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Aphra Behn's Courtesans and Crossdressing Women: An Analysis of Gender and Power in 17th Century Literature

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Abstract

The 17th century author and playwright Aphra Behn used her writing talents to demonstrate her knowledge of gender as a liberator and oppressor in Western European society. Behn wrote tales in which her female characters were imbued with her knowledge of the time and place Behn lived. Thus, the playwright and author created female characters in her works who, armed with Behn's knowledge, intentionally subverted or emphasized their gender roles to obtain social power and authority that they would conventionally lack in Behn's world. This social strategy is seen in Behn's play The Feigned Courtesans where her characters Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia gain social mobility by feigning the role of the courtesan and crossdressing as men, reinforcing and undermining the gender binary in the process. This paper takes an analytical approach through feminist, queer, and anthropological lenses to deduce how and why Behn's female characters in The Feigned Courtesans conformed and strayed from their gendered world in order to obtain power in previously unobtainable places.

1. Introduction

According to Judith Butler, "The body is only known through its gendered appearance" (Butler

1997, 406). Members of society are instructed to build perceptions of gender and, with these perceptions, are instructed to become actors of gender. This paper looks at two types of actors and how they work in tandem—the Butlerian coined "actors" of gender who act via instruction from societal influence, and the type of actors who perform for media consumption and entertainment. These two types of "performances"—socially constructed and for entertainment and consumption—are intertwined at their very cores, as on-stage performances will reflect exaggerated perceptions of off-stage socially constructed gender roles. Media formats such as plays, movies, and television rely on the gender binary to establish what body is performing what gendered appearance. It is by fitting into this binary system that allows for the media-based actors to conform to what society sees and recognizes as familiar, natural, and "normal". But accounts of gender subversion exist within this type of media as well. For example, cross-dressing performances eliminate the traditional gender binary and establishes a newly formed understanding of what body is associated with what gender.

In Aphra Behn's play *The Feigned Courtesans*, the concept of identity, gender performance, and gender roles are prominent throughout as the same three female characters—Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia—mask their true identi-

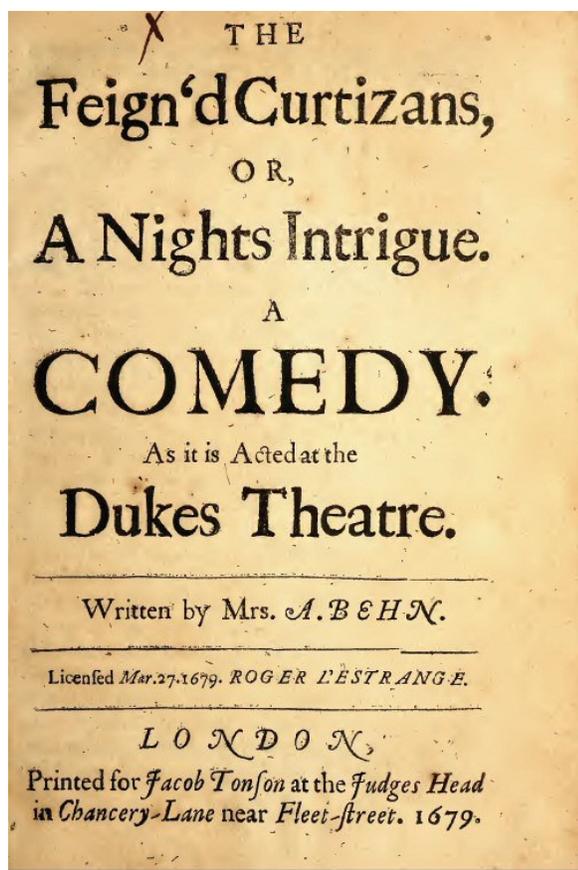


Figure 1. Aphra Behn, Title Page of “The Feign’d Curtizans, or, A Nights Intrigue.” 1679, Print, London.

ties by disguising themselves as men and courtesans. Both identities adopted by these women—the crossdresser and the courtesan—are performances that subvert and undermine the power structures within the play. This social sabotage can occur because these identities allow for the disguised characters to move in and out of spaces they normally would not inhabit, regardless of the stigma that may be attached to their masquerades. For example, the courtesan is the prostitute, enamored by men but demonized by society (Clark 1984, 105); and yet in Behn’s play, the role of the courtesan is used as an empowering tool to shield the identities of the main three female characters. Similar can be said when the same female characters cross-dress as men—by abandoning their original roles as women of quality (Behn 2008,

90), Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia can engage with the male characters of the play in ways that places them outside of their expected female sphere. In *The Feigned Courtesans*, the lines of identity are blurred as three women of quality alternate between their disguises as courtesans and men to achieve the same goal—establish power and protect their identities in the face of oppression. In adopting these new personalities, the main female characters in Behn’s play demonstrate upward social mobility as they subvert their gender roles by acting as men (Nussbaum 2016) or gain bodily autonomy as they perform as the infamous and desired courtesan. These two roles allow Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia to obtain social authority and protection in previously unobtainable places.

2. The Importance, and Non-Importance, of Gender

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance originally proposed nearly thirty years ago in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* attempts to explain the social construction of sex, gender, and the body. The social construction of gender results in a body that is also socially constructed—labels given to individuals upon birth are a direct product of categorizing people within a binary system as per the construction of a binary society. These labels are thus performed according to how society dictates they must be performed (Butler 1990, 6). According to Butler, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler 1990, 10). Without these labels and associations, gender and sex do not exist—but it can be argued that by embracing gender and sex, one’s analytical and storytelling ability can demonstrate what it means to subvert those cat-

egories as seen in Behn's work. By emphasizing sex and gender, Behn uses the theory of gender performativity to create "non-normative" and subversive roles (Morris 1995, 573). While Butler's criticism of the construction of sex and gender may seem counterintuitive in comparison to Behn's gender-reliant work, Butler's analysis can be utilized to accentuate the meaning of gender in a media-based format in which the characters are intended to take on new gender roles or increase the way in which society perceives their gender performance.

Throughout *The Feigned Courtesans*, gendered behavior, expression, and vernacular are used consistently to show the personalities and social roles of the characters. Without the very strict indication and explanation of gender in the play, the characters, both male and female, would not exist within a world that shows hierarchy of gender, which can also be perceived as a hierarchy of power. Before the play even begins, this hierarchy is established as the characters are introduced, with the men at the top of the playbill and the women at the bottom (Behn 2008, 90). Additionally, the subversion that the female characters in Behn's play fall into via crossdressing would not be prominent without the clear-cut formation of the gender binary within Behn's work. Every specification of a woman wearing man's clothes, of a female character being called a "whore", of men dueling over a woman, would be moot points without the gendered vernacular and behavior that accompanied each character—and it is that exact gendered world that the characters of *The Feigned Courtesans* live in that also creates a world in which gender subversion can exist.

Behn's hyper-gendered reality is an example of the anthropology of making difference and the anthropology of decomposing difference. The cultural implications that demand certain constructions of gender and gendered subjects is what composes the anthropology of making difference, which often includes "detailed discussions of bodily techniques and of ideological or symbolic rep-

resentations that motivate and valorize particular forms of difference" (Morris 1995, 573). The anthropology of decomposing difference, on the other hand, focuses on "the institutions of ambiguity" (Morris 1995, 574). The courtesan and crossdressing roles in *The Feigned Courtesans* fall into both categories respectively. The gendered *differences* set in place from the beginning of the play mark the bodily gendered differences between the characters, in the case of the hyper-feminine courtesans, thus allowing them to enter spaces in which these differences are thus "decomposed" when crossdressing occurs. The plays' heavy reliance on what it means to be a man and a woman, what the differences are, and how one performs those differences can allow for gender variance to occur in ways it could not if gender was not so strictly enforced.

3. Behn's Crossdressing Women

Crossdressing performances allow for a restructuring of what is commonly understood in a society that relies on a gender binary to organize and categorize people into two separate groups. For a biologically female-sexed person to dress and perform in a man's role defies the socially constructed gender association of "female-sexed" equating "woman", thus subverting gender roles and identities in a way that reshapes what is traditionally known and expected. According to Petri Hoppu, crossdressing men in historic contexts were common until the mid-19th century as women became more involved in the theater (Hoppu 2014, 329). The theater, as woman entered it, became more "feminine", and thus men were less likely to be appreciated on stage, even as crossdressers. But while this shift altered the historically known commonalities of theater-gender dynamics, crossdressing performances remained. These roles would become more common for women to undertake than men due to the societal implications of a man dressing as a woman (Friedman-Romell 1995, 464). For women, the

positive consequences of crossdressing opportunities would allow for social mobility not normally achievable, both on- and off-stage in binary-driven societies.

In *The Feigned Courtesans*, the appearance of crossdressing women is not merely done for the sake of the plot—rather, Behn’s utilization of crossdressing women defied the societal roles in England off-stage, according to Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler (1997). The theater was “the site of intense cultural and ideological negotiations involving the testing and contesting of conventional social roles and cultural categories such as race, class, and gender” (Clark & Sponsler 1997, 321). This defiance caused a shift in power—particularly for women. Behn’s crossdressing women demonstrated a performance of power that was not easily obtainable outside of the English theater—and the performances on stage, it can be argued, reflect a European society where women found themselves far less powerful than men. The crossdressing woman, as a gender subverted person, can obtain more power and mobility on stage as she is no longer seen as a woman amongst her fellow characters. West and Zimmerman’s *Doing Gender* states that gender emerges as, “an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (West & Zimmerman 1987, 126). Despite being an example of gender subversion, the crossdressing women in Behn’s play staunchly fit the masculine roles they are playing as. In doing this, they are taking on a gender role that, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), legitimizes them in social arrangements, bolstering their credibility amongst the other male characters. This is highly important within the context of the play as the female characters Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia need this credibility to navigate through their plot-driven troubles that are reflections of the lack of autonomy that women faced during Behn’s time.

As Jacqueline Pearson explains in her piece, *Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra*

Behn, “The fact that women are deprived of authority even over their own lives seems to make it impossible for them, even with the best intentions, to adhere to conventional moral codes” (Pearson 1991, 51). *The Feigned Courtesans* is an example of this—Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia don men’s clothes to interact with the other men in the play. At certain moments, it is to avoid confrontation with an arranged marriage (Behn 2008, 95)—in other moments, it is to infiltrate a situation to gain insight from other characters and plot accordingly (Behn 2008, 170). All of these actions, regardless of intention, as Pearson explains, does not conform to the moral and social expectations of society (Pearson 1991, 51). For a woman to step outside of her sphere and enter that of a man’s by pretending to be one is to enter a world that women are prohibited from. In a time where women could perform on stage and even become playwrights, further power was established within the English theater as women took on roles where they played as men to place themselves as equal to their male actor counterparts and their male characters.

The crossdressers on the English stage in 17th and 18th century England not only performed their roles as actors but performed the social roles and expectations of gender that they were crossdressing as. Men previously played all roles on the English stage (Clark and Sponsler 1997, 319), but it was the idea of men crossdressing within English society and not on the stage that frightened the general populous. Crossdressing men were often considered “reduced, powerless, or degenerate because their masculine identity itself was fluid, pliable, and unstable” (Cressy 1996, 442). The performer-audience dynamic should be a symbiotic relationship, as the performers must appease the audience, and the audience gives feedback to the performers. As Patricia E. Sawin (2002) asks, “What (culturally defined) emotions do performers and audience members feel? How are these connected to reasons for performing and for attending, enjoying, and approving or disapproving

of certain approaches?" (Sawin 2002, 30). As the 18th century rolled in, men's crossdressing roles faded out of normalcy due to "New, restrained codes of masculine behavior" (Friedman-Romell 1995, 465), coinciding with an increased demand for "sex determining gender behavior and sexual desire" (Friedman-Romell 1995, 467). The only acceptance of a men's crossdressing role was if "the male actors . . . parodied women" (Friedman-Romell 1995, 467). While a woman's crossdressing role was distinguished on the English stage by the 18th century, usually for plot points such as marriage, a lover, or revenge (Friedman-Romell 1995, 464), the crossdressing woman was a type of subversion that could also subliminally show itself as a demand and desire for power via the role of the character. The stigmatization men crossdressers faced may have provided women actors more opportunity to expand their acting repertoire while actively and openly subverting gender roles.

While Friedman and Romell's (1995, 465-7) points are crucial to understanding the historical context of the English theater, it can be further argued from a feminist and anthropological standpoint that there are more complexities regarding gender and power when women crossdressed rather than the sole assumption that crossdressing women had become a normalized trope on the English stage (Friedman-Romell 1995, 464). For women actors to dress up as men, their characters are adopting roles that allow them to further move through society in ways that privilege and benefit them. This upward social mobility is in stark contrast to the pre-disguised Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia who were well off women. This information regarding their social statuses can be assumed from Laura's character info which states she was, "a young lady of quality" (Behn 2008, 90), and Marcella's arranged marriage to Octavio, "a young count" (Behn 2008, 90). By utilizing the anthropology of decomposing difference, the crossdressing women of *The Feigned Courtesans* broke down what is culturally understood in the binary system, so they may inhabit a space of am-

biguity in the gendered institution of society (Morris 1995, 574). To move around as a man, or disguised as one, has provided the three women with more opportunities to get close to the ones they desire, such as Laura being able to hide away from her husband-to-be and instead befriend Galliard (Behn 2008, 117), the man she yearns for. This crossdressing role also allowed for Marcella to relay information to Fillamour, her lover, to truly test his loyalty and devotion to her (Behn 2008, 129), and allows Cornelia to attempt to prevent Laura and Galliard from sleeping together (Behn 2008, 170). There are even moments of empowerment within the stage direction that declares Marcella sword fighting alongside Galliard and Fillamour against Julio and her husband-to-be Octavio (Behn 2008, 138). By dressing as men, Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia obtain more opportunities to move through society without scrutiny or fear of those around them.

4. Behn's Courtesans

The character Marcella in Behn's *The Feigned Courtesans* disguises herself as a courtesan and a man—and, in both cases, she is inhabiting a new position of status within the gender hierarchy. Marcella, as a courtesan, is regarded as a "fine, desirable, expensive whore" (Behn 2008, 115) by Galliard, friend of Harry Fillamour who is the lover to the undisguised, non-courtesan, non-crossdressing Marcella. Marcella's disguise as a courtesan isn't a fruitless one as she hides in plain sight from her lover—her disguise is used to ensure Fillamour's devotion to her, and to escape her arranged marriage to the brash and angry Octavio. After she ran away from Viterbo to Rome, her disguise hides all indication of who she was back in Viterbo as she enters the reviled and revered world of the courtesan (Clark 1984, 102). The anthropology of making difference resides on this side of the spectrum with the courtesan, opposite of the female crossdressing roles that are coupled with the anthropology of decom-

posing difference. The techniques utilized by the courtesan is hyper-feminine as opposed to the role of the female crossdresser—given this, the anthropology of making difference allows one to understand the order and differences established by culture that creates the subject of the courtesan (Morris 1995, 573). The courtesan does not stray from what is culturally understood as feminine—because of this, gender conforms to what society understands as acceptable, despite the profession being socially stigmatized.

According to T.J. Clark's analysis of Manet's *Olympia*, the then-infamous painting of a courtesan, the social consensus of that occupation and women within that occupation was one of disgust and hatred. But, as Clark discusses, this hated profession had a singular advantage that non-courtesans did not have. According to Clark, the courtesan, "was the site of absolute degradation and dominance, the place where the body became at last an exchange value, a perfect and complete commodity, and thus took on the power of such things in a world where they were all-powerful" (Clark 1984, 102). This type of power, as the hyperfeminine courtesan, is similar to that of the gender subverting crossdresser. The body, shaped by society to conform to certain roles and expectations, is shaped by the courtesan to become a commodity to purchase—but, the courtesan is the one under complete control of who can purchase her, thus taking her autonomy back from a society that attempted to mold her into a powerless non-courtesan woman. For Cornelia, Laura Lucretia, and Marcella, to adopt the false identities of the courtesan placed them in a vulnerable, and yet powerful position. For Cornelia and Laura specifically, the power obtained was through their sexuality and femininity—yet another emphasis on the importance of gender throughout the play. Laura has desires for a man other than her husband-to-be and seeks to obtain him through her many disguises (Behn 2008, 95), and Cornelia is looking for excitement in a "dull, virtuous life" (Behn 2008, 111). While both women use their sexual-

ities more than Marcella, the power gained in becoming a courtesan is power that shapes itself for whomever wields it. For Cornelia and Marcella, returning to Viterbo means Marcella would have to marry a man she does not love, and Cornelia would be forced to enter a convent and feel like a "bird in a cage" (Behn 2008, 112). For Laura, to abandon the role of the courtesan means she must also marry someone she does not love and abandon the power she has obtained over her body and sexuality. To not be courtesans is to lose autonomy, and to lose autonomy is to conform to the social expectations of the female sex.

5. Behn's Silenced Women

It is not until the end of the play that the reader sees these characters falling victim to a forced marriage or domestic conformity as they shed their roles as courtesans and men. As explained by Peggy Thompson in *Closure and Subversion in Behn's Comedies*, "The restrictive, profoundly unfair implications of the marriages concluding many romantic comedies must have been particularly uncongenial to Behn . . . but Behn catered to public taste" (Thompson 1996, 75). After Laura's struggle to have Galliard reciprocate her love for him, she is still given to her arranged husband-to-be Julio, asking herself, "And must I, must I force my heart to yield?" (Behn 2008, 178). For Marcella, her lover Fillamour experienced turbulent confusion and disgust towards the profession of the courtesan and yet found himself increasingly interested in Marcella's courtesan persona of Euphemia. Marcella, hiding behind Euphemia's mask, angrily concluded that Fillamour did not have the conviction to be faithful to her due to his interest in her courtesan disguise. But after shedding her identities as courtesan and crossdresser, Marcella is given to Fillamour by her brother Julio, and she never again utters a word in the play (Behn 2008, 179). Even Cornelia, who refused to be held back by marriage, had found herself in a place of social con-

formity as her feelings for Galliard were reciprocated by him. Ultimately, though, their agreement concluded slightly more favorably as Cornelia agreed to be the most “mistress-like wife” (Behn 2008, 179). The compulsory marriage for all of the characters in Behn’s play shows where the power has fallen to—or risen to—as it was stripped from the women and given to the men. As Thompson further explains, “Indeed, by marking the conclusion of a play, such marriages—once we are made to recognize their emotional and physical consequences—are more haunting critiques than those that are ultimately avoided or annulled, and they provide none but the bitterest ‘sense of an ending’”, further referencing Laura Lucretia’s fate as a bittersweet conclusion (Thompson 1996, 78). The compulsory marriage, the marriage without consent or equality, shows how these women, once stripped of their breeches, swords, and bustiers, become silent and obedient as they were always intended to be.

6. Conclusion

Behn did not necessarily push boundaries by writing roles where women crossdressed in her plays (Friedman-Romell 1995, 464). Instead, it was her character’s intentions for crossdressing, and how they engaged in their newfound power that turns this seemingly common 18th century trope into one that generates conversation regarding gender and power. In understanding the importance of gender and the strict enforcement of the gender binary, Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura Lucretia had the capability to step outside of their designated gendered boxes to enter a new one via crossdressing, which granted them access to power that was previously unobtainable. Similar can be said about the adopted courtesan role—despite remaining within their female spheres, Marcella, Cornelia, and Laura took on a persona that disguised their identities as women of quality (Behn 2008, 90), thus giving them the opportunity to hide themselves from unwanted forced mar-



Figure 2. George Scharf. Sketch of Aphra Behn. 1820-1895.

riages, in the case of Marcella and Laura (Behn 2008, 95;112), and from joining a convent, as seen with Cornelia (Behn 2008, 112). Cornelia, Laura, and Marcella, in their disguises, subvert and undermine the power structures within *The Feigned Courtesans* and, by association, Western Europe, where women were seen as property for a man to own, chase down, or obtain through force as seen in Behn’s play. But with her extensive knowledge of what it meant to be an underappreciated and objectified woman in her time, Behn armed her fellow women with swords and their sexualities, so they could finally see what it meant to have the power to fight back.

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