This power allowed widowed women the ability to economically and legally have a say. This power allowed widowed women the unique ability to not only negotiate their place within early modern society, but craft a wholly independent version of themselves. This power allowed widowed women freedom.

Due to the death of Colonel Ranter, the Widow Ranter is a "feme sole." As such, she can move through life in a way that married women simply did not have the autonomy to do. She can spend money on whatever she chooses, she can spend time with the people of her choice, and she can spend her days engaging in what makes her happy. Widow Ranter possess the power that Vivian Bruce Conger speaks of. Her widowhood allows her the possibility to craft her image in any way she desires. She can be the woman who smokes, drinks, and curses because there is no male authority that she must contend with. Above all Widow Ranter has the power of choice. *She*

chooses who she is to become—not her father, husband, or employer. And in a world where choice is not a luxury afforded to most women, perhaps it is Widow Ranter's ability to choose what she does with her own life and body that might make her the most powerful woman in the whole play.

And, if choice is the barometer for power, one might be able to argue that the Widow Ranter is not only the most powerful woman in *The Widow Ranter*, but the most powerful woman across Restoration dramatic literature. Given Widow Ranter's complete disassociation from a typical "feme coverte," her character not only stands out as extraordinary in the context of Behn's play, but also in the context of plays across the Restoration canon. One of the most popular forms of drama during this time period was the Comedy of Manners, in which playwrights often satirized the characteristics and social status quo of the desirable English upper-class (Gill 4). However, this satire was most often interwoven into thoughts on what was and was not considered proper gendered behavior. Any person who posed a threat to the appropriate representation of the gender hierarchy was often turned into a comedic character meant to be laughed at and ridiculed—including witty women who were insistent on their freedom. As J. Douglas Canfield writes:

> In Restoration social comedy at its most familiar the threat to established order takes the form of promiscuous rakes and rebellious young women resisting—marriage itself, in the case of the libertine rakes, or enforced marriage, in the case of the witty women. At the end of these comedies, the centrifugal energy of the rakes who insist on freedom to change and women who insist on freedom to choose is normally centripetalized in a marriage that finally presents no threat to status hierarchy and that guarantees the

continuation of an aristocratic order in which power and property continue to be safely transmitted though genealogy." (33).

In other words, Restoration Comedy of Manners made fun of the individuals who posed a societal problem, often reiterating to audiences that they were being made fun of for their unorthodox desires, and enforced an ending in which those odd individuals eventually learned their place through marriage.

As such, the women depicted in Restoration comedies are either, as Pat Gill explains, "fallen" female characters who embody the brunt of the most scathing satire for their licentious ways or the heroines innocent of "dissimulation and secret amours" who serve as the "formal and moral" counterpoints to those "fallen" women (13-14). Either way, the women featured in Restoration comedy are powerless. They either remain quality representations of how women should act and, therefore, retain no ability to choose for themselves, or they are pushed into respectable representations of women, and despite their yearning for freedom, are forced to forgo any chance of choice because of marriage. Take Margery Pinchwife, for example. Margery, the female protagonist featured in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, is a wide-eyed, innocent young woman from the country who knows not of the wanton ways of the city rake. To counter this, Pinchwife, Margery's husband, locks her in their home to keep her pure. However, after meeting Horner, the play's rake, Margery partakes in disguise and deceitful behavior in order to act upon her feelings for him. Dressing up as her friend, Alithea, Margery convinces her husband to take her over to Horner's home. Eventually though, despite her best efforts, the play ends with Margery resigning herself to a life as Pinchwife's wife and repressing her affection for Horner in order to keep her good social standing. Despite Margery's start as an innocent woman, it is her desire for the ability to choose Horner over her husband that turns her into a "fallen" woman. It

is only through the reinforcement of her marriage to Pinchwife that social hierarchy is once again restored and Margery can leave her "fallen" woman status. Deceit and betrayal become the consequences of allowing women to break the natural order, thus marriage (or, in reality, the enforcement of appropriate behavior) is the only antidote. *The Country Wife* is a textbook example of the Restoration Comedy of Manners play. As one can see, Restoration plays prohibit their female characters from having any choice or freedom in order to impose a broader narrative as to what is and is not appropriate behavior for women. Margery, like other Restoration female characters, is always forced to comply with her male superiors no matter what she truly wants.

Widow Ranter, on the other hand, never has to comply with what her "male superiors" think appropriate female behavior is. Her widowhood gives her an allowance to act in the ways she sees fit without any sort of consequences. Ranter's widowhood turns her into a completely autonomous being who has the power to choose and act upon desires as she sees fit, unlike Margery. Moreover, Ranter is, by categorization, a "fallen" woman. Her behavior is inappropriate. She is loud, crass, and loves multiple vices. She disregards the patriarchy, and therefore, disregards proper social order. However, Behn never punishes Ranter for being a "fallen" woman. In fact, Ranter is actually rewarded for it. As will be examined later in the chapter, Ranter does marry at the end of her story. However, this marriage is atypical. It is not one of submission and dominance. Rather, Ranter's marriage at the end of the play is a partnership. Her new husband never expects her to change. Instead, he embraces and encourages Ranter's autonomy. Though Ranter is married at the end, as Restoration dramatic structure demands, it is not a means of caging her. Ranter's marriage is actually an acknowledgement that her autonomy makes her desirable, not a threat. In this moment, Behn embraces the genre and aesthetic of popular Restoration comedies. She does not shy away from representing Ranter as a

"fallen" woman, however, she does flip the consequences of what "fallen" woman means. As Gill writes, "…Behn…does not reject the reigning dramatic norms, but the characterizations in her plays differ from those of her male colleagues in provocatively significant ways" (139). Behn actually uses the popular genre and aesthetic choices of Restoration comedy to subvert the notion of appropriate female behavior. In an orchestrated move, Behn uses Restoration aesthetic to argue against the control of social order, rather than in favor of it. In this case, Behn utilizes the popular conventions of Restoration comedy to show that the Widow Ranter is the most powerful female character on the Restoration stage. Ranter's widowhood gives her the freedom to choose and the freedom to choose, in turn, grants Ranter a power unheard of for most women.

Part Two: The Power of Breeches

It is not just the Widow Ranter's ability to choose and craft her own personality that makes her so powerful. Her power and freedom are also conveyed through her clothing. Afterall, another integral part of an individual's ability to choose and to craft their own identity comes in the form of clothing. For the Widow Ranter, it is the men's trousers that she dons. Towards the end of the play, Widow Ranter disguises herself as a member of the colonial militia to sneak into the camp, rescue Chrisante, and convince Daring that they belong together. In order to seamlessly blend in with the colonial militia, Ranter wears breeches. This tactic—known as the Breeches Role—has been popular in stage dramas for centuries. In theatrical works, the Breeches Role was a female character who would, at some point of the play, don men's trousers. Breeches Roles were incredibly popular with audiences throughout the Restoration period. Recent calculations show that of the roughly 375 plays produced on the public stage in London from 1660 to 1700, 89 of those plays contained one or more Breeches Roles (Howe 57). Though Breeches Roles were prevalent in many plays, the Widow Ranter's breeches remain unique.

For the most part, breeches are only a disguise. A female character slips them on in order to become something she is not. Perhaps she needs to get closer to a potential love interest or maybe she needs to escape the confines of a villainous man who does not truly care for her. Either way, the breeches act as a mask for the woman. They allow her to hide her true form and, for just a moment, they allow her to be something—*someone*—she ordinarily never could be. The breeches give her a modicum of freedom. For instance, let us explore one of William Shakespeare's most famous Breeches Roles, Viola in *Twelfth Night*. After surviving a shipwreck and believing her brother, Sebastian, to have drowned, Viola decides to disguise herself as a young man named Cesario in order to gain entrance into Duke Orsino's court. This disguise becomes Viola's best chance at safety. Her brother is presumably dead, she has no other family, and she has ended up in a strange, unknown country in which she has no status or even money. The breeches give her the chance to live unencumbered in a hostile man's world. They give her the freedom of protection that comes with total autonomy. However, this disguise, and by extension Viola's freedom, is only meant to be temporary. Her breeches are only to remain on as long as they are necessary. For as soon as she has found Sebastian, she has decided to leave them behind, excitingly stating, "…but this my masculine usurped attire, do not embrace me till each circumstance of place, time, fortune, do cohere and jump that I am Viola; which to confirm, I'll bring you to a captain in this town, where lie my maiden weeds…" (Shakespeare 5.1.262-267). The masculine attire is entirely a guise. Viola is not truly Viola while still clothed like a man because her breeches were a means to an end. They were never intended to be an extension of herself, instead they were a tool, a costume. They provided a slight taste of freedom, but they were never meant to become her reality.

Viola is not the only of Shakespeare's leading ladies to don men's trousers in order to protect herself. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Rosalind disguises herself as a shepherd named Ganymede in order to escape her cruel uncle, Duke Frederick, and take refuge in the Forest of Arden. Much like Viola, Rosalind's breeches are not necessarily an act of defiance, but instead, an act of self-defense. She becomes Ganymede in order to protect herself. Slipping into the Ganymede disguise allows Rosalind certain freedoms that she is unable to possess as the daughter of a duke. She can travel safely to Arden without the worry of being hurt by men, she can escape her uncle's court without being recognized, and she can enact a scheme that encourages Orlando to act upon his love for her. Ultimately, wearing these breeches gives Rosalind a chance to break free from the restrictive nature of a male, gentile society. For a moment she is both free and safe disguised as a man. But, in the same way Viola's breeches are a temporary necessity, Rosalind's breeches are only ever meant to be her ticket to Arden. They are not hers to keep. In fact, during the last scene of the play, Rosalind changes out of her Ganymede disguise and returns wearing women's clothing in order to marry Orlando. This change is significant because, in certain ways, Rosalind's gown indicates the fleetingness of her freedom. Though it may appear to audience members as if *As You Like It* ends happily because Rosalind gets to marry the man that she loves, to do so she had to give up what the Forest of Arden had gifted her—liberty—and return to the suffocation of a hierarchical gendered society.

In contrast to Viola and Rosalind is the Widow Ranter. While Viola and Rosalind's breeches act as temporary disguises, the Widow Ranter's breeches become a permanent extension of herself, for they represent her inalienable freedom. Originally, like any other breeches role, Ranter puts on her breeches in order to disguise herself. However, Ranter's breeches never fool the one person she hopes to. Despite her male clothing, Daring, the man who

Ranter has been in love with, knew that she was a woman underneath the young soldier disguise. In a bid to try and get her to reveal herself, Daring starts insulting the Widow Ranter's character. So, in rightful anger, the disguised Widow draws her sword and demands a duel. Before any fighting can happen, Daring yells, "Hold—hold, virago—dear Widow hold, and give me thy hand," revealing that her disguise was unsuccessful (Behn 1992, 310). When she asks how he knew it was her, Daring replies that he knew her by instinct. Despite her attempts at subterfuge, Ranter is all too obvious. What Daring's reveal suggests is that Ranter's breeches are just as metaphorical as they are tangible. No matter whether she wears breeches or gowns, the Widow Ranter is undeniably the Widow Ranter. Due to her widowhood, freedom and autonomy define her being no matter what she looks like. Ranter does not just wear her breeches as a quick fix or a momentary necessity, she is (at least metaphorically) always in breeches because she can think and act for herself. Her breeches are appointed upon widowhood, for it was then that no man could lay claim over here. As Virginia L. Wilkerson states, "Unlike most literary and theatrical representations of women disguised as men, Behn's Ranter has the personality and manner to match her breeches" (74). Freedom is not fleeting for Ranter. Her breeches are not a representation of what could be, but instead a manifestation of what is.

Ranter's breeches are a symbol of the liberation widowhood has provided her and, moreover, unlike Viola and Rosalind, she never has to relinquish the power given to her. Interestingly, while the Widow Ranter's breeches definitely exist metaphorically, they come to exist tangibly as well. After Daring reveals that he knew it was Ranter all along, he suggests that they should marry right then and there. Ranter says that they should wait until after the war, to which Daring replies, "Nay, prithee, take me in the humour, while thy breeches are on—for I never liked thee half so well in petticoats" (Behn 1992, 310). On a surface level, Daring's line is

nothing but a funny quip or perhaps a poorly concealed sexual innuendo, but a deeper investigation of Daring's line reveals a far more interesting interpretation. Daring was never romantically interested in Ranter in the beginning of the story. He only knew her to be a crass, heavy drinker and nothing more. He did not know the true Ranter. It is her "daring"—her unladylike qualities, her willingness to fight for what she wants—that makes her more desirable in Daring's eyes. Daring likes that Ranter is an independent woman who is not confined by the laws of early modern propriety. He never liked her "so well in petticoats" because part of Ranter was still abiding by early modern gender hierarchy. It is only when she embraces the full potential of her power—symbolized by the act of putting on breeches—that Daring realizes how desirable she truly is. Daring's respect-turned-love indicates to the audience that Ranter will never have to choose between her autonomy and her happiness. It is *because* of her autonomy that she will find happiness. What Ranter and Daring have is a partnership—he will not own her as a traditional husband does a "feme coverte." And, to symbolize the power that Ranter will forever hold, Behn never has Ranter change back into women's clothing. In the very last time Ranter is mentioned in the stage directions, Behn writes "Enter…Ranter *as before*" (322). The Widow Ranter re-enters the stage still wearing her breeches at the end of the play. Unlike most other Breeches Roles there is no change of costume or indication that she will leave to put women's clothing back on. Most of the time, the Breeches Role character returns to how they were in the beginning, like Viola and Rosalind. That is, they change back to their normal clothes. Therefore—even if it is subconsciously—these women admit a correctness is the rigidity of early modern gender propriety. In contrast, the Widow Ranter never returns to the beginning. Her breeches are there to stay. Forevermore, she will wear breeches as comfortably as any man does.

And she will never experience a moment in which she must relinquish her autonomy and her power. Her breeches become a permeant fixture.

Given the importance of Ranter's breeches in understanding both her character and the significance of her autonomy, it should be mentioned that a large discussion discerning the intricacies of the Breeches Role exists in most feminist circles. For many of the historians that study Restoration theatre through a gender studies lens, the Breeches Role becomes a topic of contention. While they are often an important narrative function, the popularity of Breeches Roles tends to be rooted in the patriarchal and scopophilic nature of the early modern male audience. Breeches Roles seem to have been so incredibly popular due to the fact that they showed off the female figure. During this time in London, most women only ever wore long skirts, and these garments effectively prohibited any hint of the feminine figure from being shown. Conversely, having women appear in men's trousers on stage flaunted the feminine figure. The costume was perfect for suggestively outlining a woman's figure because it permitted the shape of an actress's hips, buttocks, and legs to be seen through the tight fabric. As historian Elizabeth Howe emphasizes, "The state of undress was an easy way to entertain…a state of dress could be equally as erotic" (56). This state of dress certainly titillated male audience members for there was never any confusion over what was being seen on stage. That is to say, no audience member ever questioned whether or not they were actually seeing women on stage (Howe 56). From the very moment that the actress walked out on to stage in men's trousers, audience members knew that they were watching female characters, in revealing clothing, pretend to be boys. So, it can easily be argued that, over all else, the Breeches Role was more of a fundamental tool in erotically displaying women on stage during the Restoration period than it was a fundamental tool in dramatic storytelling.

Despite the often erotic function of the Breeches Role, Behn never seems to utilize Ranter's breeches as a way to sexualize her. Their function is not to display Ranter's body in a sexualized manner, but instead, they are meant to display Ranter's significant (and frankly, unusual) power and autonomy. As Pilar Cuder Dominguez writes, "Though in Restoration drama women in breeches were erotic objects, in the character of the Widow Ranter, Behn seems to be feeling her way towards an androgynous figure that may transcend the conventional images of women displayed in the period" (102-103). Ranter's masculine qualities, self-confidence, bravery, and willingness to fight all outweigh the potential for eroticism. This "androgyny" that Dominguez speaks about is created because Ranter is an unconventional blend of masculine traits within a female body. In fact, her desirability only comes in to play because of her masculine character. If it were not for her bravery, Daring would never have found Ranter to be an attractive woman. Behn never intended for Ranter's body to be tantalizing. Instead it is her mind, choices, and freedom that is meant to be alluring. One of the greatest descriptions of the Widow Ranter comes from the stage directions Behn wrote about a battle scene towards the end. During that scene, many of Bacon's men, including Daring, rush on to the stage with swords drawn about to fight the Justices of the Peace (or "very great cowards" as Behn's cast of characters state). But, the Widow Ranter is not one to be left behind, so she joins the battle in her breeches, "fighting like a Fury" by Daring's side (Behn 1992, 313). Furies do not necessarily invoke an understanding of attractiveness. Most often, mythological stories detail them as looking hag-like. But, as the goddesses of vengeance, they were powerful. The Widow Ranter operates in much the same way. She is a force to be reckoned with. Her breeches were not intended to show off her body or make her sexually appealing, instead they highlight her raw power, bravery, and liberty from the confines of a heavily gendered world.

Interestingly, Ranter is not the only Breeches Role in *The Widow Ranter*. There is another central female character who dons male clothing during the story. She is Semernia, the Native American queen. Outside of Ranter and Daring's storyline and Hazard and Friendly's antics, a third plotline runs through Behn's work—Nathanial Bacon is in love with Semernia but she is married to the Native American king, Cavarino, as a prize for his heroism. Ultimately, Bacon slays Cavarino for Semernia's hand and Semernia decides that she must flee from Bacon, as is her duty as a mourning wife. So, Semernia disguises herself as a man and, along with several members of her tribe, heads out into the woods to escape Bacon. Unfortunately, Semernia's breeches work a little too well and Bacon, unaware that Semernia is disguised as a man, fatally wounds her in a battle. Semernia dies in Bacon's arms while confessing that she has always loved him, which leads Bacon to take his own life and thus ends Bacon and Semernia's story in utter tragedy. Unlike the Widow Ranter, Semernia's breeches do not bring her happiness, peace, or stability. Instead, they become her burial shroud.

The reason that Semernia's breeches do not function in the same manner as Ranter's do is because, fundamentally, the two women are as different as night and day. While they both decide to disguise themselves as young men in order to accomplish something, the circumstances regarding the two situations could not be more different from one another. Ranter, as a widow, has the freedom and autonomy to embrace her more masculine qualities. She can fight, carry a sword, and more importantly, decide for herself who she can and cannot love. Her widowhood essentially turns the breeches into an extension of herself. Ranter's breeches both physically and metaphorically show the world that she is emancipated from the restraint of early modern gender propriety. She has the equivalent power of any other man in the Virginia colony and her breeches acknowledge that. Semernia's breeches, on the other hand, function much like Viola and

Rosalind's do. Her disguise is only that—a disguise. Semernia does not have the insight (nor the ability to possess that insight) to wear her breeches like Ranter does. Semernia even says as much to her maid, Anaria. Afraid that she will not be able to escape Bacon, Semernia laments:

> I sigh and wish—some other fatal hand had given him his death—but now there's a necessity I must be brave and overcome my heart. What do I do? Ah, whither shall I fly, I have no Amazonian fire about me, all my artillery is sighs and tears, the earth my bed, and heaven my canopy. (Behn 1992, 317)

Semernia is timorous and gentle, much like women were expected to be in the early modern period. While Ranter possesses the "Amazonian fire" that Semernia speaks of, Semernia's bravery and willingness to fight are hard to find. Though she wears breeches, she still openly weeps for the love she cannot pursue and instead must flee from. Semernia's breeches are not an extension of herself. They are merely a temporary solution to an unsolvable problem. Like Viola and Rosalind, Semernia's breeches were never meant to last. And because her breeches were not meant to last, Semernia's masculine qualities are transient in nature. Semernia had just enough bravery to leave her home and travel in to the forest, but that is where her bravery ends. She did not possess enough courage to fight and she certainly did not possess enough courage to make her own choices regarding love. Ultimately, because of the differences in these two women's lives, Ranter's breeches became a tangible symbol of choice and freedom, while Semernia's breeches become a symbol of lost potential.

It is important to acknowledge that Ranter had the ability to embrace bravery, determination, and choice while Semernia did not. Ranter and Semernia are both widows. But, the widowed Semernia is a foil to the Widow Ranter. Ranter's older husband died naturally. Semernia's husband was murdered by the man that held her true affections. The circumstances

surrounding their widowhood also play a large part in the power and freedom they either do or do not acquire. Because Ranter's husband died naturally, she was able to benefit. She was liberated. Nothing in that particular circumstance required Ranter to continue to abide by the strict rules of gender hierarchy. She inherited money, became a "feme sole," and could finally choose for herself how her life would be. Unfortunately, because Semernia's husband was killed by the man she truly loved, the typical power that widowhood would have brought her was stolen from her too. Beginning a life with the man who killed her husband would have been scandalous and damning. Thus, instead of liberation, Semernia was to be caught in the strictly woven web that was early modern gender hierarchy. Bacon's thirst for power shattered the freedom that widowhood should have brought Semernia. Her death shows audiences that male authority and the complete control over women is a dangerous aspect of early modern society that should be changed. A widow's power is achievable, as Ranter so comically shows, but unfortunately that sort of power and freedom was not available to most women. So, perhaps, Semernia's breeches were a way for Aphra Behn to show that until society was fundamentally changed, becoming Ranter would be a pipedream for most early modern women. Until women, themselves, demanded and fought for change, they were destined to be the Semernias of the story rather than the Ranters. Perhaps, the Widow Ranter, in all her breeches glory, is not only a symbol of the potential of female power, but also a symbol of society as it is not yet, but should be.

In essence, the Widow Ranter's power is derived from her widowhood. In being thrust to the outskirts of the patriarchy, Ranter is able to create herself an oasis in which she is free to choose how she lives, who she loves, and what she dresses like. Unlike other seventeenth century women, Ranter has the ability to choose. She is a completely autonomous woman, and is happier

and more fulfilled for it. Above all, her widowhood garners her a certain amount of respect. If it were not for her unladylike tendencies and her penchant for courageously rushing into action, traits that the freedom of widowhood has encouraged Ranter to seize, then Daring would never have realized that he loved her. Her power and autonomy make her desirable and intriguing. Ultimately, in examining Ranter's characterization, her breeches, and her relation as the foil to Semernia, one can understand that widowhood provided Ranter with freedom from the constrictive early modern gender hierarchy and, thus, made her the most powerful woman, and potentially the most powerful character, in *The Widow Ranter, or The History of Bacon in Virginia*. For Behn to give such power to a woman, a woman who obviously does not hold a place in the early modern caste and who escaped the confines of female subjugation, is significant. For Behn's choice shows that she, personally, holds widowhood in high regard. Behn sees widows as a symbolically important construction of femininity because widowhood pushed back against the patriarchy by giving power and authority to women.

CHAPTER III: WOMEN IN *THE ROVER* AND *THE LUCKEY CHANCE*

One of Aphra Behn's most memorable, most scathing, and most interesting prefaces was attached to her 1686 play, *The Luckey Chance*. Fed up with the constant backlash she was facing as a female playwright during a time when commercial playwrighting was certainly not a part of the woman's sphere, Aphra Behn decided she needed to say her piece in the best way she knew how—through pen and ink. Stopping the printing of *The Luckey Chance* after several critical remarks about the fact that one of her male actors appeared on stage with his robe undone, Aphra Behn added a preface to call out the sexist nature of the comments made by her male contemporaries (Todd 2017, 372-373). In the preface, Aphra Behn wrote:

> …I make a challenge to any person of common sense and reason—that is not wilfully bent on ill nature, and will in spite of sense wrest a double entendre from everything…any unprejudiced person that knows not the author—to read any of my comedies and compare 'em with others of this age…right or wrong, they must be criminal because a woman's…And to fortify their detraction, charge me with all the plays that have ever been offensive… (Behn 1995, 188).

To Behn, the only reason her plays were being met with so many violations of censure was because she was a woman. She truly felt that any other play written by a male contemporary of hers might have just as much if not more "offensive" material, but it would never be flagged because male writers could get away with so much more. Unfortunately, Behn's observations were most likely very true. Early modern England, as outlined in chapter one, was an incredibly hierarchical society, especially when it came to gender. If a woman did not act in accordance to what society told her she should be, then she was an anomaly. She became the embodiment of scandal and ceased to truly fit in within society's harsh rules. However, if a "proto-feminist" ever

truly did exist during this time, then Aphra Behn was certainly one of them. So much of her writing career was pushing against those constructed boundaries. As Janet Todd once wrote, Behn excelled at playing "gender games" (1995, 372). And as such, her works often outlined her most intimate thoughts and feelings regarding the way women lived their lives in the mid to late seventeenth century. Most of all, her plays, while funny, bawdy, and often times a little bit crass, demanded change. They were literary forms of protest; works in which Behn could ask her audience why women deserved to be treated as second class citizens. If the pen really is mightier than the sword, then Behn's plays were her best weapon in fighting for a better life for seventeenth century women.

The Widow Ranter, though published posthumously, is Behn's example of what that change could bring. Due to her widowhood, Ranter gets to be a powerful woman in a time when that thought is almost laughable. She can choose her romantic partner for herself, she can spend money on whatever she likes, she even has the ability to draw attention to herself if she so wishes. She is extraordinary and it is her widowhood that makes her that way. The power that widows have is exceptional, but it is often singular. Most women are not given the same kind of liberties that the Widow Ranter had. So, the Widow Ranter becomes the incarnation of the power Behn wishes all women to have.

While Ranter functions as the posterchild of what has yet to come but one day could, almost all of Behn's other female characters are examples of what is. That is, they showcase in various ways how seventeenth century life was for most women. And unfortunately, the majority of Behn's women have to lie, steal, and cheat in order to obtain even a fraction of the power that the Widow Ranter has. These other female characters are forced to live in the same world that Behn finds herself in. In much the same way that Behn was villainized for simply being a

woman, so too were her other female characters. In showcasing the lives of these fictional women, Behn demands change in the same way she did by adding the preface to The Luckey Chance—she calls out the unjust treatment of women. In this chapter, I will analyze Behn's interpretation of the power of widowhood from a different angle. Through a literary analysis of the female characters and the choices they make in Behn's *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance*, one can see a contrast created between those female characters and the Widow Ranter, a contrast that displays the terrible treatment of seventeenth-century women and asks for better.

Part One: Forced Marriages

Marriage has been an incredibly popular plot point in stories for centuries now. From Jason leaving Medea in order to marry the Corinthian princess, to Queen Gertrude's remarriage to her late husband's brother, to Elizabeth Bennet telling her father that she will only ever marry for love, and even to Edward Rochester telling Jane that he was tricked into marrying Bertha for her money, so many stories have used both good and bad narratives of marriage as a catalyst for action. Aphra Behn's stories are no exception. Several of her most well-known plays somehow incorporate marriage into their storylines. However, for the women in Behn's plays, marriage is not always a celebration of love. Instead, it was often a sentence of captivity. As Behn is prone to showing the challenges and dangers of a seventeenth century woman's life, a constant motif running through her works is this idea of an arranged or forced marriage. In several of her plays, Behn's leading ladies have fathers or brothers who try to force them into marriage contracts that they do not want, and in turn, trap them in between choice or duty and love or security. Many times, Behn's depictions of forced marriage go beyond a simple denial of choice and instead enter into a more sinister territory—that is, the women being forced into a marriage frequently find themselves standing on the precipice of endangerment. As Susan Staves articulates:

> …Behn vehemently attacks the immorality of forced marriages and her heroines vigorously express the loathsomeness of being forced to marry a rich old man as no better than rape. She shows the power of patriarchal legal and economic systems to ride roughshod over women's desires (19).

To Aphra Behn, a forced marriage is the equivalent of a death sentence. Women already have so little choice in the highly structured early modern society, so a forced marriage takes away their last chance of obtaining even a small amount of freedom and say over their own life. Once a woman is married, she is no longer a full being, but instead a piece of her husband's property. Upon marriage, she is meant to act in complete subservience to her husband. And could anything be worse than subservience? Perhaps just forced subservience to a man she never even consented to marry in the first place.

It is this question regarding the detriment of forced marriage that Aphra Behn attempts to unpack in her various stage plays. In particular, Behn's 1677 play titled *The Rover or The Banished Cavaliers*—probably one of, if not the most famous works of Behn's—both critiques the immorality of forced marriages and envisions the stability of a world that encourages female liberation. In the story, sisters Florinda and Hellena find themselves trapped in fates dictated by their father and brother. Despite Florinda's love for the impoverished Belvile, the girls' father wants Florinda to be married off to Don Vincentio, a wealthy, yet elderly man, and their brother, Don Pedro, attempts to marry her off to his friend Don Antonio, the highborn son of a viceroy. While Florinda is being forced into a marriage, Hellena is faced with just as stifling, though perhaps a bit tamer, an outcome as the girls' father and brother are in the process of sending her off to a convent. In order to escape their forced outcomes, the girls decide they need to sneak out to the Carnival—a lively festival in which the laws of everyday society are temporarily

postponed, consequences are suspended, and revelry is invited. While it should be noted that forced marriage is not the central exploration of *The Rover*, it certainly acts as a catalyst for action, prompting Florinda and Hellena to embark on their journey of self-discovery. Aphra Behn's feelings about forced marriage appear quite evidently in that just the idea of a forced marriage is enough of a torment to send the girls into a panic, prompting them to risk their bodily safety at the Carnival. It is telling that these two women would rather enter into a lawless world that could potentially bring them great harm rather than be shackled to a man they do not wish to marry. Florinda and Hellena's willingness to leave behind the structured safety of society indicates that being forced into a marriage is just as harmful, if not more so, for seventeenth century women as it would be to thrust them into a shattered world in which laws do not exist and animalistic pandemonium is encouraged.

To risk physical danger in that sort of world might seem foolish to a modern reader. We might struggle to understand why Florinda does not say no, does not run away from her father and brother, or at worst, marry one of these men with an intention to eventually divorce him. But one must remember that contemporary understandings of marriage are a privilege. As outlined in chapter one, marriage was not an act taken lightly in the early modern period. In fact, it was an act deemed entirely sacred and demanded by God himself. However, scriptural interpretations of gender roles automatically placed women as a secondary party within the marriage—not a partner. While scripture often preached that a marriage was a union in which husband and wife become "one flesh," practice demanded that the husband be the metaphorical head of the fused body (Dolan 27). As Eve was made from a rib taken out of Adam, woman is destined to always be subordinate to man, even within a marriage. What this often meant for women was a life akin to servitude. She existed purely to serve her husband as necessary. And in a forced marriage,

where there might be no compassionate ties, a life of servitude could very well be a hellish existence. Florinda knows this, and in her fear and anger she exclaims to her brother, "I hate Vincentio, sir, and I would not have a man so dear to me as my brother follow the ill customs of our country, and make a slave of his sister" (Behn 1995, 1.1.62-64). Florinda is hurt and outraged that her own brother sees her as nothing better than an object to barter and trade. But she also sees the deeper-rooted problem. To Florinda, forced marriage is a country-wide epidemic of barbarity. She blames the patriarchy at large for women's suffering and condemns the leaders of the country for their part in what she believes to be another form of slavery. Don Pedro's response to Florinda's bitter criticism is to explain why she should be grateful to marry such a wealthy man. But what Don Pedro fails to understand is precisely what terrifies and angers Florinda. While Vincentio's wealth would provide stability, it in no way guarantees safety. If Florinda was able to marry a man that she chose and that she loved, then there is a greater chance of emotional and physical security. She would not necessarily have to worry about the harmful effects of the subordination required by law. But, if she is forced to marry a man who does not care for her in any way beyond her youth or beauty, there is no telling what sort of reinforcement he would use to demand her obedience.

Husbands, as the heads of households, were both encouraged and expected to guide, teach, and correct their wives. And, as I briefly mentioned in the first chapter, a method of correction was physical abuse. While sources vary on the morality of "wife-beating," several writings and conduct books from the seventeenth century allege that patriarchal power gave husbands the right to physically discipline as they saw fit. For example, *The Husband's Authority Unvail'd*, written by Mones Vauts in 1650, defended that a "good man" could beat his "bad wife" (Amussen 72). Vauts' book, among many others, indicates that not only was it socially

acceptable for men to physically abuse their wives, but depending on the circumstances, it was necessary in order to instill an understanding of power, control, and roles within a family dynamic. To many early modern men, violence against women was a natural method of teaching obedience, and their actions represented nothing more than a disciplinary tool. Moreover, as scholars Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford write, "During the early modern period, wives were not permitted to initiate an action for divorce which allowed remarriage" (141). So, if a woman's husband saw it fit to discipline with physical violence, then there truly was no other option for them than to accept and persevere through a lifetime of abuse and glorified servitude. One can imagine that Florinda, a daughter of a relatively upper-class family, would have been acutely aware of the limited options for her future. Marriage would be the securest course of action for Florinda's future stability, but it also had the tendency to be a dangerous course of action. If Don Vincentio, the man she is being forced to marry and a man she knows next to nothing about, engages in physical abuse as a form of control, then Florinda has to accept a life of suffering. For Florinda, a forced marriage could very well be deadly.

Even her sister, Hellena, knows how terribly Florinda may fare in a forced marriage as she tells Don Pedro, "It's not enough you make a nun of me, but you must cast my sister away too, exposing her to a worse confinement than religious life?" (Behn 1995, 1.1.90-92). The use of "confinement" in Hellena's dialogue is interesting. In the early modern period, over half of convents followed the Benedictine rule, making them strictly cloistered. And, even though women could not be mendicants, the chief mendicant orders—The Franciscans and the Dominicans—also had enclosed female houses (Laurence 182). Cloistered nuns were strictly confined. They had very little contact with the outside world, if any, and often took vows of chastity and poverty. They lived their lives completely devoted to prayer and contemplation,

which the confinement of the cloister easily enabled. If Hellena is regarding a forced marriage as a "worse confinement" than religious life, then it stands to reason that a forced marriage is a gross restriction of choice and liberty. At least at a convent, Hellena might be able to pursue an education in reading and writing. Though she might not have access to the outside world, she could find purpose in religious doctrine and the surrounding intellectual community. Through her marriage, Florinda can only find purpose through a life of restriction and subjugation. Hellena would still get to retain her status as a human being. Florinda would have to give up all semblance of autonomy—legal, financial, and social—in order to be a wife. As illustrated through the sisters' resistance towards Florinda's potential future, it is quite clear that Behn found forced marriages to be a reprehensible creation of an unjust patriarchy.

Aphra Behn's repulsion towards forced marriage is not only found in just *The Rover*, for many of her other dramas incorporate her disdain for the way that many women are forced into a marriage against their will. While *The Rover* really only highlights the anxiety women feel towards forced marriage, as one does not actually ever take place, other plays of Behn's showcase the actual harsh outcomes of a forced marriage. In particular, Behn's 1686 play titled *The Luckey Chance, or an Alderman's Bargain* condemns English society for pushing young women to marry old, wealthy men as a means of procuring financial protection. *The Luckey Chance* portrays the marriages of Leticia and Julia, two young women who have been forced to marry old and senile, yet wealthy, men as a way to escape poverty. Neither Leticia nor Julia is particularly happy about being forced to marry these old men, as prior to the play's beginning, they are betrothed to Gayman and Belmour, respectively. Unfortunately for Leticia, Belmour has been banished for killing his opponent in a duel and Leticia, believing Belmour to have been hanged for his crime, has agreed to marry Sir Feeble Fainwould in order to ensure herself

financial security. As for Julia, Gayman's libertinism has left him utterly poor and she, being unable to afford marriage to an impoverished man, begrudgingly accepts the proposal from Sir Cautious Fulbank, an old banker.

It is easily understood by the reader that both women are extremely unhappy to find themselves in such a position, as they both remain consistent in arguing that circumstance and society have forced their hands. When Belmour returns and reveals to Leticia that he is still alive, he demands to know why she would marry another man. Upset, Leticia replies, "But oh, remember I was poor and helpless, and much reduced, and much imposed upon" (Behn 1995, 2.2.49-50). She adamantly tries to make Belmour understand that her marriage to Fainwould was only ever a marriage of convenience. If she had wanted to live with a roof over her head, suitable clothes to wear, and enough food to eat, then a marriage to a man with money was her only option. Julia, on the other hand, has a much more biting response about the necessity of money in marriage when she finds out that Gayman has made himself destitute. She tells him, "Love's a thin diet, nor will keep out cold. You cannot satisfy your dunning tailor, to cry 'I am in love!'" (Behn 1995, 4.1.36-38). Just like Leticia, Julia's marriage is also one of convenience. She loves Gayman, but she can quite literally not afford to marry him. In order to ensure that she has the capability to just simply survive, Julia needed to accept Fulbank's marriage proposal. As briefly discussed in chapter one, early modern marriage was often a pairing built on survival—not a love match. Women, in a time that provided very little in the way of female independence, were often reliant on the men in their life for safety and security. Historians, Mendelson and Crawford, suggest that marriage was one of the surest ways to find safety and security, stating that, "Given the limited options for self-sufficiency open to single women, marriage could be an attractive economic option, one of the expedients for survival…" (268). With Belmour and Gayman

unavailable to them in terms of security, Leticia and Julia are forced to take the next best option. Society has forced these women to choose between food, shelter, and clothing or love. The harsh reality is that in choosing to survive, Leticia and Julia have knowingly resigned themselves to a life of unhappiness. In their pleas of understanding, Aphra Behn truly makes her disgust known. It is clear that Behn categorizes marriages of convenience as synonymous with forced marriages, as in both cases, women are coerced into matrimony because no other choice truly exists for them. It is just one more circumstance in which early modern women are forced to bend to the will of the patriarchy, no matter the destruction it might bring upon them. As Julia tells her friends in *The Luckey Chance*, "Oh, how fatal forced marriages are! How many ruins one such match pulls on…now I languish in a loathed embrace, pine out my life with age, consumptuous coughs" (Behn 1995, 1.2.32-37). As far as both Julia and her creator, Aphra Behn, are concerned, forced marriages bring nothing good. Instead, they turn bridal silks into burial shrouds.

Another aspect of forced marriages that Aphra Behn is sure to criticize in *The Luckey Chance* is the way that they reinforce the early modern gender hierarchy by both infantilizing women and justifying the creation of coverture. Behn expertly calls out the way that forced marriages reinscribe these ideas by satirizing the supposed guidance, knowledge, and authority that men claim to have over the women in their life. In one of the most memorable scenes of *The Luckey Chance,* several characters have gathered to celebrate Leticia's marriage to Sir Feeble Fainwould. During this scene, Fainwould makes a complete fool of himself by following Leticia around, continuously pawing at her, and calling her all sorts of absurd pet names. He calls her names like "little ting," "did'ums," "silly baby," and "pupsey" in an attempt to make himself seem more endearing or comforting. But instead, what this baby-talk really does is not only infantilize Leticia but it makes Fainwould look ridiculous and incompetent. There is nothing

impressive or respectable about Fainwould as he slinks after Leticia calling her these silly names and running his hands all over her. In fact, this behavior disgusts Leticia as she remarks in an aside to the audience "Heavens, what a nauseous thing is an old man turned lover" (Behn 1995, 1.3.56-57). There is nothing in Fainwould's behavior that suggests he has the wherewithal to offer Leticia protection and security. And, after all, protection and security were the sole reasons for this forced marriage between the two of them in the first place. The reality of Leticia's marriage is that Fainwould is no protector, instead he is a lusty old man who can only see Leticia as a commodity.

Additionally, despite what English law might suggest, there is nothing superior about Fainwould in comparison to Leticia. In fact, during this celebration, Fainwould is too dim to realize the true extent of Leticia's unhappiness with their forced marriage. Finally noticing that she does seem a little sad, Fainwould remarks, "Methinks my lady bride is very melancholy" to which Sir Cautious replies, "Aye, aye; women that are discreet are always thus upon their wedding day" (Behn 1995, 1.3.3-5). Fainwould and Cautious are so indoctrinated by the English patriarchy that they do not even realize how miserable their respective wives are after being forced to marry men they do not want to be with; instead, they explain away the behavior as an admirable quality of female modesty. Behn uses Fainwould and Cautious's atrocious conduct and obliviousness to point out the unfairness of forced marriages—especially in regards to women. All forced marriages do is uphold an archaic and constrictive law that amounts women to nothing more that property. This familiar custom ensures that most women will never have the chance to become autonomous beings.

Ultimately, I have engaged with this discussion surrounding forced marriages in both *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance* because, in some ways, the heroines of those stories provide a

fundamental contrast to Widow Ranter. The struggles that Florinda, Julia, and Leticia face in their experiences surrounding forced marriages are in exact opposition to the romantic freedom that the Widow Ranter has. While Florinda, Julia, and Leticia mourn for the loss of their happiness and autonomy, Ranter embraces a freedom that allows her to not only choose her own romantic partner, but persistently pursue him as well. She is not inhibited by the same constraints that the women of Behn's earlier plays are and, because of this, Ranter can live and love with abandon. Florinda, Julia, and Leticia must exist within a carefully curated gender hierarchy. In order to survive, they are expected to perfectly perform as gracious recipients of patriarchal rules. Ranter, however, flourishes while firmly situated on the outside of the gender hierarchy. So, what is it about the Widow Ranter that separates her from Florinda, Julia, and Leticia? How can she afford to pursue a romantic relationship with the man she loves while the other three women are forced to tie themselves to men they do not know and have no wish to marry?

Perhaps the Widow's freedom is born out of a debt already paid—that is to say, perhaps her life, at one point, had been quite similar to the women from *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance*. It is reasonable to assume that the Widow's first marriage can be categorized in a similar manner to the forced marriages Florinda, Julia, and Leticia face. When she arrives to Virginia Colony, Ranter is an indentured servant and, very quickly, her wealthy employer becomes her first husband. While Behn does not extensively elaborate on the Widow Ranter's life before Virginia Colony or the extent of her job and marriage upon moving there, we can easily, based upon an historical understanding of law and marriage, hypothesize why she might have married her former employer so quickly. Most likely, as we are told that Ranter was an indentured servant, she came from very little money. And, given that there were very few ways that a woman could financially support herself in the early modern era, marriage probably would have

been her best option for obtaining safety and financial security. It very well could be theorized that, much like Julia and Leticia, the Widow Ranter entered into a marriage of convenience in order to support herself. Having already been married, Ranter essentially would have paid her "debt" to the patriarchy. She had not forsaken her role as an early modern woman, for it would have been God's will that took her husband from her. In a way, her husband's death had set her free. Because she has technically fulfilled this marriage demand that the patriarchy set forth, she, in turn, is allowed a certain fluidity within the gender hierarchy. Widowhood acts as a doorway into a world in which Ranter can be free to marry a romantic partner of her choosing. Maidenhood, on the other hand, barricades Florinda, Julia, and Leticia from entering through that same door. Instead, they remain locked on the other side, forced to exist in a world crafted through patriarchal understanding.

Part Two: Sex as Commodity

Behn's critique of female subjugation does not just start and stop at forced marriages. Most, if not all, of her plays work to express her disdain with Libertinism at large. A reaction against Puritanism, Libertinism embraces a hedonistic pursuit of life, encouraging practitioners to value physical pleasures without restraint. While nothing technically states that the women of the seventeenth century cannot be libertines and, as such, embrace and enjoy sexual pleasure, as Susan Staves articulates, Libertinism is a masculinist ideology that too often ends up creating hostile environments for women (21). In encouraging men to value physical pleasure without any sort of regard to law or morality, Libertinism, consequently, enforces the idea that women have very little value beyond how they can sexually perform for men. And, often, Libertine ideals are not above encouraging violence so that men may have instant sexual gratification. In this time, women have so few ways to protect themselves to begin with. The consistency of marriage was

often the best option as it provided continuous male protection. Libertinism, though, renders that consistency, and therefore that protection, obsolete because monogamy no longer takes precedence. Instead, women's bodies become objectified. They are a merely an object to be bartered, bought, sold, or taken. Sexual intercourse becomes a commodity in the same way food or lumber would have been. And, when sex becomes a commodity, that is, something to be bought, sold, or taken, women become passive players in their safety and security. They no longer have the ability to even feel safe within their own bodies. As such, Behn's plays often interrogate the commoditization of sex and the objectification of the female body as a consequence of Libertinism. The reality of a Libertine world was that men began to see sexual pleasure as an entitlement of theirs. Rake characters like Horner in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, Don John in Thomas Shadwell's *The Libertine*, or Dorimant in George Etherege's *Man of Mode* are terrible womanizers who demand sexual gratification from the women in their lives. They believe that they have a right to receive sexual pleasure from women, no matter the circumstance. Unfortunately, this is the reality that Behn's female characters often face. Behn purposefully pits her women against the likes of characters like Horner, Don John, and Dorimant. Behn's women are forced to survive in a world that categorizes them as objects for the taking.

Objectification and male entitlement to sex are themes certainly explored in *The Rover*, for Florinda is exposed to the darkness and terror bred from both. Two separate times in Behn's play, Florinda is the victim of attempted rape. Act three, scene five finds Florinda waiting in her family garden well after dark. She stands in a nightgown waiting for a secret rendezvous with her beloved Belvile. Instead of Belvile, however, an incredibly drunk man named Wilmore stumbles in. He sees Florinda, and believing her to be a courtesan, he decides that one way or another he will have sex with her. So, Wilmore forcibly grabs Florinda and begins to kiss her while she

struggles against him and begs him to let her go (Behn, 1995, 3.5.20-72). Even though Wilmore is eventually interrupted and thwarted in his plan to rape Florinda, all is not well. For in act four, scene five, Florinda finds herself at the mercy of a monstrous man once again. In trying to hide from her brother, who is still attempting to marry her off, Florinda looks to find sanctuary in a house with an open door. Instead, she comes across another cavalier, Ned Blunt, who had recently been tricked out of his money by a courtesan and has now deemed all of womankind to be evil. When Florinda enters asking for help, Blunt decides that the perfect opportunity has presented itself—he will violently rape and beat Florinda as a way to punish all women. He roughly grabs her and attempts to drag her into his bedchamber. Before Blunt can do so, another soldier, Frederick, enters. Blunt invites Frederick to join him in raping Florinda, to which Frederick agrees. However, the sight of Florinda's diamond rings stops them from actually committing the act, for they worry that they might be raping a woman who already belongs to a nobleman (Behn 1995, 4.5.24-123).

On a human level, Florinda means nothing to these men. Firstly, they all only recognize her as a means to an end. Libertinism has encouraged them to seek sexual gratification with abandon. Florinda is not seen as a person, and truthfully, she is not seen as a woman either. She is an object to be used for sexual pleasure. She holds no value other than how her body can perform for Wilmore and Blunt's sexual desires. Secondly, these men only pause their actions because they worry that they made an egregious error in defiling some other man's property. For instance, when Belvile angrily pulls Wilmore off of Florinda before she can be assaulted, Wilmore exclaims, "Why, how the devil should I know Florinda?" (Behn 1995, 3.6.1). His immediate deflection indicates that he is not ashamed that he had been caught in the act of attempted rape. He only defends himself to declare that he did not know she already belonged to

someone else. Clearly, he feels that if it had not been Belvile's intended and some other unconnected woman, his actions would have been justified. Additionally, Blunt and Frederick react to Florinda's engaged status in a similar manner. The only reason they stop their assault upon her is due to the fact that she wears an engagement ring. In response to noticing the ring, Frederick says, "I begin to suspect something; and 'twould anger us vilely to be trussed up for a rape upon a maid of quality, when we only believe we ruffle a harlot" (Behn 1995, 4.5.121-123). In other words, they had thought they were going to rape a prostitute not an upper-class woman who would be promised to another man. Once again, Florinda is saved because of her status as property, not because these men realize that their actions are vile. They do not feel shame or disgust or regret at the fact that they had been about to rape a woman. They only feel fear that they may have offended another man. As Nancy Copeland writes, "Her delicacy and modesty are no protection against the commodification of her body" (25). Libertinism removes a woman's inherent value. She means nothing outside of her body's physical purpose. Behn's inclusion of attempted rape in *The Rover* explicitly highlights that Florinda's *body* has value as a means for sexual satisfaction. Her value as a human being—*as a person*—however, is completely non-existent.

Florinda is not the only character of Behn's who is stripped of value beyond what her body can give. In *The Luckey Chance*, Julia becomes the victim of rape at the hands of two men who claim to love her. Towards the end of the play, Sir Cautious Fulbank, Julia's husband, and Gayman, Julia's former lover, find themselves playing a game of dice. Sir Cautious, already having lost a hundred pounds, is wary of losing any more money but desires to continue the game with Gayman. In despair, he states, "Sir, I wish I had anything but ready money to stake…anything that were worth nothing" (Behn 1995, 4.1.377-380). In response, Gayman

suggests that Sir Cautious does have a commodity worth nothing to gamble, stating, "I would your lady were worth nothing…I would set all this against that nothing" (Behn 1995, 4.1.382-385). Specifically, what Gayman proposes is that Sir Cautious, in place of gambling away any more money, should instead gamble away one night with Julia so that Gayman might have sex with her. Sir Cautious readily agrees. And, following the dice game, which Sir Cautious badly loses, the two men devise a plan on how to sneak Gayman into Julia's bed chamber so that she would unknowingly sleep with him and not her husband. Never once do Sir Cautious or Gayman stop their dice game to consider Julia's wants. Even when she walks through the space where the game is being played, she is still thought of as nothing more than a prize to be obtained by the winning man. Julia must bear all the consequences of the men's lust-induced bet, but she is never once invited to be an active player or to have a say in the way her body is being commoditized. As feminist scholar, Laura Mulvey, would say, Julia is forced to be the bearer of meaning but she is never allowed to be the maker of meaning (804). That is to say, to Sir Cautious and Gayman, Julia functions as nothing more than an object. Meaning may be placed upon her, but that meaning will never be self-defined. She is and only ever will be categorized by the men in her life.

This dice game is definitively one of Behn's most explicit proclamations of her disgust at the way seventeenth century women are treated. Despite the fact that these men have both been openly declaring their love for Julia throughout the entirety of the play, they unabashedly assign a monetary value to her body. In fact, one could even go as far as to say that Julia's body has less than monetary value, given Sir Cautious's quick acceptance of Gayman's offer but his reluctance to part with any of his coin. It is clear that Gayman and Sir Cautious only see Julia as an object. They do not see her as a human being capable of thought, feeling, and personal autonomy.

Moreover, they only recognize that Julia has value as it relates to their wants and needs. Like Florinda, it is only Julia's body that gives her any value to Gayman and Sir Cautious. Specifically, the value these men have given to Julia's body is directly connected to how she might be able to sexually gratify them. The men's consistent use of the word "nothing" alludes to the fact that her value is contingent on how well she sexually performs. During the early modern period, the term "nothing" was a euphemism for female genitalia. As women had no "thing" between their legs, "nothing" became a popular slang term for talking about female anatomy or sexual intercourse (Williams 219). As Gayman and Sir Cautious frequently refer to Julia's value of "nothing," it is quite clear that, to these men, she has no purpose other than to sexually please them. One could argue that Behn's use of "nothing" is extremely calculated, for it has two interpretations. On one hand, Behn's articulation of "nothing" as a euphemism confirms that Gayman and Sir Cautious are gambling Julia's body. This term indicates to audience members that Gayman and Sir Cautious's "love" is incredibly conditional. They "love" her because she is young, attractive, and can provide for them in a sexual manner. On the other hand, Behn's use of "nothing" reminds the audience of Julia's position in the early modern caste. As a wife, she amounts to nothing. Julia's classification as a wife erases her autonomy and, instead, firmly encodes her as property to be owned, shared, and decided upon by the men in her life. Her status as a wife erases her worth as a full human being, thus defining her as nothing.

Furthermore, Julia's nothingness is so severely articulated, that her storyline ends in her assault. While Florinda is thankfully saved from ever becoming a rape victim, Julia is not as fortunate. Sir Cautious and Gayman's plan goes off without a hitch, as they successfully smuggle Gayman into Julia's bed-chamber, snuff out the candles, and convince Julia that she is having sex with her husband. Afterwards, the audience sees Julia run out of her chamber, undressed,

exclaiming how betrayed and angry she feels. Gayman, confused by her behavior, asks, "Can you be angry, Julia? I only seized my right of love" (Behn 1995, 5.7.18-19). Gayman's confusion illustrates Behn's most visceral disgust towards the patriarchy. He cannot understand Julia's pain because he sees the female body as a sexual commodity—a commodity that he feels an entitlement to. As British literature scholar, Karol Cooper, says:

> Gayman is lost in a gambler's version of love, where intimacy is realized through an act of economic power, then provides a killing rush of euphoria attained. In what he intends to be a wooing metaphor, he portrays sex as a single, lethal experience for which he would cash in all his possessions to purchase. He appears incapable of imagining love as the free consummation of their mutual desires. (142)

In essence, there is no intimacy in this particular sexual encounter. It is completely and utterly one of ownership. Because Gayman sees Julia's body as a prize to be won, he not only erases her humanity, but his as well. Ultimately, Julia's perceived nothingness encourages the men in her life to brutalize her body. As a wife, she is property. As property, she has no choice but to endure the horrid treatment she receives at the hands of men who supposedly care about her.

Once again, I find it incredibly important to examine the ways in which Behn presents the typical life of a seventeenth century woman in *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance* because they are in direct contrast to how the Widow Ranter lives her life. Never once in *The Widow Ranter* is the Widow's body commoditized in the same way Florinda and Julia's bodies are—even though there is ample opportunity for men to do so. The Widow Ranter spends the second half of Behn's play in breeches, therefore, the shape of her legs and hips are constantly on display. While the other male characters know that Ranter is a woman wearing men's clothes, they never make suggestive comments about her body. Men never lust after her in the condescending and

infantilizing way that they do Florinda and Julia. Men never try to take ownership over the Widow's body despite her protests or without her consent. Even though Ranter is in arguably more "revealing" clothing, her body is never seen as a commodity meant to be bought, sold, bartered for, or taken. Widow Ranter is inherently valuable. She is respected as not only a woman, but as a human. Never once does she have to prove her worth or existence, nor does she exist for anyone but herself. Some of the other characters might make quips about her appearance or her love of the bottle, but clearly, they hold regard for her as she is allowed to act in an atypical way and she is never outcast from society. Overall, the Widow Ranter is far safer and freer in her body than Florinda or Julia is. If one is to examine what could account for the Widow's sexual freedom and bodily safety, they might notice that it is Ranter's widowhood that, once again, sets her apart. As a "femme sole," Widow Ranter is given economic, social, and political freedoms that other women are not allowed to possess. This status essentially awards her more respect in the community than an average woman would have had. Perhaps this respect associated with her "femme sole" status extends to her body and autonomy as well. While Florinda and Julia are seen as property due to their confined status as daughters and wives, Widow Ranter gets to make her own decisions about her body and her relationships. She is no one's property. Her body is never assaulted with commoditization. Instead, her widowhood ensures that she is entirely her own being.

And so, Florinda, Helena, Julia, and Leticia are the examples of reality. They represent what the seventeenth century world had to offer women. They are lied to, assaulted, forced into lives they do not want, and almost always seen as subhuman. They have little value in the eye of patriarchy and are often unjustly confined to lives of fear and unhappiness. In complete contrast to the women of *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance* is the Widow Ranter. She is the ideal,

powerful woman that Behn hopes one day will be allowed to exist in reality. She loves and lives unabashedly. She dresses and behaves in an unorthodox way, but, ultimately, it is at her behest. She chooses how she lives her life and is never forced to live her life in the way that the men around her deem appropriate. Ultimately, she lives on the outskirts of patriarchy, reaping the benefits of total freedom and autonomy. Aphra Behn gifted Ranter with a tool in which she could use to carve out her own freedom and exist in a world normally so toxic to women; a tool that no other heroine of Behn's is given. This tool that Aphra Behn instilled upon Ranter was undoubtedly widowhood. And through an examination of the contrast between the women of *The Rover* and *The Lucky Chance*, specifically through the way they are forced into marriages and the ways that their bodies are commoditized, one can note that Ranter's widowhood gives her a certain power and authority unheard of in women of this time.

CONCLUSION

Early modern widows were patriarchal outliers and, as such, they moved through the world in far different ways than a single or married woman would have been able to. They individually had access to money. They could own property. They could create wills. They could determine the marriages and financial engagements of their children. Perhaps most importantly, they could create lives for themselves untethered to any man deemed more important than they were. In acquiring outlier status, widows were actually able to achieve liberation. Their "feme sole" documentation in legal doctrine was brilliantly true in a multitude of ways. Not only were these women literally alone—as in they had no husband to supervise them—but, they additionally held a power that was truly singular. They had the exceptional ability to think, act, and live for themselves. Widows were "Women Alone" in status and in freedom, which made their symbolic potential invaluable.

My project interrogates seventeenth century playwright, Aphra Behn's, understanding of widowhood as a symbolic tool. According to popular belief, Aphra Behn, herself, was a widow. When the Great Plague ransacked London in 1665, it is said that it unfortunately took the life of her husband shortly after their marriage. However, modern scholars find Behn's tale to be puzzling as no record of her marriage or her supposed husband's death can be found anywhere. Could Aphra Behn have lied about both a husband and her widowhood? If so, what purpose would her subterfuge have had?

Many scholars hold fast in their belief that Aphra Behn created her own fictitious widowhood in order to carve out a life for herself in which she could be both independent and respected. Unfortunately, there is no way to prove or disprove whether or not Aphra Behn invented her marriage and widowhood. However, investigating the possibility of her

inventiveness highlights an even more interesting study. If Aphra Behn found it necessary to create a backstory in which she is positioned as a young widow in order to survive Restoration London, then perhaps she saw a symbolic and narrative potential in widowhood. For her, widows were a representation of the liberation that was awaiting early modern women. Widows were the embodiment of ultimate feminine power. Ultimately, I argue that, to Behn, widows symbolically represented a paradigm shift in Restoration gender hierarchy, which can be articulated in an understanding of both the presence and absence of widowhood in several of her plays.

Chapter One offers an historical articulation of both womanhood and widowhood in order to craft an understanding of why widowhood might provide Behn with symbolic potential. Ultimately, early modern England enforced a strict gender hierarchy. Scientifically, women were seen as inferior. The medical works of Aristotle and Galen, which dominated anatomical understanding during this time period, positioned the female body as a wrong, inverted, and less perfect version of the male body. These notions automatically placed women as lesser than men. Additionally, the theological understanding of women as descendants of Eve spoke to their supposed inability, naiveté, and "otherness." The physiological and biblical understanding of women during the early modern period had a far-reaching effect on both male and female interpretations of womanhood. As inferior beings, women were expected to act as such. They had to be timid and modest. They could not speak out of turn. And, above all, they had to always be obedient to the men in their life. Upon marriage, women became legally documented as "feme coverte," meaning that they had no legal, economic or social autonomy. Married women existed as nothing but extensions of their husbands. In essence, early modern femininity was virtuous obedience.

In complete contrast was the early modern widow. Upon the death of a husband, widows were legally documented as "feme sole" and could own property or have complete access to inherited wealth. While widows might have existed as "other" in society due to their untraditional position as women who were not under constant male supervision, they gained a freedom otherwise unheard of. Widows had an autonomy that other early modern women could only ever dream of. Therefore, widows could function as symbols of power, positivity, and resistance.

Chapter Two offers a literary analysis of Aphra Behn's 1690 play titled, *The Widow Ranter, or the History of Bacon in Virginia.* While Behn's play depicts a romanticized version of Bacon's rebellion in the Virginia colony, its titular character is a widow. Interestingly, many scholars have written about *Ranter's* commentary on the political unrest of late seventeenth century England, but few, if any, haven chosen to comment on Behn's interpretation of widowhood as shown through Widow Ranter. In essence, Ranter's power is completely derived from her widowhood. She can smoke, drink, and curse—obviously unencumbered by early modern rules of propriety and shamefastness. She can spend time with whom she chooses, dress how she wants, and pursue a romantic relationship with the man of her choice. She is completely autonomous and, consequently, is much happier and more fulfilled in life. Showcasing the power and freedom that Widow Ranter has, despite Ranter's removal from the traditional placement in the early modern gender hierarchy, indicates the Aphra Behn held widowhood in high regard. Widow Ranter's freedom and ability to choose makes her the most powerful woman (potentially the most powerful character) in the whole play. If widowhood gave Ranter the power she has, then Aphra Behn clearly saw widowhood as a symbol for the highest level of liberation that women could achieve.

Finally, Chapter Three offers a contrast to Widow Ranter's freedom. In using close readings and a literary analysis of the female characters in *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance*, I showcase how important Ranter's differences are. Florinda, Helena, Julia, and Leticia offer audience members an understanding of reality in the Restoration period. They are lied to, sexually assaulted, forced into lives they do not wish to have, and unjustly confined to lives of unhappiness because the patriarchy dictates that, as women, that is what they deserve. These women call attention to what it means to be defined as the inferior sex. They represent the terrible present Aphra Behn finds herself living in. Through both their reactions to and experiences with forced marriages, as well as the way that their bodies are too often commoditized, Aphra Behn pleads with audience members to understand how detrimental a life of subjugation is to women. Florinda, Helena, Julia, and Leticia exist on the complete opposite side of the spectrum from Widow Ranter. Ranter chooses who she marries and never once has to be subjected to the eroticization of her body. Her widowhood saves her from a life of subjugation. If the women from *The Rover* and *The Luckey Chance* are the present, Ranter is the future. She represents what women could have if only they pushed back against the patriarchal agenda.

And so, we might never know the true history regarding Aphra Behn's marriage and widowhood. However, we can certainly understand what widowhood represented to her. Just like widowhood gave Bess of Hardwick a legal and financial independence unheard of in the early modern period, so too does widowhood give Behn's Widow Ranter a power unheard of for most women—the power of choice. While many seventeenth century women were forced into constricted lives of fear and unhappiness, widows had more of an ability to move within the strict early modern gender hierarchy and thus found liberation. They could exist as fully

functioning human beings without the constant control of the men in their lives. An early modern widow's legal standing— "feme sole"—might indicate that, as a "Woman Alone," widowhood brings a life of isolation and loneliness. And it is true that loneliness can often be confining in its own right. But becoming a "Woman Alone" was perhaps the surest form of salvation from the patriarchy that a woman of this time could obtain. Aphra Behn recognized this. To her, widows were not lonely and isolated. Instead, they were the ultimate representation of feminine autonomy and power.

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