

The house, the city, and the colony in the works of Aphra Behn: Gendered spaces and the freedoms and dangers they afford

Margarete Rubik
Universität Wien, Austria

ABSTRACT

In Behn's works the house affords no security for women, as men may force their way in, or relatives collude in the sexual violation of women. However, men, too, are threatened and cuckolded in their own houses. Not even convents are safe spaces for either sex. Outdoor spaces promise freedom from supervision but harbor threats to both women's and men's honor. The Whig inhabitants of the City of London are ridiculed, but female characters dabbling in politics are no more likeable, though Behn sympathizes with women claiming a right to public visibility. The racialized colonial space offers upward social mobility to Englishmen and -women, and to the latter also the freedom to partake in pastimes and occupations traditionally connoted as male.

KEYWORDS: Aphra Behn; Restoration drama; gendering of spaces; spacial studies; women's literature

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en las obras de Aphra Behn:
Espacios de género y las libertades y
peligros que ofrecen**

RESUMEN: En las obras de Behn la casa no ofrece seguridad para las mujeres, ya que los hombres pueden entrar a la fuerza, o los familiares pueden conspirar para la violación sexual de las mujeres. Sin embargo, también los hombres se ven amenazados y engañados en sus propias casas. Ni siquiera los conventos son un espacio seguro para los miembros de los dos sexos. Los espacios exteriores prometen liberar de la supervisión, pero albergan amenazas al honor tanto de las mujeres como de los hombres. Los *Whigs* de la *City* de Londres son ridiculizados, pero los personajes femeninos que se aventuran en la política no son más agradables, aunque Behn simpatiza con

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RESUMO: Nas obras de Behn, a casa não proporciona segurança às mulheres, já que os homens podem forçar a entrada ou os familiares conspirar para a violação sexual das mulheres. Contudo, também os homens são ameaçados e enganados nas suas próprias casas. Nem sequer os conventos são lugares seguros para membros de ambos os sexos. Os espaços exteriores prometem liberdade da supervisão, mas albergam ameaças à honra tanto de mulheres como de homens. Os habitantes *Whig* da *City* de Londres são ridicularizados, mas as personagens femininas que se metem na política não são mais agradáveis, embora Behn revele empatia para com

las mujeres que demandan el derecho a la visibilidad pública. El espacio colonial racializado ofrece movilidad que permita el ascenso en la escala social para los ingleses e inglesas, y para estas últimas, además, la libertad de formar parte de pasatiempos y ocupaciones que tradicionalmente tenían connotaciones masculinas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aphra Behn; teatro de la Restauración; género y espacio; estudios espaciales; literatura de mujeres.*

mulheres que reclamam um direito à visibilidade pública. O espaço colonial racializado oferece mobilidade social ascendente a ingleses e inglesas e a estas últimas também a liberdade de participar em passatempos e ocupações que tinham conotações tradicionalmente masculinas.

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General considerations

This paper will discuss the gendering of spaces—or rather, the subversion and questioning of such gendering—in the works of Aphra Behn, the first professional English woman writer. The interpretation will focus on her comedies, with occasional references to her narratives and to a few other well-known plays of the period for comparison. I will start with some general considerations, and then discuss first private, and then public spaces, and finally Behn’s descriptions of colonial spaces. I will show that although her male characters try to introduce a spatial regimen to control women’s activities, a survey of Behn’s works from a spacial perspective illustrates that she repeatedly disrupts “the European construct of domestic space, which always encloses the feminine within the protection of male power” (Runge 2014, 27).¹ In Behn’s oeuvre domestic settings are no safer than outside urban locations for either women or men—these spaces hold promises of autonomy and humiliation for both genders; and the physical and social mobility attainable for settlers in the new world is tainted by violence and misgovernment.

* Translation into Spanish by Tamara Pérez Fernández

** Translation into Portuguese by Miguel Ramalhete.

¹ Laura Runge (2014), in her analysis of Behn’s nostalgic nationalism in *Oroonoko*, uses this phrase to comment on the transgression of the Surinam Caribs, who murder women and children after the Dutch take-over. But in fact Behn constantly inverts the concepts of male protection and domestic sanctuary, in home settings as well as abroad.

It should be noted that the terminology used in spacial studies unfortunately is not uniform. Cynthia Wall and Miles Ogborn, for instance, in their respective studies speak of *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London*, or of *Spaces of Modernity*. Mona Narain and Karen Gevirtz (2014, 4), on the other hand, define space as a “geographical, material area,” and place as “an area delineated by the convergence of the material, the ideological and of memory.” I have opted for the term “space,” in the sense of both a physical or mental sphere in which characters operate and a location considered appropriate to them (*OED*), in order to analyze, not descriptions of concrete sites of memory, but Behn’s representation of such concepts as indoors and outdoors, home and abroad, and the gendered power dynamics that are played out in these locations. No matter what terminology we use, however, there is general agreement that spaces “undergo transformation and are invested with meaning and value thanks to particular representational practices” (Brewer 2004, 174), and “cultural productions, such as literature, play fundamental roles in this continuing process of construction of meaning” (Runge 2014, 21).

When we speak of gendered spaces, we tend to think of the nineteenth-century doctrine of separate spheres, which it would be a-historical to apply to the seventeenth century. There was no rigid segregation of male and female spaces then. While a century later men and women were believed to be endowed with different natures and hence needed separate spheres, the Galenic model of human physiology represented sex not as a binary opposition but as a sliding scale (Pearson 2003, 163), with the male body believed to be closer to perfection (Flather 2007, 19). Still, women were associated more with enclosed spaces, though of course the boundaries between the private and the public have always been permeable. Space constructs and is constructed by social relations (Flather 2007, 3). Women’s activities were circumscribed by social expectations and conventions, as well as prescriptive ideas from religious and conduct books; the freedoms and choices afforded to women obviously differed according to age, rank and family situation: widows, for instance, had more freedom than daughters and wives.

Sixteenth and seventeenth-century women worked in all kinds of professions—from street vendors to midwives and members of the royal household, and helped in their husbands’ businesses. By the

end of the seventeenth century, however, the growing professionalization edged out women from traditional occupations. Besides, Restoration drama deals predominantly with rich or upper class women, frequently casting tradesmen's wives merely in the roles of seduction victims. Of course women of rank also supervised households and servants—but Restoration dramatists were not interested in such tasks. They portrayed women of leisure, who were hardly ever shown as engaging in other occupations than amorous intrigue, husband hunting or cuckolding.

The private space

The term “private” means that a thing is restricted to the use of one person, or a group of persons, rather than being communal and shared (*OED*). Lena Cowen Orlin (1994, 2) claims that the proverb that a man's home is his castle dates back to the sixteenth century. But true privacy, even in privately owned houses, had been largely unavailable in earlier times, when even bedrooms were shared. Indeed, privacy only began to be more broadly available for bourgeois households in the Restoration period. After the Great Fire, Cynthia Wall (1998, 214) explains, house design changed: instead of interlocking suites of room, through which people passed at all hours, corridors and back stairs were built, and smaller rooms allowed for more private space—at least for the rich. Behn's comedies are not only set in England, but also in Madrid, Cadiz, Naples (then under Spanish rule), Rome, Florence, etc. There are also prose works set in Flanders, France and Portugal. She often mixes the conventions of London city comedy with Spanish intrigue comedy, since the stricter Spanish and Italian rules of conduct provided a good background for plots in which women try to escape from patriarchal control. Nonetheless, Behn generally modelled her foreign spaces on the conditions in England.

Behn's English and foreign heroines alike come from the wealthy classes and generally have private rooms for their own use. In *The Emperor of the Moon* (set in Naples), both the Doctor's daughter and niece have separate bedrooms. The rich London widow Lady Galliard in *The City Heiress* has at least one dressing room and a chamber. The stage directions in *The Lucky Chance* specify “a

chamber in the apartment of Lady Fulbank" (1687, I. 2),² the wife of a rich London merchant, plus an anti-chamber (1687, V. 2), and Lady Fancy, who is of the same social class, has her own private bedroom, too. Not that these private chambers shelter them from their husbands' amorous advances. Wives had no authority to prevent husbands from entering their bedrooms,³ and marital rape was not considered a crime.

Wall (1998, 156) has complained that descriptions of locations in Restoration comedy are vague and non-descript in comparison with Elizabethan and Jacobean plays—but then Elizabethan theatre did not use stage scenery and needed to convey an impression of the surroundings through the dialogue. Restoration theatres for the first time used changeable wings and shutters. But scenery for most plays was pulled from stock: companies probably had standard scenery for a wood, or a city street, as well as for lodgings, or a throne room (Milhous and Hume 1985, 53)—and those were used, regardless of what authors specified in their scripts. It would thus have been counter-productive for playwrights to give detailed descriptions in the text, because the theatres as likely as not would not have been able to fulfil the requirements. Hence the stage directions in Behn's comedies merely indicate "a chamber," "a street" or "a garden," but hardly give any further descriptions. The lavish lodgings in which the eponymous Feign'd Curtizans reside is briefly suggested by the men's admiration: "How rich is all we meet in this Palace [...]" (*The Feign'd Curtizans* 1679, IV. 1)—perhaps an indication that the scenery normally used for a royal residence was required. Also other characters, such as Angellica in *The Rover*, boast of a "fine chamber" (1677, II. 2), but how this was painted and furnished, we do not know. We do know that Cornelia's bedchamber in *The Feign'd Curtizans* has an arras and fireplace (1679, IV. 1), in which one of the foolish suitors tries to hide.

Interestingly, one of the most closely described locations is not one of these elegant places, but Gayman's miserable attic in Alsatia (a notorious sanctuary for debtors and criminals outside the

² All of Behn's plays are quoted from Chadwyck-Healey's *English Drama* [ED] database.

³ Cf. Lady Fulbank's resignation when her husband indicates his wish to spend the night with her (*The Lucky Chance* 1687, V. 2) or Lady Fancy's inability to prevent her husband from barging into her bedroom (*Sir Patient Fancy* 1678, III. 3).

jurisdiction of the City of London), where he has hidden to conceal his total impoverishment. For once, the description is given in a conversation between Lady Fancy, who is enamored of Gayman, and her husband's apprentice, who has managed to locate him:

[...] I was sent up a Ladder rather than a pair of Stairs; [... the room is] a pretty convenient Tub Madam. He may lie along in't, there's just room for an old Joyn'd Stool besides the Bed, which one cannot call a Cabin, about the largeness of a Pantry Bin, or a Usurer's Trunk, there had been Dornex Curtains to't in the Days of *Yore* ; but they were now annihilated, and nothing left to save his Eyes from the Light, but my Land-ladies Blew Apron, ty'd by the strings before the Window, in which stood a broken six-penny Looking-Glass [...]. (*The Luckey Chance* I, 2)

The question of private space is closely connected with property ownership. Since British laws regulating property ownership were gendered, and formal and legal authority rested with the husband (Flather 2007, 41),⁴ who, as the householder, was accountable for his family and servants (Orlin 1994, 3–4), it was thus actually men who held the power in the house, although it was considered the appropriate space for women. The father's position in the household was likened to that of a King in the public realm. Even after the Glorious Revolution, Sarah Mendelson and Patricia Crawford remark (1998, 6), the King might hold the crown at the invitation of Parliament, but men were still believed to have a God-given right to govern their family members and servants. A husband could even throw his wife out of the house, or forbid others to visit her, and he was allowed to "correct" her behavior by beating her. Naturally we should not assume that all women were oppressed in such ways; indeed, Restoration comedy describes an astonishing amount of freedom and transgression on the part of women. But we also need to remember that there were men who did exert their full, brutal authority (in real life as in plays such as Behn's *The Forc'd Marriage*): the historical Hortense Mancini, Duchess Mazarin, was separated from her family and friends and was confined by her husband, until she fled and finally became mistress to Charles II. Like the other mistresses whom Charles made conspicuous in his court, she paid for her high visibility by a notorious reputation and frequent

⁴ Single women and widows could also own property, and marriage settlements could safeguard some of the bride's property.

vituperation. While giving her freedom from her disastrous marriage, the English court thus “merely came with a different set of limitations and expectations for those who wished to be its regular members” (Beggs 2014, 120).

As a rule, men—especially men of the higher classes—, tried to control female sexuality, as women could ruin the family honor by their unchastity (Mendelson and Crawford 1998, 4, 91) and introduce bastards into the family line. Moralists like Richard Allestree (1673 [1727], Part II, 151) warned virgins against the liberty of choosing their own company, which might give “opportunity to any that have ill designs upon them.” Young women of rank generally had less privacy with suitors than middle or lower class women, and least agency of all women in courtship (Mendelson and Crawford 1998, 108; 112). Marriages among the landed classes were generally arranged, and financial transactions rather than love matches, although girls were slowly being granted a right of veto in marriage. Widows had more freedom—but still had to guard their reputation. Generally, women were believed to be either sexually insatiable, or at least frail vessels that could not resist temptation. Hence the house was not only a woman’s proper place because of cooking and house-keeping, but because women could be closely chaperoned and surveilled by male and female relatives, and in addition servants in attendance could act as spies.

In *The Rover*, for instance, the heroines’ brother breaks in upon their secret conversation on how to escape from their father’s dictates of a forced marriage and confinement to a nunnery. He orders the governess to watch over them and prevent them from going out. In contrast, the servant Pedro in *Feign’d Curtizans* helps the two heroines who fled from a similar fate to survive. Lady Galliard in *The City Heiress* is betrayed by her maid, who was bribed to act as a secret witness to a promise of marriage, which the widow never meant to keep. But by and large, attendants in Behn’s works are helpers rather than enemies: in *The False Count*, *Sir Patient Fancy* and *The Younger Brother* they encourage and help their mistresses to cuckold their elderly husbands. In *The Luckey Chance* her husband’s apprentice helps Lady Fulbank to convey to her admirer money which she stole from her husband.

Despite male authority and control, several women in Behn’s works thus follow their own desires in the house (though Behn also

shows how men sexually exploit women). In fact plays of the period teem with cuckolding plots and prove the inadequacy of domestic surveillance and prescriptions of behavior. While male writers like Wycherley and Etherege in their comedies glamorize male rakes but show little sympathy for female transgressors, Behn celebrates women's wit, unruliness and ingenuity in overcoming obstacles of gendered conventions and evinces marked sympathy for transgressive women.

In theory, women were supposed to be safe from temptation and sexual danger in the house, but this is certainly not true of Behn's works. "Boundaries mean little to men," Derek Hughes (2004, 40) rightly remarks, as characters like Sir Charles in *The City Heiress* simply force their way into Lady Galliard's house. Even more often, however, patriarchs themselves introduce visitors who then stain their honor: in the short story "The Dumb Virgin" the father's guest makes love to the daughter while the old man is entertaining other guests below. A fool in *The Younger Brother* introduces his wife to a prince, whom she thereupon invites to her bed. And in *The False Count*, a miserly old man invites a chimneysweep disguised as a nobleman to woo his daughter. Indeed, in some cases close relatives are directly responsible for a woman's sexual violation. In the novel *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*, Silvia is seduced by her brother-in-law in her father's house, under his very nose. The rakish Lodwick in *Sir Patient Fancy* has no scruples about sleeping with his future mother-in-law when her maid mistakes him for her lover. Julia in *The Luckey Chance* is violated in her own house, with her husband's connivance. He has wagered her body in a game of dice and allows the winner to sleep with her, pretending that he is her husband. Restoration law would not have classified husband-impersonation as rape (Pacheco 2000), but the two men together turn Julia unto an unwitting adulteress. In a surprising twist, however, Behn turns even Julia's commodification into a source of female empowerment: his vile trick gives her the justification to separate from her husband, and also to send her lover packing — although it is not clear whether the latter is meant in earnest. The violation of her body has thus given her the moral excuse to free herself from male domination.

If the examples listed undermine the "contemporary rhetoric that presented the domestic environment as safe for women" (Flather

2007, 53), Behn also shows that the home is not necessarily a safe place for men either. Besides their humiliation by cuckold-makers, there are other threats as well. In *The Luckey Chance*, a young intruder prevents an old man from consummating his marriage by fake messages of riots in the city, and frightens him out of his wits in the guise of a ghost. Sir Timothy in *The City Heiress* is terrorized and robbed in his house by his nephew. And in the narrative *The History of the Nun* a man returning home from a long journey is murdered by his wife, who in the meantime has married a second time. Such gruesome perversions of domestic peace are, of course, nothing new in drama—Jacobean domestic tragedies like *Arden of Feversham* also capitalized on such sensational plots.⁵ Men in Behn's plays also run a risk when they enter the houses of prostitutes, where they are threatened by rivals or cheated by the women themselves. In *The Feign'd Curtizans*, various prospective suitors steal into the protagonists' house in the hope of a tête-a-tête, but are beaten up, pursued by armed rivals, or fall into a well. In *The Rover*, a prostitute posing as a gentlewoman lures the country fool Blunt to her house, robs him and disposes of the naked victim through a trap-door leading into a sewer. Since he does not know her name and, as a stranger, cannot find the house again, she gets away scot-free. Quite apart from murder, robbery, beatings and humiliation, on a more harmless level, men are not always free from unwanted intrusion and importunities in their own habitations. Blunt in *The Rover*, reduced to his underwear after the adventure with the predacious whore, cannot keep his friends out of his chamber. Despite his pleas, they break open the door to sneer and laugh at his misfortune. And customs of hospitality and good neighborhood forbid Sir Patient Fancy to throw out his loquacious neighbor, Lady Knowall, who during a visit maddens him with an endless flood of words. In *The Town Fopp* and *The Younger Brother*, masked revelers enter the house uninvited to join the wedding celebrations—and here, too, the patriarchs have little power to rid themselves of such unbidden guests.

Not even convents are safe places for either sex, or guarantees of female chastity—quite apart from those examples where prospective nuns run away to provide themselves with marriage partners. In the

⁵ In *Staging Domesticity* Wendy Wall (2002) illustrates how scenes of jealousy and betrayal defamiliarize ordinary domestic life in Jacobean domestic tragedy.

story *The History of the Nun* the protagonist breaks her solemn religious vows when she is courted by a handsome young man and in the end – despite her supposed piety – murders both her first and second husband. The Fair Jilt in the narrative of this title makes a temporary vow as a Begine, but spends her time receiving presents, serenades and billets-doux, and is so depraved that she tries to seduce a priest during confession and, when this fails, accuses him of rape – which leads to his imprisonment.

Private spaces, at least in Behn's oeuvre, are thus locations of danger and opportunity for both men and women. Undoubtedly her female figures are vulnerable to male violence even inside the house. However, in her works she presents the house not primarily as a place of female suppression and male power. As often as not, men become victims of pranks in turn, or even worse. Women – with the help of servants, or their own ingenuity and wit – get the better of them, or, as we shall see in the next part, venture outdoors to escape from patriarchal control.

The public space

The term “public,” generally understood in opposition to “private,” means that something is open to and relates to the whole community and to public life (*OED*), and I will comment on Behn's treatment of public space both in the meaning of “generally accessible to a wider public” and “political,” i.e., pertaining to the public weal. Public spaces in Restoration drama were mainly outdoor urban places of approved social interaction, such as streets, markets, or gardens. Such places were considered the domain of men, although women did have access to them – for instance for shopping, or selling goods at the market. The rich also had access to leisured activities and amusements, such as going to the theatres, or promenading or driving their coaches through the fashionable parks. Women of rank, however, were not supposed to walk there alone, but had to be chaperoned or accompanied. Shady groves in gardens and parks offered too inviting a place for illicit sexual activities. Women who entered such spaces alone thus risked their reputations. Even middle and lower class women often went out into the public space in pairs to protect themselves from harassment and violence (Flather 2007,

124). Especially walking the streets at night involved the very real danger of being mistaken for a whore and arrested.

In Restoration comedy, we hence often see men meeting in the streets, rarely women. And although couples (accompanied by friends) do meet in fashionable places of entertainment, it would be a misconception to believe that most action in Restoration plays takes place outdoors. After all, sex comedy of the period contains a lot of bedroom action. Behn, in particular, sets many scenes indoors—perhaps because more than her male contemporaries she focuses on women characters. But she also shows how her female figures negotiate outdoor spaces.⁶

In Behn's comedies it would be wrong to associate gender transgression only with transgressing physical boundaries; we have seen that plenty of transgressive women also operate indoors. In the house activities were subject to surveillance. It is the anonymity and escape from patriarchal control in outside spaces that makes them attractive to Behn's rebellious heroines. Normally defined as somebody's daughter, wife or widow, they can be whoever they want outside, as long as they don a disguise. Dressed as men, they gain the mobility normally only afforded to men, who need no justification to roam the streets. In cross-class disguise, they are free from the social etiquette women of rank had to observe and able to flirt with strangers (as happens in *The Rover*, *The Feign'd Curtizans*, or *The Younger Brother*). Urban spaces offer women the freedom of meeting men without their family's approval—albeit at a possible danger to their honor, i.e. chastity. Hughes (2004, 39) in his discussion of Behn's dramatic oeuvre speaks of "the perilous wide spaces of the public world." Indeed, it might be argued that Florinda in *The Rover*, by leaving the patriarchal protection of the house to find the man she loves, runs the danger of rape, because she is twice mistaken for a prostitute—and molesting a prostitute was not considered a crime (Pacheco 1998).⁷ However, her self-confident, witty sister Hellena, who ventures out during the Naples carnival disguised as a gypsy, is in no danger of molestation. And, as I have tried to show, indoor spaces do not necessarily provide any more

⁶ Plays like *The Dutch Lover* or *The Rover* are even predominantly set outdoors.

⁷ See also Dagny Boebel (1996, 64–66). She also argues that Florinda's internalization of the sentimental construction of womanhood makes her "the perfect victim" (64).

protection. Besides, if women risk their honor in these outdoor spaces, so do men, because they frequently get involved in duels and brawls testing their strength and courage, quite apart from the danger of being culled by thieving prostitutes or other swindlers (as, for instance, in *The False Count* and *The Feign'd Curtizans*).

Churches were one of the few public spaces women of rank could attend alone without endangering their reputations, but in Restoration plays they are places of sexual intrigue, not religious devotion—so much so that, like Hippolita's father in Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing Master* (1673, I. 1),⁸ for fear of being cuckolded Sir Feeble in *The Lucky Chance* tries to forbid his bride to attend the service (1687, I. 3). No matter whether Anglicans, Catholics or Dissenters—lechery is rife everywhere. The rake in *The City Heiress* has an assignation in an Anglican Church with a woman who, he hopes, will prove a willing “sinner” (1682, I. 1). One of the Catholic heroines in *The Emperor of the Moon* is so taken with all the well-dressed beaux at the chapel that she has no thought to spare for heaven, but does “nothing but admire its handy work” (1687, I.1). In *Sir Patient Fancy* and *The Roundheads* we hear that lustful Nonconformist Elders sexually harass female worshippers. And, as already mentioned, Miranda, the Fair Jilt, tries to seduce a priest in the sacristy.

Miranda is later pilloried for attempted murder and hence exposed to one of the worst forms of shaming a woman of rank could face. Her accomplice is hanged.

[...] she was found guilty, and both receiv'd Sentence; the Page to be hang'd, till he was dead, on a Gibbet in the Market-place; and the Princess to stand under the Gibbet, with a Rope about her Neck, the other End of which was to be fasten'd to the Gibbet where the Page was hanging; and to have an Inscription in large Characters upon her Back and Breast, of the Cause why: Where she was to stand from Ten in the Morning, to Twelve. (*The Fair Jilt* 1688, 97)⁹

Public punishments and executions, indeed, were popular spectacles, but Behn rarely described such scenes; this short story, however, features two executions (one of them botched), both

⁸ All citations of Wycherley's plays are from Chadwyck-Healey's *ED* database.

⁹ All citations of Behn's narratives are from Chadwyck-Healey's *Early English Prose Fiction* [EPPF] database.

involving male accomplices of the protagonist, who herself is only pilloried. Yet she manages to turn even this public humiliation into a pageant of her beauty and wealth: she appears, dressed to kill, in a velvet gown embroidered all over with diamonds and a train of servants and footmen following her.

A Gentleman carry'd her great Velvet Cushion before her, on which her Prayer-Book, embroider'd, was laid; her Train was born up by a Page [...]. When they arriv'd to the Place of Execution, the Cushion was laid on the Ground [...] and the Princess stood on the Cushion, with her Prayer-Book in her Hand, and a Priest by her Side; and was accordingly ty'd up to the Gibbet. (*The Fair Jilt* 1688, 99)

Let us now take a closer look at the kinds of outdoor locations described in Behn's comedies. As in the case of her indoor descriptions, Behn's stage directions concerning outdoor locations remain vague. The scenes are laid in a "garden" or a "street," and once inside a church (*The Second Part of the Rover* 1681, I. 2) or on board a ship (*The False Count* 1682, IV. 1), but no details are specified—for the obvious reason that set pieces of scenery had to make do for all kinds of outdoor locations. While scenic descriptions are rare, the movements of the characters are precisely choreographed in the stage directions, as in the farcical scene in the street at night in *The Feign'd Curtizans*, in which characters grope around in the dark, run against each other, and fight without being able to see their opponents.

*Tickletext retiring hastily runs against Octavio, who is just entering, almost beats him down, Oct. strikes him a good blow, beats him back and draws: Tick. gets close up in a corner of the stage, Oct. gropes for him as Galliard does, and both meet and fight with each other [...]. Enter Sir Signal [...] with a dark Lanthorn [...]. Advancing softly, and groping with his hands, meets the point of Oct. sword, as he is groping for Gall [...]. Hops to the door: And feeling for his way with his out-strecht Arms, runs his Lanthorn in Julio's face who is just entering; finds he's oppos'd with a good push backward, and slips aside into a corner over against Tickletext. (*The Feign'd Curtizans* 1679, III. 1)*

Behn can also be quite particular when it comes to specific stage props. Thus a foolish suitor stages a serenade on top of an elephant in *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678, III. 1). *The Emperor of the Moon* asks for a "Street, with the Town Gate, where an Officer stands with a Staff like a London Constable. Enter Harlequin riding in a Calash, comes through the Gate towards the Stage, dress'd like a Gentleman sitting in it" (1687, III.

1). The scene is set in Naples, but, as the reference to the London Constable makes clear, Behn was not interested in geographical veracity, but in fact targets contemporary English follies even in plays set on the continent.

As far as the geography of London is concerned, Restoration playwrights frequently mention—without describing—fashionable outdoor spaces like St. James' Park or Mulberry Gardens. In Etherege's *Man of Mode* the characters meet in the Mall,¹⁰ and in Wycherley's *Country Wife* (III. 1) the notorious Horner kisses Mrs Pinchwife in the Exchange. Behn, too, refers to well-known locations such as Covent Garden, a fashionable entertainment district, but also renowned for its prostitutes (e.g., *The Town Fopp*) or Lincoln's Inn Fields (e.g., *The Younger Brother*), and indicates the social standing of her characters by means of their London residence. Her plays, like those of all Restoration dramatists, are addressed to a sophisticated London audience well aware of the social and ideological implications of particular locations. The mere mention of a London address, a favorite coffee house or recreation space, could suggest the rank, profession, political affiliation and moral standing of dramatis personae. London's urban geography, at the time, can roughly be divided into the City proper, the Town, and the Court. The Court resided in the palace of Whitehall, in the district of Westminster, in the West of London. Though the characters are frequently persons of rank, Behn's comedies are never set at the English Court; though a few tragic plays and narratives are set in foreign courts, usually at some unspecified time in the past.¹¹

Conceived as a contrast to the court, the term "City," in Restoration England, signified the chartered City of London, which had its own administrative council, elected by the inhabitants, not the king. The City was the center of trade and commerce, but it was also the stronghold of the Whig opposition to the Tory court party, and housed many Puritans and recalcitrant adherents of the Commonwealth (Wall 1998, 152) who objected to the policies of the Stuart Kings. The so-called "cits," that is, the inhabitants of the City,

¹⁰ See *To the Mall and the Park/Where we love till 'tis dark* [...] (*The Man of Mode* 1676, IV. 1). Etherege's play has been quoted from Chadwyck-Healey's ED database.

¹¹ The courts of Spain, France, Florence, and Portugal, respectively, only appear in tragedies, tragi-comedies or tragic narratives set in a distant past, such as *Abdelazar*, *The Forc'd Marriage*, *The Amorous Prince* or "Agnes de Castro."

were hence regarded as fair game in Restoration comedy for the sexual forays of young Royalists, who cuckolded the merchants and tradesmen and thereby symbolically proved the superior potency of their political convictions. In between the Court and the City was the so-called Town, the area of the theatres in Covent Garden and Lincoln's Inn Fields, and the New Exchange in the Strand, where luxury goods were sold. As most playwrights themselves were members of the cultural elite or even the aristocracy, Restoration comedies are generally located in these fashionable recreation spaces and in the parks frequented by the nobility – rather than in the City, whose middle-class inhabitants, as Wall (1998, 149) reminds us, only became acceptable heroes in the eighteenth century. How Behn, whose father had been a barber, became immersed in these genteel literary circles is not quite clear, but biographers assume that she was introduced to them by Col. Colepeper, who, in contemporaneous parlance, was her foster-brother because her mother had been his wet-nurse (Todd 1996, 13). Behn shared the Tories' aversion towards the City, but nonetheless set several plays there. In all of them she ridicules Whiggish citizens that dabble in treasonous politics.

Behn's London city comedies – indeed, also several comedies set abroad, in Naples or Cadiz – are thus Tory propaganda, attacking the nouveau riche merchant class as political enemies. Politics, however, rarely is in the foreground of her plays, although many scholars have discovered a hidden political agenda; rather, Whig sympathies in general provide an implicit justification why these traders and merchants should be cheated and cuckolded. In *The City Heiress*, for instance, Sir Timothy Treatall, “an old seditious Knight” modelled on the Whig leader Shaftesbury, “keeps open house for Commonwealthmen and true blue Protestants” (1682, Actors Names), but in fact craves the crown of Poland. He is robbed by his royalist nephew and tricked into marrying the latter's whore. The zealous Nonconformist Sir Patient Fancy probably received his title during the Commonwealth and is “vainly proud” of “his Rebellious opinion, for his Religion means nothing but that [...]” (1678, II. 1). The two old aldermen in *The Luckey Chance* have no moral scruples about ruining young cavaliers financially, but fearfully gape at each other when they are supposed to hurry to the Guild Hall because the City is purportedly up in Arms about a new plot (1687, III. 1) – a satirical jibe at the various Whig-engendered plots of the time, from

the Popish Plot (1678–1681) and Exclusion Crisis (1678–1681) to the Rye House Plot (1683). Inhabitants of the City in Behn’s plays are thus portrayed as both potentially treasonous and politically incompetent. A greater space is given to politics in the novel *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*, which features Charles II’s illegitimate son, The Duke of Monmouth, in the guise of Cesario, who is persuaded by his mistress to trust in foolish oracles, starts a rebellion against his father, but proves militarily inept.

In contrast, most of Behn’s royalist heroes do not directly engage in political plotting.¹² In *The Rover*, the fact that the English cavaliers are exiled during the Commonwealth vouches for their loyalty and character, and the eponymous hero even captains the ship transporting the Stuart Prince; but politics is not a major theme. In a play also set during the Commonwealth, two young royalists wage a cuckolding war (rather than a political campaign) against the eponymous Roundheads. And the very fact that he hates his Whig uncle is meant to exonerate the rather unpleasant rakish hero in *The City Heiress*. Though the Whigs are reviled, however, kings are not always painted positively in Behn’s works, but are tyrannical (as in *The Forc’d Marriage* or the story “Agnes de Castro,” or lecherous, like Oroonoko’s old grandfather).

Hitherto, when talking about the public space in the sense of politics, I have only mentioned male characters, since politics was a male domain. And yet, at the end of the century England again had two queens—Mary, who reigned jointly with her husband, William of Orange, and Anne, the last of the Stuart monarchs. Particularly at the time of Queen Anne (that is, after Behn’s death) several aristocratic women gained enormous influence—first and foremost, Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough. These women prove that although females (below a queen) were excluded from political office, their actual leverage could be considerable. Indeed, already at the time of Charles II there was wide-spread fear of the influence of his mistresses on his policies—particularly the Catholics among them were suspected of favoring an alliance with France abhorred by the majority of Protestants.

¹² This is despite the fact that *The Second Part of the Rover* was dedicated to James, Duke of York, and that Behn identifies him with Willmore.

Although Behn had undoubted sympathies for transgressive women, the portraits she paints of politically active women in her works is no more flattering than that of politically active men. The lecherous Spanish Queen in *Abdelazar* is unfit for rule and falsely denounces her own son as a bastard. The Puritan upstart Lady Lambert in *The Roundheads* craves the crown of England. Caesario's superstitious mistress in *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* has a baneful influence on his political decisions. This negative picture of women dabbling in politics is perhaps all the more surprising as Behn herself had been sent to the continent as a political agent in the 1660s to spy on the Commonwealth-men who had found refuge there. She was by no means the only female spy at the time (Marshall 2015). She was not very successful and received little thanks and insufficient money for her labor, so that she may have ended up in debtors' prison. Yet throughout her career in the theatre, she outed herself as a Tory supporter, and as the first professional female playwright was constantly in the public eye, taking her share of fierce satire and vituperation. In many of her Forewords, she stakes a claim to the same rights and treatments as male playwrights, attacking the idea of the theatre as a gendered space in which male dramatists were allowed to use a language and style which was considered unacceptable for women writers. Except for the narrator in *Oroonoko*, of whom more will be said below, none of her female characters is a (professional) writer. Most others enter the public space only to further their amours, not for professional or political reasons, and many do so in the anonymity of a disguise. But since Behn herself so forcefully laid claim to the public space, it is little wonder that she harbored sympathies for the few female characters who also openly claim it in their own right—such as the courtesan Angellica in *The Rover*, but also, in real life, the royal mistresses Nell Gwyn and Hortense Mancini, to whom Behn dedicated two of her works.¹³

The colonies

Aphra Behn was not only the first professional British woman writer, she was also the first British novelist to deal with the

¹³ *The Feign'd Curtizans* and *The History of the Nun*, respectively. Neither of these royal mistresses, however, engaged in political plotting.

transatlantic slave trade. The novel *Oroonoko* tells the story of an enslaved African prince transported to Surinam in South America, whereas the tragi-comedy *The Widdow Ranter* is set in Virginia, without, however, engaging in a debate about slavery. In imperialist texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the virgin land is notoriously gendered female, to be conquered and made productive by white male explorers and colonists. Already in the Early Modern Period, the newly discovered continent was allegorized as a female figure (Traub 2015, 25). Such a gendering of the land is not found in Behn's texts, although she, too, regards Surinam as a provider of consumer goods for the home market. In *Oroonoko*, the colonial space is racialized, as in a slave society the status of men and women depends on their ethnicity, not on their gender. I do not want to go into the much-discussed issue of race in *Oroonoko* here, but will concentrate on the gendering of spaces. And from this perspective it becomes clear that the colonial spaces in Behn's two works offer surprising possibilities to both men and women, although, as in Britain, women are excluded from participation in government.

"With more accuracy than is her wont" Behn regales her metropolitan readers with descriptions of the exotic wonders of South America, thereby participating in the "generation of geographical knowledge," for which there was a huge market (Runge 2014, 22 and 20). In Surinam, the female narrator and her family excite notice when they arrive and live in "the best house" (*Oroonoko* 1688, 152) in the colony. Yet, although they befriend prince Oroonoko, they have no power to avert his torture after the failed slave rising or to prevent his execution, which is ordered by a brutal deputy governor supported by a militia made up of the dregs of society. However, the narrator (often identified with Behn herself) does play a minor political role after all. She entertains the royal African couple in her house, but at the same time acts as a kind of spy on him, reporting to the colonists his impatience to be set free: she thus plays a role similar to that which Behn herself enacted in the Low Countries. Nonetheless, her political influence is negligible. But the colonial space affords other freedoms to the narrator unheard of at home: for once, she becomes the biographer of a prince. Although her feigned regret that, after the death of all sympathetic male eyewitnesses, "only a Female pen" (*Oroonoko* 1688, 108) remains to record Oroonoko's story seems to echo the "British dismissal of female history" (Runge 2014, 26), the narrator, in fact, assertively

inserts herself into the contemporary tradition of life writing, which was considered a male domain. She also acts as an amateur zoologist, describing in detail the strange South American animals and proudly telling the reader that she donated her collection of rare insects to His Majesty's Antiquaries. Through such a gift, she participates in the scientific discourses of the time, to which women as a rule did not contribute. She also describes the life and customs of the native Caribs, and goes on an adventurous trip into the jungle to visit a remote indigenous tribe. And she ventures on tiger hunts. Indeed, the outdoor space is fully accessible to the narrator: she joins in the men's pastime, without being censured for transgression. On the other hand, when the slave rebellion breaks out, she fearfully flees down river, assuming the character of a timid maiden she has shunned in all other parts of the narrative. Surinam even gives agency to Oroonoko's wife Imoinda – more so than Coramantien in Africa, her birthplace: in Coramantien, she could not defend herself from being forced into the old king's harem; however, once the slave rebellion breaks out in Surinam, she bravely fights with bows and arrows at her husband's side and even wounds the villainous deputy governor. However, the fact that the pregnant Imoinda later acquiesces in being killed by her husband, to prevent her violation by the rabble and the enslavement of their child, severely brackets the African woman's agency.

The issue of race is less prominent in *The Widow Ranter*. Bacon and the Indians against whom he fights share the same aristocratic culture and behave with the same chivalry. In this play, too, however, women enter the public space as a matter of course: the Indian Queen takes part in the battle and is killed, and the eponymous heroine disguises herself as a man and challenges her lover to a duel.¹⁴ Although the fighting of cross-dressed heroines is a conventional motif in Restoration drama, Ranter's attitude is not. She plans to "beat the Rascal" – which shocks her maid: "Beat him Madam? What a woman beat a Lieutenant General [...]. But if he should kill you Madam?" – upon which Ranter assures her: "I'll take care to make it as Comical a Duel as the best of 'em, as much in Love as I am, I do not intend to dy it's Martyr" (*The Widow Ranter* 1690, IV. 2).

¹⁴ Cross-dressed heroines also engage in sword-fighting in *The Dutch Lover* or *The Feign'd Curtizans* to aid or challenge their lovers.

Although her low birth is generally known and her behavior is quite unlady-like—she smokes and drinks—Ranter is socially accepted in Virginia. Colonial society is much less socially segregated than in Britain: Ranter invites the local gentry to her house as well as the hoi polloi who have become counsellors and Justices of Peace in America. These men serve on the colonial council, although they come from the lowest social classes, and some are even transported criminals. It is thus in the field of social mobility that the colonies provide the most ample opportunities to white settlers: the Widow Ranter, a former indentured servant, was bought by a rich planter, who married her and left her a wealthy widow. In the end she marries a dashing lieutenant general, rising into the local gentry. Such a career would have been difficult to imagine in Britain—though I suspect that even there her fortune of 50,000 pounds would have made many a younger brother forget about her descent. Another rich widow of un-genteel birth in the play marries a nobleman’s second son and thus climbs the social ladder.¹⁵

Men, too,—whether they be penniless younger brothers or transported rogues—can gain wealth in America and rise in social class—the latter much to Behn’s displeasure, who disdains the influence of the rabble on the colonial government and deplures “the disastrous outcome of transporting English criminals to build new English places abroad” (Runge 2014, 29). These characters behave treacherously and unscrupulously, making a farce of justice—although some putative gentlemen like the deputy governor in *Oroonoko* are really no better. In the latter narrative Behn almost gloats over the fact that many of these villains got their comeuppance when the Dutch took over Surinam—deeply though she regrets the loss of the colony. In the comedy, her tone is more conciliatory. The low-class counsellors are removed from office, and men from the traditional British elite—officers and second sons of the gentry—take their place. But the riff-raff remains in Virginia, a tolerated part of the population, and continues to thrive.

¹⁵ These characters’ social advancement stands in marked contrast to the fact that, in general, the Caribbean was not a place for eighteenth-century women to make a fortune in (Hultquist 2014, 41).

Conclusion

Male characters in Behn's works believe in the gendering of spaces in so far as they heedlessly classify women's morals and social position on the basis of the space in which they move. Men themselves, however, think they can lord it over private and public spaces alike. But Behn's female characters will not be confined and controlled. To be sure, Behn was keenly aware that both the law and social practice disadvantaged women and limited their freedom. In most of her plays, however, women successfully negotiate the private, public and colonial spaces, using their sexual attraction and wit to get what they want. Behn thus questions the gendering of spaces and the power and disempowerment that go with it. The house, the town and the colonies offer chances and threats to both men and women. And Behn delights in portraying women who overcome the obstacles of social conventions and take their fates into their own hands.

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Author's contact: Margarete.Rubik@univie.ac.at

Postal address: Department of English and American Studies – Campus der Universität Wien, Hof 8.3 – Spitalgasse 2-4 – 1090 Wien – Austria

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