

Merry Wives and Widows in Aphra Behn's Later Comedies

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As the first woman professional writer, Aphra Behn has deserved special attention in modern times. Much scholarly debate has focused so far on the politics of marriage in her plays, since many of them characteristically thematize the clash between the marriage of convenience and the love marriage.¹ This kind of social conflict, according to the historian Lawrence Stone, featured prominently in 17th-century England, and most particularly in the Restoration period:

Between 1660 and 1800 (...) there took place the far more radical shift from [the arranged marriage to the love marriage], with the children now normally making their own choices, and the parents being left with no more than the right of veto over socially or economically unsuitable candidates. At the same time there was inevitably a marked shift of emphasis on motives away from family interest and towards well-trying personal affection. (1977: 183)

A further side to the marriage subject is the importance of the role which women's portion, or dowry, played, an importance which, according to Stone, increased dramatically in the period:

The seventeenth century saw a sharp rise in the size of marriage portions paid by the bride's parents to the groom's parents. This rise meant an increase in the economic stakes of marriage, and so enhanced the position of the wife. By her marriage portion she was now making a major economic contribution to her husband's finances. (1977: 221)

These two major phenomena explain both the high recurrence of the topic of marriage in Restoration drama in general and in Aphra Behn in particular, and the usual emphasis on money matters in its treatment. Moreover, one might even contemplate the notion that relationships, motivations, and actions in Restoration comedy come down to a money problem more often than not. It is an inescapable fact that the Restoration hero-rake is characterised as much by his extravagant use of money as by his libertine mores: he is perpetually in debt, he pawns all his properties,

¹For this issue in Behn, see Taetzsch 1993; in restoration drama in general, see Wheatley 1990.

he gambles away all he has, etc.² Women too, are bound up in an economic system which defines them as commodities to be exchanged between families through the marriage contract. Either as maids, wives, or widows, women's worth is shaped by their exchange value. Indeed, the Restoration saw the emergence of mercantilist codes that ruptured the social order:

As the violence of civil commotion subsided, the importance of economic factors pressed more and more on people's consciousness. (...) Large commercial institutions like the Bank of England and the Stock Exchange were started, and shortly came to seem as much part of the establishment as royalty or the Church of England. London swelled in size and importance. Although the hegemony of aristocracy and gentry was still assured, capitalist values associated with the middle classes were spreading upwards. (Todd 1989: 19)

All things considered, the scant attention that the interpenetration of economic values and love liaisons in Behn has merited among critics is rather surprising. Only Hinnant seems to have pursued this line of work, in the understanding that

mercantilism and its values began to permeate the more established idioms of Restoration comedy. One finds these values enshrined . . . in language--the witty metaphors and similitudes employed by its major characters (1995:78).

The purpose of my paper is therefore to explore the economic issues at stake in the love plots of Behn's plays, with added emphasis on the way that money and property affect the position of wives and widows in the exchange market, as Behn projects it in her later comedies *The Lucky Chance* and *The Widow Ranter*.³ In so doing, I am accepting, at least provisionally, Jacqueline Pearson's judgement that there is a darkening vision in these later plays that distinguishes them from Behn's earlier work:

Many of the later plays emphasise women's emotional, economic and sexual vulnerability and devise extreme images for this and for the contradictory demands made on them by society. In most of the early plays forced marriage is a danger which the heroines successfully escape: in the later plays it is often a trap into which they have already fallen. (1988:166)

It is certainly true that Aphra Behn's later comedies, like *The Lucky Chance* (1686) and the posthumously performed *The Widow Ranter* (1689), display a larger scope and, together with the ever-present maid, they scrutinise the situation of other women in the marriage market. Of the three female protagonists in *The Lucky Chance*, only one is the archetypal maid in distress. Diana, like her predecessors Florinda in *The Rover* and Marcella in *The Feigned Courtesans*, to name but two, is being forced to marry the fop Bearjest though she loves Bredwell:

² See Schneider 1971: 59ff for the Restoration comic hero's extravagance. Schneider identifies here the dichotomy liberality/avarice at the heart of Restoration comedy. Even though his discussion applies almost exclusively to the male characters, it is wide-ranging and thorough.

³ For my analysis of *The Lucky Chance*, I will be using Spenser's 1995 edition, while I will be quoting from Duffy's 1990 edition of *The Widow Ranter* for Methuen. As the latter gives no line numbers, references will then be to page numbers.

SIR FEEBLE: Enough, enough, Sir Cautious, we apprehend one another.—Mr. Bearjest, your uncle here and I have struck the bargain: the wench is yours with three hundred pound present and something more after death, which your uncle likes well.

BEARJEST: Does he so, sir? I'm beholding to him; then, 'tis not a pin matter whether I like or not, sir.

SIR FEEBLE: How, sir, not like my daughter Di?

BEARJEST: Oh Lord, sir, die or live, 'tis all one for that, sir. I'll stand to the bargain my uncle makes. (1.3.125-33)

Even though Behn does not save us the grossness of this mercenary arrangement, Diana's troubles deserve only minor attention in the comedy, and are predictably solved with an elopement.

A variation in the pattern is introduced with the position of Leticia, who has just married the old alderman Sir Feeble Fainwould (Diana's father) after he has deceived her into believing that her lover Belmour, to whom she was contracted, is dead. "Poor and helpless, / And much reduced, and much imposed upon," as she herself explains in 2.2.50-51, Leticia has to trade her "jewel" or maidenhead for Sir Feeble's wealth and the security it affords her. This central image shapes the various encounters between the new husband and wife, with the old Sir Feeble offering Leticia jewels for a smile, or a kiss:

Alas, poor pupsey, was it sick? Look here, here's a fine thing to make it well again. [Shows a jewel] Come, buss, and it shall have it. [Kisses Leticia and gives her the jewel] Oh, how I long for night (2.2.99-102).

The consummation the old lecher so much desires is, however, delayed by Belmour, who tricks him out of Leticia's bed. The first time he uses the pretext that London is up in arms due to some plot, but Sir Feeble returns home before Belmour and Leticia manage to escape, she bearing a casket with the jewels in yet another metaphoric displacement of her depriving him of his right to deflower her.⁴ Finally, Belmour comes up with the idea of terrorising Sir Feeble's guilty conscience with his own "ghost". Out of his wits, Sir Feeble finally gives his blessing to the union of Belmour and Leticia, whose contract takes precedence over his own marriage.

But by far the most frequent use of this rhetoric of sex and money devolves on the third woman in the play, Lady Julia Fulbank, another young woman married to an old man but in love with the young rake Gayman, whose advances she has been virtuously resisting for some time. The rivalry between husband and lover for Lady Fulbank's love and favours will be played out in terms of hard cash and property.

At the opening of the play the husband, Sir Cautious, has the upper hand: Gayman has spent all his money on presents and gifts for Lady Fulbank in vain, and he owes money to Sir Cautious as well, so that he is reduced to the most extreme poverty and, under the name Wasteall, has gone into hiding at an inn of ill repute. As elsewhere in Behn's comedies, however, women do not remain passive onlookers. Informed that Gayman is about to lose his land to Sir Cautious, Lady Fulbank takes things in her own hands and steals the money he needs from her husband, sending it to

⁴ This lack of deflowerment seems to be central to the happy ending of the plot, as Peggy Thompson suggests (1996: 83). However, it is not so in Behn's earlier comedy, *The False Count* (1681).

Gayman under the pretence that it is from a secret admirer. Like the old men in the play, Lady Fulbank now has the power to buy the object of her desire, Gayman who, in being forced to accept the money, is now placed in the characteristic situation of women. This reversal of the usual sexual roles is evident in Gayman's conclusion about the origin of the money:

Some female devil, old, and damned to ugliness,
And past all hopes of courtship and address,
Full of another devil called desire,
Has seen this face, this shape, this youth,
And thinks it worth her hire. It must be so. (2.1.186-90)

Lady Fulbank's agenda goes even further. In this instance as everywhere else in this comedy, money matters thinly veil the granting of sexual favours. Lady Fulbank's empowerment in stealing her husband's money is the prologue to an assignment with Gayman under the disguise of his secret admirer. Thus, a woman is shown to possess the power to re-distribute wealth as much as to "pollute" the line of inheritance, two faculties which are in fact intimately related even though in the dramatic action it may seem otherwise.⁵

As the action bears on, the balance between the old husband and the young lover is being redressed, thanks to Lady Fulbank's agency. The turning point will be the gambling scene of 4.1., which again decides sexual privileges under the guise of material gain. Sir Cautious, suspecting Gayman of having stolen his money, designs to play dice with him in order to see his gold:

I shall go near to know my own gold, by some remarkable pieces
amongst it; and if he have it, I'll hang him, and then all his six
hundred a year will be my own, which I have in mortgage
(4.1.231-4).

However, not only does Sir Cautious not get the proof he wants, but he loses to Gayman all the money he is carrying. Playing on his avarice, Gayman then convinces Sir Cautious to wager a night with Lady Fulbank against the whole sum:

GAYMAN: You have moveables, sir, goods; commodities--
SIR CAUTIOUS: That's all one, sir; that's money's worth, sir;
but if I had anything that were worth nothing--
GAYMAN:--You would venture it; I thank you, sir. I would
your lady were worth nothing.
SIR CAUTIOUS: How so, sir?
GAYMAN: Then I would set all against that nothing.
SIR CAUTIOUS: What, set it against my wife?
GAYMAN: Wife, sir; aye, your wife.
SIR CAUTIOUS: Hum, my wife against three hundred pounds?
(...) (aside) What a lavish whore-master's this: we take money to
marry our wives, but seldom part with 'em, and by the bargain
get money. (4.1.379-404)

⁵ Erickson 1996 concurs as to empowerment of Lady Fulbank, though he analyses it rather under the light of the playwright's control over action, characters and staging.

The contest between Gayman and Sir Cautious is based on the implicit notion of the wife as a commodity, and such a one that, in mercantile parlance, it fails to get money because it does not circulate any more. Its exchange value is "nothing," with a sexual innuendo that becomes even more evident when Gayman wins the wager. Asked then by Lady Fulbank what the wager was, Sir Cautious dejectedly replies it was "only a small parcel of ware that lay dead upon my hands", to which Gayman rejoins: "But I shall improve 'em, madam, I'll warrant you" (457-59).

Thus the husband is forced to facilitate his own cuckolding, in what, as Chernaik has remarked, is a recurrent theme in Restoration comedy (1995:186). The *double entendres* continue as Sir Cautious smuggles Gayman into his wife's rooms inside a chest which carries "prohibited goods", out of which he promises Lady Fulbank "some fine knick-knack will fall to thy share" (5.4.63-70). And while he waits in the antechamber he feels "as restless as a merchant in stormy weather, that has ventured all his wealth in one bottom" (5.7.1-2). Sir Cautious' fortunes have now sunk, just as Gayman's reach their highest with the news, at the close of the play, that he has inherited two thousand pounds a year from an uncle. Once more, wealth goes hand in hand with sexual prowess, whereas Sir Cautious is not only comparatively less rich than at the beginning but has also lost his wife.

Nevertheless, the changes in the fates of the male characters leave Lady Fulbank's untouched: though the commodification she suffers from her husband as from her lover in the gambling scene might disempower her, the dignity she displays, as she solemnly vows that she will never again go to bed with a husband who has so prostituted her, sets her above such reification. She chastises Gayman and Sir Cautious, the latter for his lack of morals and the former for his impulsiveness, and both for having used her in some measure. Such behaviour, which denies women's agency, is clearly presented as difficult to forgive or forget. Though the conventions of the comedy press for a reconciliation between the parties concerned, the playwright resists them in order to provide an open space for female autonomy. Therefore, Behn seems to defend the possibility of women's autonomy even inside marriage, though this autonomy, as in the case of the maids of earlier comedies, can only be understood in very relative terms. As Peggy Thompson explains, Behn always "acknowledges the social and economic forces that allow no alternatives" (1996:85).

Yet another autonomous woman was Behn's last creation. *The Widow Ranter, or the History of Bacon in Virginia* is, properly speaking, a tragicomedy, which combines the heroic plot of the subtitle with the comic action surrounding the figure of the Widow. Rich widows were, needless to say, much sought after: a re-circulating commodity for fortune hunters. Antonia Fraser records several examples of seventeenth-century wealthy widows courted to the point of harassment:

In 1653 (...) Dorothy Osborne went to dinner with a rich widow, middle-aged and "never handsome", who had "broke loose from an old miserable husband" with the avowed intention of spending all his money before she died. (...) [T]he widow's palpable state of siege thoroughly amused her. For all the widow's frank words concerning the use to which she intended to put her late husband's money, and despite her lack of physical attraction, she was, wrote Dorothy, "courted a thousand times more than the greatest beauty in the world that had not a fortune". They could hardly get through dinner for the disturbance caused by letters and presents pouring through the

door in order to persuade the widow to change her mind.
(1984:97)

Indeed, Behn here equates the wealth of the widows in the colony of Jamestown with the wealth the New World has to offer enterprising subjects. The play opens with the arrival of Hazard, a younger brother who has gambled away all he had and has bought passage to Virginia in search of fortune. There he meets with his old friend Friendly, who has lived in Jamestown since he inherited a plantation, and straight away directs him towards two likely sources of income: a widow and a widow-to-be. Friendly suggests Hazard should take up residence at Madame Surelove's, married to a rich old merchant currently in England and in ill health, on the pretence that Hazard is his kinsman. Thus he can patiently await the husband's demise while he courts the wife. If this plan does not suit Hazard's fancy, Friendly has an alternative, the Widow Ranter, whose story he tells as follows:

[A] woman bought from the ship by old Colonel Ranter; she served him half a year, and then he marry'd 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 retains something of her primitive quality still, but is good-natur'd and generous. (214)

Both women will then be under siege for the wealth they may bring to the conqueror, just as the town itself suffers the double threat of the Indians and General Bacon. In fact, the connection surfaces later as Bacon takes the principal town ladies hostages in his tug-of-war with the town council. Ranter, however, is not among them, which sets her apart for her extraordinary character: unlike the others, she never has to submit. Friendly's description above is pointedly understated, for unlike the more conventional Madam Surelove and Friendly's own beloved, the virginal Chrisante, Ranter is outspoken, direct, and even fairly vulgar. Her unladylike behaviour also involves drinking and smoking. Above all, she is practical and clear-minded, and exhibits an evident understanding of her situation as a valuable commodity, as in this exchange in first meeting Hazard:

RANTER: What, are you like all the young fellows, the first that they do when they come to a strange place, is to inquire what fortunes there are.

HAZARD: Madam, I had no such ambition.

RANTER: Gad, then you're a fool, sir; but come, my service to you; we rich widows are the best commodity this country affords, I'll tell you that. (227)

Placed in an independent position substantiated by wealth, this woman will have her way, and to that purpose she is not willing to abide by the niceties (or the hypocrisy) which restrict women's actions. In his love chase of Daring, one of Bacon's officers who in turn prefers Chrisante, Ranter will prove that she can take what she wants. Wearing breeches, she goes to Bacon's camp in order to rescue Chrisante and so prevent marriage to her lover. Impressed by the widow's "daring", the young officer acknowledges that her unladylike manner and her courage suit him best of all: "Prithee [marry me and] take me in the humour, while thy breeches are on-for I never lik'd thee half so well in petticoats" (277).

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:

[T]he Widow Ranter is indeed a highly novel figure, blending masculine self-confidence and independence with erotic attractiveness, and despite her unfeminine behaviour and her gleeful debunking of male presumption she retains the full sympathies of the audience and is not forced to recant or metamorphose into a chaste and modest belle in the end. (Rubik 1998: 39)

Chernaik too perceives that Ranter, like the central character of the Duchess of Newcastle's *Bell in Campo* (1662), Shadwell's *The Woman-Captain* (1680), and Southerne's *Sir Anthony Love* (1691), is

a genuinely androgynous figure, a woman whose male dress is not a temporary disguise but expresses her inward nature, with all its contradictions, freeing capacities and feelings which in other circumstances would have remained hidden (1995: 195).

All in all, the playwright's late work seems to become more complex, and it comes to problematise and go beyond the flat characterisation of women to be found elsewhere in Restoration drama. As this analysis of the rhetoric of sexual and domestic economy in her later comedies has attempted to show, Behn must have been in the process of shifting from the intense focus on the conflicts of arranged marriages that pervade her early work to a wider understanding of women's positioning in the marriage market. The diminishing attention she bestows on the stereotypical young virgin, though still ever present, is fairly noticeable, and she tentatively includes other scenarios, like the adulterous affair in *The False Count* (1681). However, she remains always sensitive to issues of wealth and correspondingly, of power, as much as to the changing features of her society's economic system. It is by means of such rhetoric and its multifaceted nuances, and most particularly in the bartering exchanges that pepper her comedies, that she manages to both expose and subvert female reification even as she explores new venues for female intervention. Above all, here as in her fiction, she is concerned with resisting women's commodification, and with the creation of spaces that allowed for women's autonomy.

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