

Aphra Behn (from a painting by Sir Peter Lely)

1. Having spent some fifteen years thinking (off and on) about Aphra Behn's theory and practice of literacy in the context of her fictional -- or "factional" -- representations of white English women working with words in colonial settings,<sup>1</sup> I'm now at the early stages of rethinking Behn's writings across several genres for a book provisionally called "The Illicit I (Eye)." So far, the book lacks a sub-title further specifying its subject/object of study, although I

came up with a bland post-colon phrase when I applied for grants last year. The granting agencies all said no, as, evidently, did many of the aristocratic patrons from whom Behn sought financial support for her books. Grant-free, I'm hoping here to think anew, and harder, about my project's analytic focus and about my own investments in the figure who commonly but by no means simply went by the names of "Aphra" and "Behn."<sup>2</sup>

2. The present essay is inspired by Natasha Korda's article in the recent issue of *EMC* on "materiality": "The Case of Moll Frith: Women's Work and the 'All-Male Stage'" (<http://eserver.org/emc/1-4/issue4.html>). I'm indebted also to Jim Holstun's response to that issue; his notion of a "rough urban commoning" as, in some instances, a mode of "resistance to class encroachment" provides an entrée into the argument I want to make here about Behn's politics in relation to her representations of ambiguously "common" women's work, including (I will argue) her own as a writer and a spy.<sup>3</sup> Her working women may be called "gentlewomen" but their association with illicit sex makes them "common" in one significant sense of the word; and their status as gentry is never epistemologically secured in Behn's texts, as Valerie Wayne has argued in a recent essay entitled "Assuming Gentility."<sup>4</sup> Behn's treatment of such women points, I think, to an area of ambiguity in seventeenth-century social theory explored by C. B. Macpherson in connection with James Harrington: "in a theory which hinges almost entirely on the balance of property between the few and the many, the nobility and the people, Harrington is ambiguous as to whether the gentry are included in the former or in the latter."<sup>5</sup>

Behn, I think, is similarly ambiguous. The present inquiry into one aspect of her economic politics will, I hope, contribute to the ongoing critical debate about what it means to identify Behn as a "royalist" or (after the Exclusion Crisis around 1680) a "Tory."<sup>6</sup>

3. Although many critics approach and leave their evidentiary fields convinced that Behn was a royalist consistently and "in all parts," a number of recent studies have noticed and explored contradictions among different strands in Behn's political formulations; most of this work focuses on tensions between her party politics and her sexual politics. It is hard *not* to notice that many of her female characters look like the evil "roundhead" women caricatured (as Jerome de Groot has incisively shown) in many royalist texts published from the 1640's onwards.<sup>7</sup> As

## **Conning the "Overseers": Women's Illicit Work in Behn's "The Adventure of the Black Lady"**

### **Margaret Ferguson**

Jacqueline Pearson observes, Behn's "divine right royalism is in strong tension with her vigorous questioning of the rights of domestic patriarchs."<sup>8</sup> I want to argue here that many recent accounts of her "party" politics, including those that focus on lines of strain between her royalist formulations and what I would call the liberal feminist strands in her thought -- those, for instance, which expose injustices in the system of patriarchal marriage as it affects daughters and wives of men of "quality" -- omit significant parts of her political-economic statement.

4. Approaching the question of Behn's politics through her representations of "common" women's work allows us to complicate the dominant critical view of Behn as a Stuart loyalist who, by virtue of that alleged loyalty, clearly believes, according to Elliott Visconsi, that "any check on the God-given royal prerogative leads directly to the ignorant democratic tyranny of the common people."<sup>9</sup> She did, to be sure, often mock Whigs and "roundheads" in various textual venues, denigrating them, as Visconsi shows, by associating them with the traditional image of the "*mobile vulgus*, a subversive, noisome crowd."<sup>10</sup> But Behn's views of the common people, like her views of what constitutes a person of "quality," are multiple and shifting; it's hard to pin them down, much less to infer from them the "consistent" Stuart loyalty affirmed by some readers.<sup>11</sup> Her depictions of economic injustices she suffered while working for the Crown both in the 1660's, as a spy, and in the 1680's, as a writer, seem to me to show something more than merely "mixed" feelings about the king within a larger stance of royalist loyalty.<sup>12</sup> In her depictions of herself as a servant pleading for money, she engages with issues of justice.

5. As a young woman, a "poore strainger," as she calls herself, recruited to spy for the Crown in Holland in 1665, she writes to Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington, Secretary of State, that she is "in extreame want & Necessity," in danger of prison because, having run up a debt of £120 doing the King's work, she has been paid only £50.<sup>13</sup> In December, 1665, she writes again to Lord Arlington: "I have troubled every body so often with my complaints, & to so little purpose that weare I not confident of the

Justness of my cause . . . I think I should be wild wth [sic] my hard treatment" (cited in Todd, *Secret Life*, 107). Many years later and in a wittier, more indirect vein, she limns the same structural relation existing between herself as a person rendering "services" and a royal employer who must be repeatedly "dunned" for what he owes. In a verse letter addressed to Thomas Creech and published in a *Miscellany* of 1685, Behn describes how a "Catastrophe" of a coach accident prevented her from meeting Creech during the great frost of 1683-84. The catastrophe put the writer's "Scribling Fist" "out of Joynt" and made her look as ridiculous as a "sawcy Whigg" did when, a "plot" having "broke out," he "dejected hung his sniv'ling snout" (ll. 41, 54-56). Comically erasing the line between Whig and Tory to dramatize her discomfiture at missing her "dear Assignation" with Creech, Behn also blurs the line between the king and his female subject. She begins the poem by describing herself as a "debtor" to Creech -- which, in intellectual terms, she certainly was;<sup>14</sup> she goes on to describe the king as someone in her debt; the difference between her and the king briefly seems to be that she is at least attempting to pay her debt, via the poem itself, whereas the king, apparently, has said and done nothing at all. In lines that Virginia Crompton has cited as evidence that Behn worked as a Tory propagandist in the last years of Charles II's reign, Behn

writes: From White-Hall Sir, as I was coming,  
His Sacred Majesty from Dunning; Who oft in Debt is, truth to tell,  
For Tory Farce, or Doggerel, When every Street as dangerous  
was, As ever the Alpien Hills to pass . . . Near to that place of  
Fame call'd Temple (Which I shall note by sad Example) Where  
Colledg Dunce is cur'd of Simple Against that Sign of Whore call'd

Scarlet My Coachman fairly laid Pilgarlick. . . . (*Works* 1, no. 55, pp. 166-67, ll. 26-31,36-40)<sup>15</sup>

6. Behn's colloquial term "pilgarlick" means, according to the *OED*, a "pilled" head like a peeled head of garlic; it was commonly used to signify a "poor creature" but perhaps here also conjures up the image of a republican or "roundhead" in portraying Behn's coachman's (and hence her own) position on the frozen ground. The disaster takes place in a symbolically-charged landscape, near a "place of fame call'd Temple" (where lawyers trained) and even nearer to an establishment -- presumably of ill fame -- called the Scarlet Whore.<sup>16</sup> These lines illustrate Behn's ability to treat party politics and even the king's "sacred majesty" as elements in a serio-comic drama in which the figure of the author plays an ambiguous, not altogether loyal part. At the heart of the comedy is a movement from high to low that carries with it both the king, fleetingly placed "beneath" the writer by being described as a frequent debtor, and the writer-servant who, as Catherine Gallagher has shown, often likened herself to a prostitute.<sup>17</sup> Behn also, however, identified with male heroes such as Oroonoko and Nathaniel Bacon. She lays the rhetorical ground for such an identification in the preface to *The Luckey Chance* (1686), where she asks her readers to grant her "the Priviledge for my Masculine Part the Poet in me . . . to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv'd in" and declares that "I value fame as much as if I had been born a *Hero*" (Todd, *Works* 7: 217). I've argued elsewhere for her specific if limited identifications with the "outlaw" heroes of her late works set in America;<sup>18</sup> she compares both of those heroes, the rebel

Nathaniel Bacon and the black slave-prince Oroonoko, to the ancient enemy of Rome, Hannibal, whose famous scaling of the Alps en route to fight Rome's forces may be recalled in Behn's description of an icy London Street being as dangerous as the "Alpian Hills." Like Hannibal, Oroonoko, and Bacon, the Behn-persona in this poem becomes a spectacle in her fall: "Who saw me cou'd not chuse but think, / I looked like Brawn in sowsing drink. / Or Lazarello who was show'd/ For a strange Fish, to'th' Gaping Crowd" (67-70). One could quote this final phrase about the picaresque hero Lazarillo de Tormes ridiculed by commoners to illustrate a stereotypically royalist (or Roman-patrician) view of the crowd as a degraded entity; in context, however (and I of course have supplied that only partially), the gaping (hungry?) crowd seems not so distant from Behn when she portrays herself as one of the many servants unpaid and hence unfed by the king. As she had written back in the 1660's to Thomas Killigrew, who may have introduced her to "service" for the Crown, "his Majestys friends heare do all complaine upon the slenderness of their rewards" (cited in Todd, *The Secret Life*, 99).

7. Behn's description of her "catastrophe" in the verse letter to Creech can serve as an apt introduction to the text I want to focus on in the remainder of this essay: a late work, first published posthumously in the *Histories and Novels* of 1698, entitled "The Adventure of the Black Lady" and described as "a Novel" by "A. Behn" on the title page though it is only a few pages long. Few modern critics have devoted much attention to it; some (perhaps correlatively) regard it as not truly Behn's own.<sup>19</sup> The anonymous "Advertisement to the Reader," however, states that this work, like

its companion piece "The Nun," needs no comment because it so "evidently confess[es] [its] admirable Author." Whether or not the confession is "true" cannot be empirically determined (at least not with the evidence we now have); but such a determination is not necessary to my argument here, for I am concerned with the economic politics limned in and by a set of texts, printed and in manuscript, that circulated as Behn's during her lifetime and thereafter. The plot of "The Adventure of the Black Lady" is largely driven by the activities of a "gentlewoman" landlady who seems in many ways a figure of the author, though the story also marks the author's shaping powers through a first-person narrator who appears -- usually in parenthetical statements -- at intervals to express her opinions. The landlady earns her living not just from renting rooms to persons of quality (among them the unmarried, pregnant lady named, enigmatically, in the tale's title) but also -- I want to suggest -- from shadier types of labor illustrating Korda's contention that we should not separate analyses of early modern women's work and economic status from a consideration of the forms of female criminality in the period (Korda, ¶16, paraphrasing Garthine Walker). Like the historical women Walker studies and the Moll Frith Korda reconstructs from heterogeneous "shards of historical evidence," Behn's landlady in the "Adventure" underscores how porous was the boundary that existed in seventeenth-century London between licit and illicit kinds of labor. Behn's landlady also reminds us that what counts as licit is in part a function of who sees a given act and of how and to whom that act's existence is reported or represented. In Behn's tale, the narrator calls conspicuous if paradoxical attention to a range of activities that



are inconspicuous in the root meaning of that word: "That [which] cannot be seen; invisible" (*OED* 1). Through her performance of various kinds of work, including a version of spying on or "overseeing" other women, Behn's landlady ultimately succeeds in conning a group the narrator calls "vermin": these are the "Overseers of the Poor," parish officials with disciplinary powers that had been confirmed when Charles II reinstated Elizabethan and Jacobean poor laws in 1661, in the "Proclamation for the Observation of certain Statutes made for the Supressing of Rogues, Vagabonds, Beggars, and other idle disorderly persons, and for Relief of the Poore."<sup>20</sup>

8. Yoking questions about women's productive and reproductive labor to questions about surveillance, spectacular appearances and disappearances, lost and/or stolen property, and ambiguous interactions among persons of different, if not fully legible, class origins when they meet in the city, "The Adventure of the Black Lady" invites analysis in relation to the story of Moll (Mary) Frith as reconstructed by Korda. She draws on new research by historians of women's work to set Moll's story in the context of women working, legally and illegally, in and around the institution of the London theater; Korda thus significantly revises the dominant critical view of the historical/fictional Moll as an exception to the "rule" of an "all-male" pre-Restoration stage. That critical view derives in part from Middleton and Dekker's representation of a cross-dressed Moll in *The Roaring Girl*; the Epilogue has the male actor playing Moll announce that Moll herself will soon appear -- as indeed she did, history following fiction -- when she showed herself (according to a Consistory of

London Correction Book cited by Korda) "vppon the stage in the publique viewe of all the people there presente in mans apparrell & playd vppon her lute & sange a songe." The title-page of the 1611 quarto edition of Middleton and Dekker's drama displays a woodcut of Moll in lavish male attire accompanied by the caption, "My case is alter'd, I must worke for my living." Korda reads these (appropriated? counterfeited) words as a key to seeing an "altered" Mary Frith: not the exceptional female of the stage, fictional and historical, but rather a figure pointing to a group of ordinary women who "played a vital role in London's shadow economy of unregulated crafts and trades"; such women, working as "second-hand clothing dealers, pawnbrokers, peddlers, hawkers, tipplers, [and] victuallers," provide us with new understanding of the "networks of commerce surrounding early modern London's public theaters" (Korda, ¶2 ). Korda's analysis of Moll's "case" (a word she herself is reported to have used, possibly with a pun on "case" as female genitals) prompts James Holstun, in his response, to reflect on "petty property crime" as a site of significant social struggle. Korda's argument shows, he suggests, that such crime "is frequently a form of implicit class struggle, and can be understood in a continuum with various forms of resistance to capitalist encroachment, from a copyholder's suit in a manorial court, to an attack on enclosures, to a full-scale peasant rebellion. Indeed, we might well think of urban property crime, and the forms of improvisatory commerce and small production that blend with it, imperceptibly, as a sort of rough urban commoning" (Holstun, ¶15) By "commoning," Holstun means (I think) an activity that involves both social leveling and purposive resistance to class "encroachment" -- an

encroachment that took, as one of its most notorious early modern forms, the enclosing or engrossing of common lands. "Rough urban" commoning, I surmise, would involve some kind of (more or less purposive) redistribution of property in ways that would benefit the "common" people, those who were punishable by law but who were held by many men of property to be incapable of understanding legal doctrines that would be "commoned" simply by being printed in the vernacular language.<sup>21</sup>

9. Building on Holstun's argument in relation to a narrative presentation of women "working" in a London setting in ways partly analogous to those explored by Korda, I want to consider "commoning" as a process that pertains to changes in women's sexual as well as their social status and hence their relation to property. Behn is fascinated by asymmetries between women's social status (often merely alleged) and perceptions of their sexuality. A woman reputed to be of gentle birth could become common by acting like, or being seen or believed to act like, a whore. Sexual degradation was often construed as a cause and/or as an effect of social "commoning" of various kinds. Richard Ross underscores the connection in his study of resistance to the printing of vernacular legal discourses in English during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. "Commoning," Ross explains, "worked a double injury in the eyes of the anti-publicists. It debased the dignity of law as it did of any learning, a sentiment expressed throughout learned Europe from the early sixteenth century in metaphors of intellectual promiscuity, as in the common dictum, 'The pen is a virgin, the

printing press a whore' (p. 375, n.151). The phenomenon of "urban commoning" as Holstun describes it may imply a degree of critical and collective political agency altogether absent from representations of London life attributed to Aphra Behn. If, however, we think about commoning in the more general sense outlined by Ross -- making something available to many that had heretofore been available only to a few -- and if we look, specifically, at the conjunction of the sexual and class dimensions of the term "common," we may find Holstun's notion of urban commoning applying after all to Behn's work. I do not wish to argue that she was a radical or even a republican in disguise; but I do want to suggest that she was something more than, or at least something other than, the royalist and Tory and also the social snob many critics have seen. My reading of "The Adventure of the Black Lady" will counter Susan Staves' argument that Behn was a "classist" who scorned the very idea that Poor Laws (for instance) could touch a woman "genteely" born.<sup>22</sup> An ideological "classism" may indeed partly explain why Behn's narrator calls the Overseers "vermin" and allows the "gentlewoman" landlady to trick them even though she is arguably performing a similar policing function with regard to the heroine. But this explanation seems too simple -- with respect to an account of Behn's economic politics -- if one reads her narrative, as I begin to do here, as at once exposing and covering over the landlady's participation in types of work considered common in the most derogatory senses of that word: running a brothel and fencing stolen goods. The evidence I am using (and constructing) here to present Behn as a participant in "urban commoning" (perhaps of a smooth rather than a rough variety) will, I realize,

not be persuasive to those who are already convinced that efforts to find traces of "race, class, and gender" -- and their attendant conflicts -- in Behn's texts are completely anachronistic.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, I hope to prompt debate and perhaps further work on Behn by critics concerned with historical materialism as a theoretical and historical project.

10. This project, as I understand it, includes seeing, naming, and assessing aspects of texts that an idealist tradition of literary criticism tends to neglect as crude, as degrading to the very idea of literature as polite letters. Such an idea already subtends Dryden's advice to an aspiring poet to avoid "the Licenses which Mrs. Behn allowed herself, of writing loosely, and giving (if I may have leave to say so) some Scandal to the Modesty of her Sex."<sup>24</sup> Threats to "modesty" abound in Behn's "The Adventure of the Black Lady." In this tale, a young stranger named Bellamora comes to London from Hampshire in order to find "Madam Brightly," a "Relation" (later called a "Cousin") with whom the heroine hopes to stay while (as we soon learn) she endures the last month of an illegitimate pregnancy -- one that is described as being possibly the result of a rape. Madame Brightly is never found, but the heroine does find rumors that "such a kind of lady" had lived several years ago at a house on Bridges Street -- a place "notorious as a haunt for prostitutes" (*Works* 3: 462, n. 2). Thus the narration establishes a link, a trace of a connection, among the heroine who exclaims to another woman "Madam, I am lost" (317), the lost cousin who seems to have become either a prostitute or a wife after her own mysterious pregnancy, and a lost object mentioned on the tale's first page: Bellamora's trunk

and all the "Valuable Furniture" within it: her "Cloaths, and most of her Money and Jewels" (Todd, *Works* 3: 315). That trunk -- a word that meant both "body" (dead or alive) and "carrying case" in seventeenth-century usage -- slides along different chains of meaning as the story progresses. It arguably signifies not only the heroine's lost chastity -- a story about her past -- but also a story about her future in London, which includes the possibility that she could (by accident or design) lose or miscarry or kill the young "stranger," as the landlady puts it, whom Bellamora bears with her. The possibility of a miscarriage -- whether natural or induced -- is explicitly raised when the landlady, "working" on Bellamora's imagination later in the tale to make her submit to the landlady's designs, tells the heroine that "her things were miscarried, and feared lost" (319).<sup>25</sup> The parallels implied by the fate of the trunk and the possible fates of both the heroine and the child bring her squarely into the domain of legal sanction that Frances Dolan describes in *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700*. Dolan's chapter entitled "Finding What Has Been 'Lost': Representations of Infanticide and *The Winter's Tale*" helps us see the significance of the multiple losses that occur in Behn's "Black Lady." "Increasingly rigorous legislation against infanticide," Dolan writes, "was interwoven with legislation controlling the poor and the sexually incontinent and linking the two" (*Dangerous Familiars*, 127-28).

11. In Behn's tale, infanticide hovers in the narrative as a potential that is never realized, never born into full light, as it were. As such, it has something of the ambiguous quality of the heroine

herself, a figure named in a way that would suit tragic as well as comic narratives: "Bellamora" clearly signals foreignness and can readily be decoded as "beautiful love" or "beautiful Moor";<sup>26</sup> to a reader who knows French as well as Italian, the name also plays on (literally, contains) the sound of death: "la mor[t]." Death in childbirth was of course a likely fate for an orphan girl friendless and without money in London; another possible fate, implied by the "Moor" in the heroine's name and in the title designation of her as a "black" lady, was a life of prostitution, preferably led without children. The landlady saves Bellamora from these fates, but not without emphasizing the costs of the rescue. We might say that the landlady's labor -- about which more shortly -- effectively though enigmatically *displaces* the parturient labor of the heroine, and thus, symbolically, commits a kind of infanticide by removing the child from the scene. Bellamora's labor is "hourly expected" (320) by the end of the story, but it never occurs. The landlady, in cahoots with the baby's father's sister (a "Lady" who happens to be one of the landlady's lodgers), fashions a romantic marriage plot that appears to satisfy some key laws of capitalist social reproduction. Bringing the (perhaps reluctant?) father, one "Fondlove," to town by means of a persuasive letter (319), the sister joins forces with the landlady to assure an apparently lawful process of social reproduction. When the affectionate (but also, his name suggests, foolish) brother arrives from the country, his sister and the landlady marry him to Bellamora in order that the expected child won't be born "out of Wedlock, and so be made incapable of inheriting each of their Estates" (320). What Bellamora's "estate" might really be is left as dark as her origins; the question of whether or not she actually desires the marriage is

also left hanging.<sup>27</sup> Nor does the narrative give us any clear information about Fondlove's financial standing at the end; Bellamora has described him to the landlady as "of Good Estate," but it wasn't good enough to satisfy the heroine's mother. With many questions about finances and feelings left unanswered, the marriage is nonetheless accomplished, and the narrator implies a subsequent sexual consummation with almost Pepysian jauntiness: "So to Bed they went together that night."

12. Their congress, which seals the legality of their marriage, occurs despite the bride's imminent labor. This surreal turn in the plot shows the narrator playing a trick on the reader that anticipates the trick that the landlady plays in the tale's final sentences. Both tricks make the expected human baby disappear; both thus invite us to see the narrator and the landlady as figures with powers like those of midwives who were perceived as having the power to kill or exchange babies should circumstances require such dark work. Midwives were required to be licensed and were bound by oath to "uphold and enforce the interests of the parish"; among these interests, as Laura Gowing explains, were the prevention of "counterfeit births and infanticides"; the naming "only of the true father"; the avoidance of "witchcraft or sorcery" and of "herbs or poisons to cause abortion"; the refusal to consent to a "woman's being delivered in secret"; the "safe and secret burial of stillbirths"; and the ensuring that children "were baptized with the correct service" (Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 159). Midwives were thus endowed with powers both to help and to police other women, rich and poor alike. But who was policing the midwives? Their neighbors, of course, who could denounce them



as witches and expose them as "unlicensed." "By no means all midwives took th[e] oath" binding them to serve the parish and the church, as Gowing observes.<sup>28</sup>

13. Shady midwives were at the center of two scandals of the 1680's: the "Meal-Tub Plot" of 1682 and the "Warming-Pan Plot" of 1688. Both scandals can be seen as offshoots of the large set of rumors and allegations circulated by participants in the Popish Plot of 1678, which Frances Dolan describes succinctly as an attempt, in many different discursive forms, "to persuade the English populace, and especially judges and juries, that Catholics were conspiring to reclaim the kingdom by force and by stealth."<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Cellier, the so-called "Popish Midwife," was at the center of the Meal-Tub plot, which focused on "the provenance and proof-value of documents found in her flour barrel"; without describing the complex arguments and counter-arguments in detail, I want to underscore Dolan's important point that that Cellier was "available" for incrimination by one Thomas Dangerfield, who claimed that she had hired him to fabricate evidence in a plot against the king, because she was "using her mobility and her contacts as a midwife with an aristocratic, even royal, clientele to monitor and relieve Catholic prisoners in Newgate, to smuggle correspondence into and out of the prison, and to support the defences of Catholics on trial" (*Whores of Babylon*, 160).<sup>30</sup> The second scandal, which helped precipitate the change known as the "Glorious Revolution," constitutes an even richer intertext for Behn's "Adventure of the Black Lady" than the Meal-Tub plot does because the "Warming-Pan plot" focuses not only on the figure of a "mobile" urban

midwife mediating between aristocratic and criminal spheres but also on an allegedly absent baby -- a legitimate male heir gone missing into a sea of competing discursive claims. In 1688, London was abuzz with rumors that the newly born Prince of Wales was not really the king's son because the Queen, the Catholic Mary of Modena, "had feigned her pregnancy and smuggled a baby into the bed as a warming-pan, or that the prince had died after a few weeks and been replaced" (Crompton, "Propaganda," 131). Behn might well have sought to add "The Adventure of the Black Lady" to the heady mix of texts circling around the question of the legitimacy of the new prince -- but perhaps she thought twice about committing her story to print. Mary Ann O'Donnell hypothesizes a significant (and carefully regulated) split between Behn's "public" and "private" views of the royal pregnancy and birth in 1688.<sup>31</sup> Publicly, according to O'Donnell, Behn was a faithful admirer of the Queen whom Behn addressed flatteringly as a new Virgin Mary, about to give birth to a new Messiah ("Congratulatory Poem to Her Most Sacred Majesty on the Universal Hopes of All Loyal Persons for a Prince of Wales").<sup>32</sup> After the miraculous birth had indeed occurred, Behn wrote a congratulatory poem to the king offering up "endless" vows such as: "Oh Happy King! To whom a Son is Born! / What more cou'd Heaven for this Bless'd Land Perform?"<sup>33</sup>

Privately, however, O'Donnell avers, Behn was pursuing quite a different political tack: her commonplace book includes five poems mocking the miraculous birth as a counterfeit event and illustrating Rachel Weil's argument that the Warming-Pan Scandal drew on a long Protestant tradition associating Catholicism with "a

kind of monstrous motherhood that deprived men of their paternal rights."<sup>34</sup> One of these poems is entitled "An Excellent New Song call'd The Prince of Darkness, Showing how the three Kingdoms may be Sett on fire by a Warming Pan."; another's title summarizes its narrative neatly while dramatizing a particularly juicy rumor circulating about the Queen's pregnancy: "The Miracle. How the Dutches of Modena being in Heaven prayd the Virgin Mary that the Queen might have a Son and how Our Lady sent the Angell Gabriel with her smok Upon wch the Queen Conceived. To the Tune of thou hadst better bin starved att Nurse" (O'Donnell, p. 293). O'Donnell's research into Behn's commonplace book is invaluable, but I wonder if the evidence really supports the critic's argument that Behn drew a "strict line" between private jottings and public utterance? Even readers lacking access to her manuscript book might be forgiven for wondering whether her "congratulatory" poems are wholly serious in their hyperbolic rhetoric and in their deployment of the trope of the "virgin birth." That trope, of course, could cast the king not as God but as a Joseph confused (at best) about his paternity. Given that Mary of Modena had suffered eight miscarriages and had given birth to only one son by 1688 -- a boy who had died, as had his three sisters, before the age of four -- I share Melinda Zook's sense Behn's fulsome public congratulations to the Queen on her miraculous pregnancy could well be read by contemporaries as a "bold and presumptuous act."<sup>35</sup> The line between public and private writing in this period was blurry, and complicated by the circulation of anonymous poems including one later ascribed to Behn, attacking a poet who had attacked Behn for her "celebration" of the Queen's pregnancy; this writer, John Bader, or

Bavius, as his opponent calls him, accuses Behn of hasty greed for patronage; specifically, and as she admits in her printed poem denouncing him, he had attacked those who had been unable to "bridle" their "officious Rhime" (poetry in search of royal favor) with regard to the royal heir's appearance in the world -- and who had thus produced a premature poetic birth. Bader portrays Behn -- and the portrait is reproduced in her defensive poem -- as having "bestowed" on England "an Heir before the Time"; she, in turn, accuses him of filling the land "with Abortive Lines" (Todd, *Works* 1 no. 85, ll. 16, 43). As this publicly disputatious poem suggests, something fishy, something illicit, was going on with regard to the theme of pregnancy -- and to debates about the politics of social reproduction -- in 1688, the year when Behn is likely (in my view) to have written "The Adventure of the Black Lady."<sup>36</sup>

14. The tale ends with a double disappearance. The narrator somehow occludes the expected moment of childbirth, and the loss seems to me no less peculiar than the heroine's partly "ordered," partly "forgetful" loss of her trunk at the beginning of the story. Instead of having a baby, Bellamora goes shopping -- to the popular London market called "The Exchange" (or, as Todd's note explains, the "new" Exchange, on the south side of the Strand). The marriage having been accomplished by an "honest officious Gentlemen" whom the landlady and the sister have cleverly "provided" (320), the narrator tells us that on the morning after the wedding night, the young couple went off "to the Exchange, for several pretty Businesses that Ladies in [Bellamora's] condition want" [and I read that verb as meaning

both "lack" and "desire")] (320). There is, it seems, to be no lying-in period for Bellamora; she no longer seems to need the "Child-bed Linen" which Fondlove's sister is mentioned as having bought earlier at the Exchange (319). This occlusion of the birth-story, an inexorable one if nature alone were having her way, leads immediately to another narrative trick: this is the bizarre substitution stratagem recounted in the tale's final paragraph. It doesn't bring pleasures of romantic closure, but it does bring pleasures of revenge and of a rough justice that we might see as a comic degradation -- one meaning of the term "commoning" -- of those men who "oversee" the affairs of the parish. The narrator joins the landlady in expressing satisfaction with the ending of their (shared) plot:

Came the Vermin of the Parish, (I mean the Overseers of the poor, who eat the Bread from 'em) to search for a young Black-hair'd Lady (for so was Bellamora) who was either brought to bed, or just ready to lie down. The Land-Lady shew'd 'em all the Rooms of her House, but no such Lady cou'd be found. At last she bethought herself, and led 'em into her Parlour, where she open'd a little Closet-door, and shew'd em her Black Cat that had just kitten'd, assuring 'em that *she* shoul'd never trouble the Parish as long as she had Rats or Mice in the House, and so dismiss'd 'em like Logger-heads as they came. (320).

15. Who is this "Land-lady" who ties the plot up so neatly, substituting kittens for a baby and a black cat for the pregnant lady whose moral blackness has now become simply a description of her hair color? Initially described as a woman who

might once have been prosperous but who is quite poor at present, the landlady enters the text as "good, discreet, ancient Gentlewoman who was fallen a little to decay and was forc'd to let Lodgings for the best part of her Livelihood" (316-17). The phrasing suggests that she was well-born, perhaps to gentry (or "quality") status; she seems to have "fallen" in terms of class as well as beauty, and her fall of course allies her with the young black lady.<sup>37</sup> Her "letting of Lodgings" may also signal a fall into the occupation of running a bawdy house, a "House of Convenience for Gentlemen and Ladies," as the *London Bawd* describes it; according to Melissa Mowry, some Restoration London bawds rented their houses instead of owning them and many "entered into a wide range of business partnerships."<sup>38</sup> Behn's landlady may be a fallen woman (many bawds were in fact former prostitutes) but she may also have risen, at least in name, from commoner status, again like the young heroine whose foreign name marks the invisibility of her birth once she arrives in the urban setting. In the course of the tale, the landlady's imputed goodness decreases even as her agency and arguably her wealth increase. If, as I suggested earlier, she comes to resemble a midwife in some respects, one of those "cunning women" -- women of knowledge -- so often associated with witchcraft in the early modern period, her role in constructing the tale's legal resolution, the marriage that will allow a legitimate child to "inherit" his parents' estates, suggests that she is perhaps one of those "white witches" who stands, as Frances Dolan puts it, "at an empowering but dangerous conjunction of medicine, the occult, and popular belief" (*Dangerous Familiars*, 204). But the landlady's role in making the baby disappear from the narrative and in

duping the overseers of the parish, those whose interests "licensed" midwives were bound to serve, suggests that the landlady may be, from another perspective, more a black witch than a white one. Such women's social status -- their moral "color" -- was dependent on how they were perceived by others, which would in turn depend on how they exercised their own perceiving or "overseeing" powers. As Dolan observes, "[m]any of those accused of 'black' felonious witchcraft had spent long, prosperous careers as cunning-people" (204). Behn's landlady may be such a person -- her black cat looks like a sign clearly legible as a witch's familiar -- but her career is not prospering at the moment this tale begins.

16. She uses her cunning and conning powers, I suggest, to engage in two (interrelated) profit-making schemes that are outside the law and that escape official notice, and hence punishment. One involves coercing Bellamora into marriage by a kind of blackmail: the landlady threatens to expose her to the Overseers of the Poor, who will, the landlady tells the girl in a "dreadful" discourse, send her to a "House of Correction" and her child to a parish nurse (319). This seems true enough, and one could say that the landlady is using bad means for a good end -- if one subscribes to the landlady's view, shared by at least one modern critic, that Bellamora's "happiness" (318) lies in her achieving the bliss of wedlock to a man who may have raped her. Matters are complicated by her admission that she "pitied" him; she also says that she has "abhorred" the sight of him ever since he made her, in essence, a whore (318). In an unusual twist of romance plot conventions, Bellamora also says that she "doubt[s]"

not that he would marry me"; the problem seems to be that she does not want to marry him. Is this because she fears that he can never truly love her after having had her illicitly (318)? Or is this because she really does "abhor" him and "dread" marriage? Her story to the landlady, and hence to us, allows both interpretations and provides (so far as I can see) no evidence for deciding on one rather than the other. What we do see clearly is that the landlady threatens Bellamora with prison and that the landlady's accomplice, Fondlove's sister, forces Bellamora to lie to her uncle, in writing, about her present whereabouts (the sister "told her . . . that she must write down to her Uncle a farewell Letter, as if she were just going aboard the *Pacquet-boat* for Holland," 319). Surrounded by women who thus govern her behavior, Bellamora is a perfect example of "managed" consent: she keeps herself a "close Prisoner to her Chamber" for the final three weeks of the pregnancy (319-20). News of the secret escapes the house, however, (through the agency of a servant) and reaches the "long Eares of the Wolves of the Parish," the Overseers who seem also to be overhearers of gossip (320). Their imminent arrival (the narrator and perhaps the landlady know that the overseers plan to arrive "the next day") pushes the plot to its double climax -- the shot-gun marriage and the trick on the overseers themselves. Nowhere does the narrative say that the landlady receives money from the sister or from Fondlove for her work as a marriage broker fixing past indiscretions, preferring Fondlove's suit (if it really is one) over the wishes of Bellamora's dead mother and her living but duped uncle, and ensuring the "expected" child's legitimacy.



17. So why do I think that Behn's landlady represents a woman profiting from shady work? Because even as she manages Bellamora's marriage, she also works brilliantly, though of course covertly, with a shadiness doubled in the laconic style of narration, as a fence for stolen goods. The sign or "proof" of this work, I think, is her miraculous recovery of Bellamora's "lost" trunk and its valuable contents. *Before* she threatens Bellamora with exposure to the Overseers of the Poor and reminds her that she lacks the "Security" of "twenty or thirty Pound" that she would need to pay the Overseers in order to avoid the "House of Correction," the landlady has *already* arranged for the trunk to be delivered to her house, "but unknown to [Bellamora]" (319). So the landlady lies when she tells the girl that her "things were miscarried," and the landlady withholds (for how long we aren't told) the vital economic information that the trunk has been returned to its owner's "lodgings" if not to her knowledge. How has the trunk been retrieved? The narrator both does and doesn't tell us when she states that "[t]he good Gentlewoman of the House had sent to the Star- Inn on Fish-street-hill, to demand the Trunk; which she rightly suppos'd to have been carried back thither: For, by good Luck, it was a Fellow that plyed thereabouts who brought it to Bellamora's Lodgings that very Night" (319). Is this "fellow" the same "strange porter" to whom Bellamora so foolishly entrusted her trunk when she first arrived in London, "utterly unacquainted with the neat Practices of this fine City"? We aren't told, but it seems that the narrator and the Landlady are well acquainted with those "neat" urban practices. The landlady's ability to "demand" that the trunk

be returned by someone who had evidently stolen it shows her engaging in the kind of ordinary women's work Korda describes in her essay on Moll Frith. The landlady, like Moll, appears to know London's underworld well enough, and have enough credit therein, to be able to "demand" that a thief return a stolen article. Behind the "demand" may have been a threat of blackmail and, very likely, a fee of some sort, perhaps garnered from the trunk's contents or perhaps elicited from Bellamora when (if) the trunk reached her. As Korda explains, the practice of returning stolen articles to their owners for a fee was a common and lucrative one among receivers, brokers, and what were termed "thief-takers" during the period. Professional "thief-takers," who often were or had been thieves themselves, drew on their extensive knowledge of criminal networks to present victims of property crimes with an attractive alternative to expensive and lengthy litigation, compounding with thieves for the return of stolen property to its rightful owners for a fee. Compliant criminals were thus rewarded and relieved of the burden of fencing their pilfered goods, while recalcitrant ones could be punished by blackmail and extortion, or by being turned over to magistrates, who also depended heavily on the services of thief-takers (Korda, ¶11).

18. If I'm right in seeing the landlady's retrieval of the stolen trunk as a sign of her participation in the world of shady work inhabited by Moll Frith and her fellow (sister?) fences, there is an obvious parallel between the landlady's method of finding the trunk and her method of "returning" Bellamora's body to Fondlove so that the intergenerational transfer of "gentlemen's" property can continue to function. Does this mean that, in the last analysis, the

landlady is a version of the "royalist heroine" Melissa Mowry sees Moll Frith becoming in the hands of her Restoration biographers? According to Mowry, those biographers "celebrate [Moll's] alternative legal authority in terms of her commitment to the status quo distribution of wealth and goods"; the status quo is maintained, capitalist "reproduction" is accomplished, through Moll's exemplary "tenure as a fence" who (in the words of the anonymous 1662 text, *The Life and Death of Mary Frith*) helps "Losers . . . recover their goods again."<sup>39</sup> Behn's landlady does seem to function conservatively in the root sense of that adverb. But because the landlady lies about the trunk's return, and never clearly delivers it or its contents to its owner, the tale disrupts -- if only glancingly -- the symbiotic relation between legal and illegal transfers of property. This is the relation that the Restoration biographies of Moll Frith attempt to naturalize. Behn denaturalizes the marriage plot interwoven with her crime-plot in many ways, including by skipping the part about the birth of the inheritor of wealth; moreover, she makes the figure of the "thief-taker" look just like a thief at the moment when the landlady makes the trunk return to Bellamora's "lodgings" but not to Bellamora herself. This collapsing of social distinctions may not qualify clearly as one of those "rough commonings" Holstun sees as constituting "a form of implicit class struggle." But such commoning, strange and occluded as it is, does contribute to the "history of illegal theft"; in so doing, it contributes to a narrative uncertainly divided between Marx and Derrida, the narrative Holstun calls a "crucial *supplement* to the historical materialist history of legal theft" (my emphasis).

## Notes

1 M. Ferguson, *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). In using the punning term "factional" to describe certain features of Behn's verbal

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production, I draw on Maureen Duffy, Introduction to her edition of *Aphra Behn, Love Letters Between a Nobleman's Sister* (London: Virago, 1987), vii.

2 For a discussion of the various names under which this writer's works appeared, and for an argument that both "Aphra" and "Behn" contain significant puns, see M. Ferguson, "The Authorial Ciphers of Aphra Behn, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650-1740*, ed. Steven Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 225-249.

3 See Holstun, "Comment: Historical Materialism and Early Modern Studies," [http://eserver.org/emc/1-4/holstun\\_response.html](http://eserver.org/emc/1-4/holstun_response.html).

4 See Wayne, "Assuming Gentility: Thomas Middleton, Mary Carleton and Aphra Behn," in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 243-56.

5 Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism:*

*Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 162.

6 According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Whig" and "Tory" were originally "terms of abuse introduced in 1679 during the heated struggle over the bill to exclude James, Duke of York (afterward James II [1633-1701]), from the succession. 'Whig' -- whatever its origin in Scottish Gaelic -- was a term applied to horse thieves and, later, to Scottish Presbyterians; it connoted nonconformity and rebellion and was applied to those who claimed the power of excluding the heir from the throne. Tory was an Irish term suggesting a papist outlaw and was applied to those who supported the hereditary right of James despite his Roman Catholic faith"; see <http://www.hfac.uh.edu/gbrown/philosophers/leibniz/BritannicaPages/WhigTory/WhigTory.html>. See also Gary Stuart Dekrey, *A Fractured Society: the Politics of London in the First Age of Party, 1688-1715* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). One of the most influential feminist studies of Behn's royalism is Catherine Gallagher's "Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," *Genders* 1 (Spring 1988): 24-29.

7 See de Groot, "Mothers, Lovers, and Others: Royalist Women," in *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*, 194-210.

8 Pearson, "The Short Fiction," in Derek Hughes and Janet Todd, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 188-203. Other useful discussions of tensions in the set of ideas taken to be Behn's

political views include: Warren Chernaik, "Captains and Slaves: Aphra Behn and the Rhetoric of Republicanism," *Seventeenth Century*, vol. 17, no. 1, (Spring 2002): 97-107; Robert Markley and Molly Rothenberg, "Contestations of Nature: Aphra Behn's 'The Golden Age' and the Sexualizing of Politics" in Heidi Hutner, ed., *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism* (London and Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993): 301-21; Robert Markley, "'Be Impudent, Be Saucy, Forward, Bold, Touzing and Loud': the Politics of Masculine Sexuality and Feminine Desire in Behn's Tory Comedies," in *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theater*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah C. Payne (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995): 114-40; Ros Ballaster, "Fiction Feigning Femininity: False Counts and Pageant Kings in Aphra Behn's Popish Plot Writings," in Janet Todd, ed. *Aphra Behn Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 50-65; and Susan J. Owen, "Sexual Politics and Party Politics in Behn's Drama, 1678-83," in Todd, ed. *Aphra Behn Studies*, 15-29.

9 Elliott Visconsi, "A Degenerate Race: English Barbarism in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and *The Widow Ranter*," *ELH* 69.3 (2002): 676.

10 The quotation is from Visconsi, 674; he discusses various examples of Behn's royalist views of commoners (e.g., the "brown" slaves whom Oroonoko excoriates for their lack of honor); see also Virginia Crompton's argument that Behn's revisions of Thomas Philipott's English version of *Aesop's Fables* for Francis Barlow's 1687 edition are "clearly designed to represent Stuart royalist politics" and, accordingly (but with one

exception) seldom express "sympathy for poverty" (Crompton, "For When the Act is Done and Finish'd Cleane,/ What Should the Poet Doe, but Shift the Scene?': Propaganda, Professionalism and Aphra Behn" [hereafter cited as "Propaganda"], in Todd, ed. *Aphra Behn Studies*, 134).

11 Behn's political character is often epitomized by her statement that her play *The City Heiress* is "in every part true Tory! Loyal all-over!" But even that totalizing claim is rhetorically qualified ("except one Knave") -- and the occasion of the statement, a dedication of the play to a nobleman whom Behn elsewhere describes (wishfully?) as her patron or "Maecenas," needs to be included in any assessment of what the proclamation of allegiance signifies. For this dedication, see Janet Todd, ed., *The Works of Aphra Behn*, 7 vols (London: Pickering, 1992-96), 7: 7. Behn's reference to the nobleman in question, Henry Howard, Earl of Arundel, as her "patron" occurs in her Coronation Ode for James II (1685), as Todd notes (*Works*, 7:4). All citations of Behn's texts are from Todd's edition and will from now on be parenthetically indicated in my text.

12 For this view of Behn's royalism as fundamentally untroubled by her "mixed" views of a king who failed to pay her, see Melinda S. Zook; "The Political Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, 46-67; quotation from p. 47.

13 Cited in Janet Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (London: Andree Deutsch, 1996), 107.

14 See M. L. Stapleton's discussion of Behn's relation to Creech and gratitude for his translation of Lucretius, "The Debt to Daphnis," in *Admired and Understood: The Poetry of Aphra Behn* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), chap 3.

15 For Crompton's discussion of the first four of these lines, see "Propaganda," 131.

16 I haven't found an actual inn or brothel named "the Scarlet Whore." The geographical designation may be Behn's invention and /or an allusion to anti-royalist as well as anti-Catholic polemic; as Frances Dolan observes, the phrase was widely used after the Reformation "to denounce the Roman church, the pope, and particular Catholics, especially women" (*Whores of Babylon*, 1999; rpt. with new introduction, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 6. The phrase had been used, in particular, to describe Charles 1 (see, e.g. Marvell's 1665 poem on Cromwell); and it was often used in ballads (including a number collected by Pepys) to describe James II. . 17 See

Gallagher, "Who was That Masked Woman?' The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Comedies of Aphra Behn," in *Women's Studies* 15 (1988), 23-42 and also her chapter on Behn in *Nobody's Story: the vanishing acts of women writers in the marketplace, 1670-1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994); see also Jacqueline Pearson, *The Prostituted Muse: Images of women & women dramatists, 1642-1737* (New York: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1988); and Kate Aughterson, *Aphra*



*Behn: The Comedies* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), Chap. 4 ("Heroines and Whores").

18 Behn's identification with the heroes of her late works set in America can be observed chiefly in her representations of their fame as a "form of prowess gendered both masculine and feminine" (see Ferguson, *Dido's Daughters*, 349). The identification I posit is by no means complete, however, for Behn also draws ideological distinctions between her authorial personae and the heroes she defines, negatively, as naïve, "premodern," and in certain crucial ways, "illiterate."

19 My reading is indebted to one substantial analysis of the tale -- that of my student Jessica Jordan in an unpublished seminar paper entitled "She 'Miscarried Her Things': (Il)legitimate Literary (Re)Production, Fiction and Abortion in Aphra Behn's *The Adventure of the Black Lady*" -- and to brief but incisive commentaries by the following critics: S. J. Wiseman, *Aphra Behn* (London: Northcote House, 1996), 63-64; Jacqueline Pearson, "The Short Fiction (Excluding *Oroonoko*)," (cited above, n. 8), 197-98; and Ruth Selvaggio, "Aphra Behn's Love: Fiction, Letters and Desire," in *Rereading Aphra Behn*, ed. Hutner (cited above, n. 8), 262-63. For a discussion of the attribution issues -- and an argument that the tale was probably penned by one of Behn's literary "sons," Thomas Brown -- see Jane Spencer, *Aphra Behn's Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 125-26. Germaine Greer thinks it "impossible" that Behn would have failed to publish these posthumous stories for money had she written them (*Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet* [London: Viking, 1995], 196, cited in Spencer, 125).

20 This proclamation is mentioned in Melissa Mowry, "Thieves, Bawds, and Counterrevolutionary Fantasies: The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005): 32.

21 See Richard J. Ross, "The Commoning of the Common Law: the Renaissance Debate Over Printing English Law, 1520-1640," *The University of Pennsylvania Law Review* (January, 1998): 324-91. It seems to me that that Holstun's response to Korda contributes to a significant reassessment of Marx's and Engels' concept of the "Lumpenproletariat" as a group separate (despite its name) from the proletariat and including (according to a well-known passage in Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*) "vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds . . . swindlers, mountebanks . . . ragpickers, gamblers, . . . brothel keepers, porters, *literati* . . . tinkers, beggars." Cited in and discussed by Peter Stallybrass, "Marx and Heterogeneity: Rethinking the Lumpenproletariat," *Representations* 31 (Summer 1991): 69-95.

22 Staves briefly discusses Behn's "The Adventure of the Black Lady" as presenting a "classist" and "very hostile glimpse of the Church's Poor Law system" in "Behn, Women, and Society," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, 14-15.

23 See Derek Hughes, "Race, Gender, and Scholarly Practice: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Essays in Criticism* vol. 52 (Jan 2002): 1-22. Hughes vigorously critiques politically "correct"

interpretations -- all by American women -- of Behn's novella. Behn, like Shakespeare, seems to prompt intense critical battles about the boundaries of the canon and the readings it can legitimately generate; see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Cultural Canon Formation* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991]. Intriguingly, Harold Bloom pits Behn against Shakespeare in an article published in the *Boston Globe* entitled "The Dumbing Down of American Readers" ([http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing\\_down\\_american\\_readers/article](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers/article)); Bloom sees Behn's pedagogical emergence as an emblem of cultural decline and laments that "[a] fourth-rate playwright like Aphra Behn is being taught instead of Shakespeare in many curriculums across the country."

24 Dryden to Elizabeth Thomas, *The Letters of John Dryden*, ed. C. E. Ward (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942), 127.

25 This statement repeats information that the heroine already knows; but she, like the narrator, seems to have a strangely faulty memory -- the kind that would allow one to forget one's social origins as one employed one's skills of self-fashioning. The story begins with the narrator calling attention both to herself and to the tale's origins in her possibly unreliable memory: "About the beginning of last June (as near as I can remember) Bellamora came to town. . . ." The narrator subsequently describes the heroine as having "in her Perplexity quite forgot her Trunk and Money." But this contradicts an earlier sentence telling us that the heroine "order'd therefore her Trunk . . . to be brought after her to Madam Brightly's, by a strange Porter whom she spoke to in the

Street. . . ." The ambiguity about Bellamora's degree of responsibility for her lost trunk parallels the ambiguity about her degree of responsibility for her lost virtue (see *Works* 3: 318).

26 This pun allies Bellamora with the "wicked" character named Moorea -- and said to be an acquaintance of the narrator -- in Behn's story "The Unfortunate Bride or The Blind Lady a Beauty" (in *Works* 3: 322-334).

27 Fondlove's moral character is also dubious; his passion for Bellamora, which the "innocent (not to say foolish)" heroine wanted to interpret "really" as "love" (317), led him to accost her on her bed with "reiterated Promises of Marriage" but also with "such Violence and accursed Success" that she ended up "great with Child by him" (318). She blames herself for her ruin, admitting (Desdemona-like) that she "pitied" Fondlove while also feeling "aversion" to the suitor her mother had chosen for her. Critics disagree radically on how "satisfactory" the marriage-resolution is, either for Bellamora or for the (modern) reader. For negative assessments, see Ruth Selvaggio, "Aphra Behn's Love: Fiction, Letters and Desire," in *Rereading Aphra Behn*, ed. Hutner, p. 262; and the unpublished paper mentioned in n. 19 above by Jessica Jordan. Jacqueline Pearson, however, sees the "love affair" between Fondlove and Bellamora arriving at a "happy ending" ("The Short Fiction," p. 198); in *Aphra Behn*, p. 64, S. J. Wiseman argues that "The reader is given the pleasure of knowing that our protagonist will, in fact, get what we want for her." But Wiseman goes on, subtly, to argue that we, "the readers, are organized as bourgeois good housekeepers whose desire for economic security is coded into the heroine's success"

(65-66). I am less certain than Wiseman is that the tale codes Bellamora's marriage as a "success."

28 See Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 159. On the requirement that midwives be licensed, on their importance in legal proceedings, and on the fears that they might "collude in the disposal of unwanted children," see also Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 302-3. Midwives' testimony could save a young woman from being prosecuted under the 1624 Act against "the destroying or murdering of bastard children" (the term "infanticide" was not yet in use). As Garthine Walker notes, "any woman who concealed her bastard infant's death was to 'suffer death as in case of murder' unless one witness testified to a stillbirth" (21 James I c. 37, cited in Walker, in *Crime, Gender, and Social Order*, 148). For more general information on the labile figure of the midwife in early modern culture, see Holly Tucker, *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early-Modern France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Adrian Wilson, *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England, 1660-1770* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Elaine Hobby, "Gender, Science and Midwifery: Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book* (1671)," in *The Arts of 17th-Century Science: Representations of the Natural World in European and North American Culture*. Eds. Claire Jowitt and Diane Watt (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

29 Dolan, *Whores of Babylon*, 157; see also Jonathan Scott,

"England's Troubles: Exhuming the Popish Plot," in *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England*, ed. Tim Harris, Paul Seward, and Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990): 107-32.

30 See also Rachel Weil, "'If I Did Say So, I Lyed': Elizabeth Cellier and the Construction of Credibility in the Popish Plot Crisis," in *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern England: Essays Presented to David Underdown*, ed. Susan D. Amussen and Mark A. Kishlansky (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995): 189- 209. In a longer version of this essay I plan to analyze Behn's stress on her narrator's dubious credibility with the credibility issues explored so astutely by Weil.

31 See O'Donnell, "Private Jottings, Public Utterances," in Todd, ed. *Aphra Behn Studies*, 285-309.

32 See Todd *Works* 1 no. 83, pp. 294-96: "Like the first sacred Infant, this will come / With promise laden from the Blessed Womb, /To call the wand'ring, scatter'd Nations home" (ll. 13-15).

33 Todd, *Works* 1, no. 84, p. 297, ll. 5-6.

34 The poems, two on the pregnancy and three on the delivery, are not in Behn's hand, O'Donnell states, and are probably not "by" her; all occur in other textual venues as well as in Bodleian MS Firth c.16, where "Astrea's Book" appears with three dates "superimposed on one another: 1685, 1686, 1688" and containing poems from 1682 to 1689 in several hands, including the one held to be Behn's (O'Donnell, 287). The quotation from Weil, which I initially found in Dolan, *Whores*, p. 153, n. 192, is from "The Politics of Legitimacy: Women and the Warming-Pan Scandal," in

*The Revolution of 1688-89*, ed. Lois G. Schworer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 76.

35 Melinda S. Zook, "The Political Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*," 58.

36 A serious engagement with the dating question -- which slides quickly into theoretical as well as empirical questions about authorship and attribution because of the "Adventure of the Black Lady's" posthumous printing -- is beyond the scope of this paper; in a longer version of this essay I hope to explore the parallels I see between this story and other works Behn wrote in 1688, as her health failed and the king's cause lost support. Behn's poem to the king, as Todd notes (*Works* 1:438, headnote to no. 84) was initially printed as a broadside in 1688; it was issued later in the same year "with a reset title page announcing it as 'The Second Edition', and with an advertisement for 'the most Ingenious, and long Expected History of Oroonoko' at the end." *Oroonoko* includes the story of an unborn child whose enslaved father, ironically named "Caesar" by his English owners, kills the pregnant mother to prevent her from being sexually defiled as the "property" of others besides her husband.

37 The landlady recalls or anticipates the character named Onahal, one of the old king's "cast-mistresses" in *Oroonoko*; members of this social group, being "now past their Beauty," work in the harem as "Guardians, or Governants, to the new and the young" (*Oroonoko*, in Todd, *Works*, 3, 70).

38 Mowry, *The Bawdy Politic in Stuart England, 1660-1714*:

*Political Pornography and Prostitution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 84; she cites the oft-reprinted *London Bawd* on p. 83.

39 Mowry, "Thieves, Bawds, and Counterrevolutionary Fantasies" (cited above, n. 20), 35. Mowry argues persuasively that the effort to transform Moll into a royalist heroine was ultimately a "failed polemic," (26), in part because of the difficulty of construing "Moll's embrace of bawdry as a defense of patriarchal power and the formality of homosocial property exchange" (26, 39).

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