

‘Pretty Contradictions’:
the Virgin Prostitutes of Aphra Behn’s
The Feigned Courtesans (1679)

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Critics have repeatedly noted Aphra Behn’s concern with the politics of marriage. To Diamond, for instance,

... the commodification of women in the marriage market is Aphra Behn’s first and most persistent theme. Beginning appropriately enough with *The Forced Marriage; or The Jealous Bridegroom* (1670), all of Behn’s seventeen known plays deal to some extent with women backed by dowries or portions who are forced by their fathers into marriage in exchange for jointure, an agreed-upon income to be settled on the wife should she be widowed. (524)

The Feigned Courtesans is a good example of this concern. It was first staged at the Duke’s Theatre in 1679, two years after the success of *The Rover, Part I*, a play to which it bears a remarkable similarity (Shell 92). Unlike *The Rover*, which is an adaptation of Thomas Killigrew’s *Thomaso*, there is no known source for this latter play. However, it is easy to perceive the many links between both plays as regards their plots, to the extent that the latter has been considered an imitation of the former (Hughes 215). In *The Rover* two sisters, Florinda and Helena, want to evade the arrangements their father has made for them: Florinda is to marry the rich but old Don Vincentio while Helena is to go to a convent, thus saving her father another dowry. Both women will deploy disguises and intrigue in order to marry the men they love: Florinda the very noble but penniless Belvile, and Helena the also penniless but not quite so noble Willmore. The cast of characters in *The Feigned Courtesans* displays the same roles and features under different names. Here, too, we find two sisters, Marcella and Cornelia, with the same prospects (marriage to her uncle’s choice, Octavio, and becoming a nun, respectively) who, at the beginning of the play, have fled their guardian’s home. Like the previous pair of sisters, these ones will use their wits in order to land the husbands they themselves would have: Fillamour and Galliard.

In both plays there is as well a comic subplot which pokes fun at a distinctive social type: in *The Rover* Blunt is a country fool who thinks the world of himself and hence is easily deceived by a prostitute to whom he loses all he has; in *The Feigned Courtesans* the conceited squire Sir Signal Buffoon and his Puritan tutor Tickletext are also cheated of their money.

Finally, in *The Rover* as in *The Feigned Courtesans* the figure of the prostitute is strikingly prominent. In the earlier play, the courtesan Angellica Bianca competes with Helena for the love of Willmore; in the latter, the women choose to pose as courtesans in order to live unchaperoned for a time without risking discovery. This fact has been interpreted variously. Some critics have symbolically identified the figure of the prostitute with the author herself, since in her case “the status of the professional writer indicated immodesty: the author, like her texts, became a commodity” (Diamond 520; cf. Ballaster 268). Even more obvious is the connection between the actress and the prostitute in the Restoration stage:

For Pepys and other Restoration commentators, the actress's sexuality tended to disavow her labor. Rather than produce a performance, she is a spectacle unto herself, a painted representation to lure the male spectator. In her professional duplicity, in her desirability, in her often public status of kept mistress, she is frequently equated with prostitutes or "vizard-masks" who worked the pit and galleries of Restoration theatres during and after performances. (Diamond 523; cf. also Spencer 98)

A third reading has been offered by Alison Shell in her recent study of the religious plot in *The Feigned Courtesans*. She argues that in England the Catholic Church was often described as a scarlet woman, a harlot, whose outside appeal contrasted with her inner corruption. Thus, according to Shell, "Behn's transcendence of gender stereotype ... combines with her sympathy to Catholicism to bring about a realization that neither print nor popery need imply a loss of female chastity" (39). Though it is certainly true that both prostitutes and Catholics were marginal groups in late-seventeenth-century England, Shell's theory does seem a bit far-fetched, while at the same time it has the virtue of highlighting the elusiveness of the sign "prostitute".

If Shell's reading appears to be off-focus, it is probably because it lacks the economic dimension that the figure of the prostitute immediately calls to mind, and that Behn's plays consistently bring to the foreground. In fact, Behn uses the prostitute in order to remind us that all women are in some measure reified and commodified. However, there is a substantial difference in the treatment of this figure in both plays, which would convey a change in Behn's position. Thus, in *The Rover* the prostitute, embodied in Angellica Bianca, can be safely kept at a distance, and ultimately contained, whereas in *The Feigned Courtesans*, as we will see, there is no such safety to fall back onto, the honest woman and the harlot are one and the same person, and in the final analysis the only difference between them is one of degree.

In order to ascertain the evolution of Behn's thoughts concerning this issue, we should start by briefly considering *The Rover*, a play that so far has received much more critical attention than the lesser known *The Feigned Courtesans*.

The Rover shows women as a currency that is circulated amongst men. This currency is given a value that derives from the woman's possession of "honour" (the dowry) or her lack of it (the prostitute's fees). These identities then, are mutually exclusive; they are built on their mutual difference, and so they remain as fixed, opposite poles throughout the play, a fact that is hinted at in the rivalry between Helena and Angellica Bianca. Likewise, though the women of quality will use several disguises, they never pose as prostitutes: that is one disguise they never wear, for in so doing they would risk crossing over the gulf that separates one from the other. A woman cannot be at the same time honest and a prostitute, and hence Willmore must, at the end, choose either one or the other.

Or can she? The opposition is not as stable as it may at first appear to be. Franceschina has pointed out that there is a remarkable ambivalence of signs in this comedy:

Despite his honest intentions, Belvile is taken for a villain and murderer when he happens upon a wounded Antonio. Out of doors, "undress'd," Florinda is taken for a whore by Willmore who responds to her protests with an offer of money. Willmore's attempt to purchase Florinda is significant, as it reinforces the mercenary-erotic praxis of the play in which money not only purchases (and maintains) the image of the female but supports the male image of self-worth. (33-34; see also Hughes 208-12 for a similar reading)

This is, nevertheless, only one of several strategies Behn deploys in order to de-construct this either/or dichotomy. Backscheider, for instance, has noted how the playwright often gives "familiar lines to unexpected characters in order to foreground women's common lot" (86). Helena's praise of inconstancy in the play is a case in point, but even more startling for an audience is to hear Angellica Bianca denounce the mercenary attitudes of men concerning marriage:

When a lady is proposed to you for a wife, you never ask how fair, discreet, or virtuous she is; but what's her fortune; which if but small, you cry "she shall not do my business," and basely leave her, though she languish for you. (2.2.90-93)

Behn further explores this analogy between the prostitute and the honest woman two years later in *The Feigned Courtesans*. What in the earlier comedy remained safely at a distance, only occasionally and transitorily close to the point of mistaking one identity for another, is shown in this later play as too close for comfort: all the female characters are simultaneously honest women and prostitutes.

Allegedly the vizard mask that the sisters adopt is meant to hide them from their guardian. As such, it is simply one more disguise, which offers them “a relative freedom of speech and action that the modest woman, who proves her virtue by silence and seclusion, cannot easily claim in her own person” (Spencer 95). However, the line between honesty and whoredom is, from the beginning of the play, rather blurred. When Marcella and Cornelia first enter the stage, they complain about their lack of money; since they cannot possibly live off thin air, this period of independence must soon draw to an end:

CORNELIA: [O]ur money’s all gone, and without a miracle can hold out no longer honestly.

MARCELLA: Then we must sell our jewels!

CORNELIA: When they are gone, what jewel will you part with next?

MARCELLA: Then we must—

CORNELIA: What, go home to Viterbo, ask the old gentleman pardon, and be received to grace again; you to the embraces of the amiable Octavio, and I to St. Teresa’s, to whistle through a grate like a bird in a cage? For I shall have little heart to sing. (2.1.107-15)

Faced with the choice of either confinement or marginality, these women will attempt to renegotiate the terms of their situation. Needless to say, this is not without risk, for they must walk a very narrow and slippery path between seeming and being. Actually, on their entering the stage they have passed by the very men they are trying to avoid, their uncle Morosini and Marcella’s fiancé Octavio, neither man having recognised them:

MOROSINI: Stay, stay, what women are these?

OCTAVIO: Whores, sir, and so ‘tis ten to one are all the kind; only these differ from the rest in this, they generously own their trade of sin, which others deal by stealth in: they are courtesans. (2.1.25-28)

Although Octavio’s is a misogynist remark, I believe it is a crucial statement in the play, as Behn’s purpose seems to be to show that there is some truth in it even as she undermines its misogynist intent: insofar as patriarchy makes of all women, one way or the other, commodities for sale, it is true. The difference between honest women and prostitutes results from the different methods patriarchy deploys in marketing the “goods”, i. e. the women. This is why the play recurrently engages the notions of marriage and prostitution in terms of economic modes.

Two such modes are contrasted in the love dialogues between the women posing as courtesans and their gallants. One is a residual mode, a pseudo-feudal, aristocratic notion that bestows the highest value on land-ownership. As applied to the issues of love and women, this is the language of possession and exclusivity, whose mouthpiece is Fillamour. He defends from the beginning that “the lawful enjoyment of [a pretty, witty and young] woman, and honest too, would be a blessing” (1.1.55-56). In the alternative economic mode, possessing land is not the basis of wealth; rather, wealth results from the circulation and distribution of goods. This bourgeois, capitalist mode clearly identifies Galliard, who believes in using and consuming, not in possessing or reserving, as Fillamour does:

GALLIARD: Pox on’t, my knight’s [Fillamour’s] bound for Viterbo, and there’s no persuading him into safe harbour again. He has given me but two hours to dispatch matters here; and then I’m to embark with him upon this new discovery

of honourable love, as he calls it, whose adventurers are fools, and the returning cargo, that dead commodity called a wife! (4.2.311-16)

To Galliard, men in love are like trading vessels, but the risks Fillamour takes do not bring him profit; instead, his only reward in seeking “honourable love” will be a “dead commodity,” a wife, dead because it does not circulate, and hence it fails to bring in more gain, thus ultimately losing all value altogether.

These two approaches are dialogically contrasted in the play, not only in the conversations between the promiscuous Galliard and the more conventional Fillamour, but even more pointedly in Fillamour’s dealings with Marcella posing as the prostitute Euphemia:

FILLAMOUR: Oh, I could talk eternity away,
In nothing else but love, couldst thou be honest.
MARCELLA: Honest! Was it for that you sent two thousand crowns,
Or did believe that trifling sum sufficient
To buy me to the slavery of honesty?
(...)
FILLAMOUR: No, I would sacrifice a nobler fortune
To buy thy virtue home.
MARCELLA: What should it idling there?
FILLAMOUR: Why, make thee constant to some happy man,
That would adore thee for’t.
MARCELLA: Unconscionable! Constant at my years?
Oh, ’twere to cheat a thousand,
Who, between this and my dull age of constancy,
Expect the distribution of my beauty.
GALLIARD (*aside*): ’Tis a brave wench.
FILLAMOUR: (...) This wealth together would enrich one man,
Which dealt to all would scarce be charity.
MARCELLA: Together? ’Tis a mass would ransom kings!
Was all this beauty given for one poor petty conquest?
I might have made a hundred hearts my slaves,
In this lost time of bringing one to reason.
Farewell, thou dull philosopher in love;
When age has made me wise, I’ll send for you again. (4.1.78-112)

Although both codes commodify women, the more conventional discourse voiced by Fillamour dangerously borders on the misogynist speech of confinement and imprisonment whose most extreme representations in the play are Morosini and Octavio. On the contrary, Galliard’s libertine ethics can empower women, as shown in his repartee with Cornelia in 2.1, in which both speakers commodify themselves and try to strike a bargain, each of them being at the same time the buyer and the seller of “goods”, i.e. simultaneously subject and object of the transaction:

GALLIARD: And have you no kind message to send to my heart? Cannot this good example [Euphemia’s] instruct you how to make me happy?
CORNELIA: Faith, stranger, I must consider first; she’s skilful in the merchandise of hearts, and has dealt in love with so good success hitherto, she may lose one venture, and never miss it in her stock, but this is my first, and should it prove to be a bad bargain, I were undone for ever.
GALLIARD: I dare secure the goods sound—

CORNELIA: And I believe will not lie long upon my hands.

GALLIARD: Faith, that's according as you'll dispose on't, madam: for let me tell you, gad, a good handsome proper fellow is as staple a commodity as any's in the nation; but I would be reserved for your own use! Faith, take a sample tonight, and as you like it, the whole piece, and that's fair and honest dealing I think, or the devil's in't.

CORNELIA: Ah, stranger, you have been so over-liberal of those same samples of yours, that I doubt they have spoiled the sale of the rest. Could you not afford, think ye, to throw in a little love and constancy, to inch out that want of honesty of yours? (3.1.183-201)

The empowerment that the libertine code can bring to women is, as Cornelia remarks, necessarily thwarted by the realisation that virginity and "honour" are their only assets in the system of patriarchal exchange, and that, without that, they are "undone for ever." That is why, once cornered, Cornelia will have to retreat and protect her virginity from Galliard by confessing that she is no prostitute, but "a maid of quality" (4.2.155). Even while denouncing the double standard applying to men and women, the playwright must accept it and can only return her characters to the safe but confined sphere of marriage, though they are rewarded with husbands of their own choice.

Thus, their temporary sojourn as feigned courtesans is a provisional identity they must eventually rid themselves of. It is a device used by Behn in order to point towards the fact of the position of all women as exchangeable property among men, the more recognisable because unlike the corporeal reality of Angellica Bianca in *The Rover*, all women and no woman in this other play are Silvianetta, the object of all the men's desire. In addition, in *The Feigned Courtesans* it is as well the means for women to negotiate a more equal, less constricted relationship with men, which must needs stop short of challenging the very core of patriarchy.

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