Chapter 9: "A new power that may the old supply": Aphra Behn's *Abdelaz'r, or The Moor's Revenge*.


Although Aphra Behn is probably one of the most famous women writers of the Restoration period, her life is surrounded by mysteries. Little is known about her birth, background and youth. According to *The Life and Memoirs of Mrs Behn*, written by "a Gentlewoman of her Acquaintance" (A4v), and published in one volume with *The Histories and Novels of the Late Ingenious Mrs Behn* (1696), Aphra Behn was "a Gentlewoman by Birth, of a good Family in the City of Canterbury, in Kent; her paternal Name was Johnson, whose Relation to the Lord Willoughby, drew him for the advantageous Post of Lieutenant-General of many isles, besides the Continent of Surinam" (1696, A4v). However, many scholars question the reliability of this information. They suggest that the writer was born as Aphra Johnson between 1637 and 1643. In their view Behn was the daughter of a wet-nurse and Bartholomew Johnson, who was a barber and later became one of the overseers of the poor for St Margaret's, a parish in central Canterbury.¹ She acquired the surname Behn through her marriage to the Dutch merchant sailor Johan Behn, who died only a few years after their wedding.²

As a young seventeenth-century woman, Aphra Behn led an anomalous existence. She undertook the dangerous voyage to the West Indies, became involved in a slave rebellion there, and visited a tribe of Indians who had never before seen Europeans. Later she became a spy for Charles II against the Dutch, and, due to expenses incurred in service of the king, Behn was imprisoned as a debtor. She was a political activist who argued the Royalist point of view in public.³ She had a long-term sexual relationship with Jack Hoyle, in spite of not being married to him.⁴ Having debts and no husband to secure an income, Behn took up the pen and became a professional writer in order to earn her bread. As one of the first professional women writers, Behn appears to have relied on the education that she had received as a child. Whether due to her family's social status or her family's relation to the Colepeper family, Behn seems to have received a gentlewoman's education. There are numerous references to Greek and Roman mythology, to classical philosophy, poetry, and

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¹ These scholars' view is confirmed by the Colonel Thomas Colepeper, who declared that Aphra's mother had been his wet-nurse. See Colepeper 7591. See also Todd, 1996, 13-15.
² As Janet Todd points out, "no wedding of a Behn is recorded in London, but records are incomplete and it might have taken place elsewhere in Britain or on the Continent" (1996, 68).
³ See Goreau, 1980, 3.
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drama in her later literary work. She also paraphrased Ovid's *Epistle of Oenone to Paris*, suggesting that she must have had a fair amount of instruction in the classics.\(^5\)

Although Behn took up the "feminine" genre of translation, and celebrated motherhood in her *Two Congratulatory Poems to her Most sacred majesties, The First Occasioned bon the Universal Hopes of all Loyal persons for a Prince of Wales, The Second, on the Happy Birth of the prince* (1688),\(^6\) most of Behn's writings signal a move away from the gender norms of femininity.\(^7\) In her preface to the comedy *The Lucky Chance* (1686) Behn argues: "I value Fame as much as if I had been born a *Hero*" (preface). Behn's ambitious claim to the status of hero implies that she privileges obtaining the masculine prerogative of literary fame over the preservation of her fame as a woman, that is, her reputation of chastity.\(^8\) She appears unconcerned about the imputations of wantonness that her profession as a woman writer may elicit, and disregards the feminine norm that a woman should be silent in order to protect her good name. In this preface Behn argues:

> All I ask, is the Privilege for my Masculine Part the Poet in me (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv'd in….(1686, preface)

Behn's idea of a "Masculine part, the poet in me" can be compared to Queen Elizabeth's words in her "Armada Speech to the Troops at Tilbury, August 9, 1588": "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king" (2000, 326). Behn's use of the term "my Masculine Part the Poet in me" exposes the cultural construction of writing as a gendered activity: she argues that as a member of the female sex she may have "masculine" capacities and desires.\(^9\) Claiming that she has a "masculine" poetic part inside her, Behn suggests that the feminine gender society has imposed upon her is only one of the parts that she may act out. She may as well take on "masculine" gender roles, since she implies that masculine and feminine gender do not naturally belong to a particular sex.\(^10\)

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\(^4\) See Goreau, 1980, 200-203.

\(^5\) Behn nevertheless expressed resentment at the ways in which her gender restricted her education: "Till now, I curt my birth, my education/ And more the scanted customs of the nation: / permitting not the female sex to thread,/ The mighty paths of learned heroes dead" (quoted in Todd, 1996, 31).

\(^6\) The prose works translated by Aphra Behn include Bonnecorese's *La Montre*, Fontenelle's *Entretien sur la pluralité des mondes*, and an incomplete version of Larochefoucauld's *Maximes*. In "A Congratulatory Poem to her Most sacred majesty on the Universal Hopes of all Loyal persons for a Prince of Wales" Behn confirms gender norms. She depicts the queen not as a significant person, but as a vessel whose role is confined to procreation: "O sacred Vessel, fraught with England's STORE!...Guard safe our Treasure to the wish'd for Shore (1688, A1v).

\(^7\) See also Langdell, 1985, 113.

\(^8\) See also Ballaster, 1992, 94.


\(^10\) See also Munns, 1991: "Rather than cross-dressing Behn double-dresses and insists that her audience/readers accept her female gender and her right to a freedom of expression and range of topics hitherto limited to male literary production...her creation of a new sexual space from which to speak" (195)…"In defining the poet in her as masculine, Behn does not deny that women can write verse. She is pointing to the cultural tradition of her
By thus demystifying gender notions, Behn transforms authorship into a role that is accessible to women as well, and consequently appropriates the literary field.11

Furthermore, as a female author Behn frequently overstepped the boundaries of feminine propriety by writing about sexual desire, and by giving the woman transported by love a speaking voice in her texts. In several of her poems Behn openly writes about sexual matters. For instance, in "Love's Power" a woman is depicted who pays her lover "with a joy for every tale" (Poems by Eminent ladies, 1755, G3v). In the light of the ambiguity of the word "tail", the young woman does not merely listen to her lover's stories with joy, but also appears to experience delight during their sexual intercourse. Similarly, in "Temple of Love" Behn assumes the voice of a male lover whose mistress does not hesitate to satisfy him sexually: "A thousand freedoms now she does imart/ Shews all her tenderness disrob'd of art,/ permits me lead her to the bow'r of bliss"(Poems by Eminent ladies, 1755, M2v-M3r).

Behn explores the issue of sexuality from both a male and a female perspective, thus taking on the different personae of the male lover or the mistress as if she were impersonating roles on a stage.12 There are two versions of the poem "Song. The Willing Mistress". In one of these versions the speaking voice is that of Amyntas who describes how he "led my Silvia to a Grove" (1994, 26) in order to seduce her. The poem also exists in a version in which the persona is a woman who describes her sexual enjoyment with Amyntas: "Amyntas led me to a grove…A many Kisses he did give;/ And I return'd the same/Which made me willing to receive/That which I dare not name" (1994, 27). This version of the poem is radical in that it allows a woman to respond both verbally and sexually to her lover's advances.13 In her poem "To Lysander" Behn takes matters even a step further, by having her female persona voice awareness of the commodification of female sexuality, and a refusal to get involved in a relationship without equality between the sexual partners: "I care not how the busy Market goes, / And scorn to Chaffer for a price/ Love does one Staple Rate on all impose…It's not enough, I gave you Heart for Heart" (1992, 92, ll.5-17).14

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11 On Behn's professionalisation of her authorship see Crompton, 1996, 130-54.
12 In this respect, Behn's adoption of male and female personae is similar to Margaret Cavendish's assumption of different role and voices in her Orations (1662). See my earlier discussion on page 165.
13 Another such poem in which Behn explores a woman's sexual pleasure is "The disappointment", a translation/adaptation of the French poem "Sur une impoissance" (1661) by de Cantenac. The poem is part of the "'imperfect enjoyment' genre" (Munns, 1999, 88), that is poems dealing with man's inadequacy and impotence.
14 See also Price, 1998, 140.
Behn's novel *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister; with the History of their Adventures In three Parts* (1684) deals with the transgressive love affair between the married Philander and his sister-in-law Silvia. The novel consists of letters between the two lovers which were found after their elopement in "their Cabinets, at their House at St. denis, where they both liv'd together" (A4v). The letters are full of lascivious descriptions with which each seeks to titillate the other, and Silvia "displays herself for conquest" (Todd, 1989, 81). While the sexual liaison between Philander and Silvia is central to this epistolatory novel, *Love Letters* also has a political subtext. Behn's representation of a transgressive love between a brother and sister- in-law reworked the elopement of Lady Henrietta Berkeley with her brother-in-law, Lord Grey of Werke, and therefore commented on current events. Furthermore, in the novel references are made to the political divide between supporters of Charles II and supporters of the Duke of Monmouth. Behn's *Love Letters* thus also signified an intrusion upon the masculine realm of politics, like many of her other writings in which she made overt political statements. Sometimes her political statements in her writings even brought her into difficulties. For instance, when Behn criticised the Duke of Monmouth's disloyalty to his father the King in her prologue to the anonymous play *Romulus and Hersilia* (1682) she was even arrested by the court, despite her loyalty to Charles II.17

Considering Behn's use of public generic modes such as drama, her defiance of the feminine norm of reputation and her engagement with politics and sexuality, it is not remarkable that many contemporary critics associated her with the stereotype of the wanton woman writer. In *The Tory Poets, a Satire* (1682, various authors) Thomas Shadwell stated that "Poetess Afra through she 's damned today/ Tomorrow will put up another Play;/ And Ot[w]a[y] must pimp to set her off" (8).18 In the anonymous "A satyr on the Modern Translators" (1684), printed in *Money Masters all Things: or, Sartrical Poems* (1698), Behn was depicted as a prostitute: "Then let her from the next inconstant lover,/ take a new copy for a second Rover/ describe the cunning of a jilting whore,/ From the ill arts herself has us'd before" (119-20).19 Behn was commonly considered a whore because of her profession as a woman writer, as is also revealed by the anxiety underlying the description of Behn in the earlier mentioned *The Life and Memoirs of Mrs Behn*. Behn's female biographer insists upon Behn's sexual virtue despite the outspokenness and verbal vivacity for which she was known:

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15 See Wiseman, 1996, 72.
16 See Wiseman, 1996, 73.
17 See Carnell, 1999, 134.
19 See also Goreau, 1989, 254.
She was mistress of all the pleasing Arts of Conversation but us'd 'em not to any but those who lou'd not Plain-dealing...For my part, I knew her intimately, and never saw ought unbecoming of just Modesty of our Sex...She was, I'm satisfy'd, a greater Honour to our Sex than all the canting Tribe of Dissemblers, that die with the false Reputation of Saints. (1696, B4v)

While underscoring Behn's virtue, her biographer at the same time undermines dominant gender representations. Stating that many women who appear modest, are in fact a "Tribe of Dissemblers" who do not deserve the reputation of sexually pure, the biographer disturbs the notion that reticent women are necessarily chaste. By extension, this idea implies that a woman who voices her views in public may be honourable as well. In other words, by challenging common ideas about womanhood, the biographer opens up the possibility for Behn to be a woman writer, yet virtuous.

Whereas Behn was ridiculed and criticised by male poets and critics, at the same time she proved to be a great inspiration to other women writers. For instance, in "An essay in defence of the Female Sex" (1696) Mary Astell mentions Aphra Behn as an example to which all women should aspire in order to become liberated from man's oppression: "and let the noble examples of the deservedly celebrated Mrs Philips and the incomparable Mrs Behn rouse their Courages, and shew mankind the great injustice of their Contempt" (E4v). The anonymous female poet "Ephelia" expresses great admiration for Behn in her Female pens on Several Occasions (1679):

> When first your strenuous polite Lines I read,  
> At once it Wonder and Amazement bred,  
> To see such things flow from a Woman's Pen  
> As might be Envy'd by the Wittiest men:  
> …A rare connexion of strong and sweet…  
> This I admir'd at, and my Pride to show...(F4v)

While "Ephelia" celebrates Behn, she also seeks to feminise her as a writer by associating Behn with notions such as gentleness, sweetness and softness: "You write so sweetly...Passions so gentle, and so well expresst" (F4v). "Ephelia's" need to feminise Behn's authorship stems from the prevalence of representations in which Behn was identified as an unnatural, as well as women writers' refutations of these conventional representations.20 After Behn's death, the subsequent generation of women dramatists paid tribute to her, either by celebrating Behn as their example in the prologues to their own plays, or by employing Behn's writings as sources for their own plays. For example, Delarivier Manley modelled her rake hero Wilmore in The Lost Lover (1696). Catherine Trotter adapted Behn's novella Agnes de

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20 Ephelia appears to have written a play herself, entitled The Royal Pair of Coxcombs, which was acted at a dancing school around 1679, but has since been lost. See Davis and Joyce, 1992, 116.
Castro for the stage in 1695, and in the prologue to the play praised Astrea, whose lays "with never dying wit, bless'd Charles's days".

9.2. Aphra Behn as a Dramatist and *Abdelaz'r, or The Moor's Revenge*.

The *Tixall Letters* is a collection of letters written by relatives of the aristocratic Aston family during the seventeenth century. In one of these letters, dating from approximately 1670, Elizabeth Cottington states to her uncle:

> Wee ar in expectation still of Mr Draidens Play. Ther is a bowld woman hath oferd one: my cosen Aston can give you a better acount of her then I can. Soem verses I have seen which ar not ill: that is commendation enouf: she will think so too, I believe , when it comes upon the stage. I shall tremble for the poor wooman exposed among the criticks. She stands need to be strongly fortfied agents them…

(1815, 60)

The "poor wooman" that is to be "exposed among the criticks" is sometimes assumed to be Aphra Behn. Cottington's letter makes clear that as a female playwright Behn was considered an anomaly in her age, yet was famous as a phenomenon. Behn had a long and prolific career writing for the theatre: her debut *The Forced Marriage* was produced on September 20 1670 at Lincoln's Inn Fields, and *The Widow Ranter* was produced at Drury lane in 1689, after her death. In between at least nineteen other plays saw the light: one tragedy, *Abdelaz'r, or the Moor's Revenge*; two tragicomedies, *The Forced Marriage* and *The Amorous Prince*; one farce, *The Emperor of the Moon*, and fifteen comedies. Furthermore, there are several unsigned plays and adaptations attributed to Behn: *The Revenge, or a Match in Newgate* and *The Woman Turned Bully*. It is unknown how Behn came to enter the dramatic world and who introduced her to the coterie of writers. Although she had had some contact with Thomas Killigrew while being a spy in the Netherlands, Behn took her plays to the rival company of the Duke's men, which was run by Lady Davenant. Perhaps Behn found her way into the theatre world through the support of this Lady, who must have known how difficult it was for women to obtain a position in the male-dominated dramatic world.

Considering her references to stagecraft in her plays, and the fact that her drama was enacted in the public theatre, Behn must have had some working knowledge of stagecraft when she became a dramatist. Possibly Behn attended many performances prior to her active engagement with drama, or perhaps she worked as an actress for some time. However, there is no evidence for this latter hypothesis. Considering the lack of dedications, and the fact that

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21 *Tixall Letters. Vol 1-2, or the Correspondence of the Aston Family and their Friends. During the Seventeenth Century.* Various authors. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1815
her correspondence fails to mention any kind of support during the period 1670-1677, it can be assumed that Behn wrote her first seven plays without patronage. This supposition is further confirmed by the fact that her first seven plays were published by cheap London printers, such as James Magnus and Thomas Dering. One of the other privileges Aphra Behn might have enjoyed from a patron in those early years of her career was "the assumption of debt incurred for publication" (Deborah Payne, 1991, 107). That Behn first worked without a patron shows how difficult it was for women to enter the theatrical world as writers: after all, at the time of her first dramatic experiment she was no longer an obscure writer, having built up a steady reputation as a poet.

Behn first had to survive without the financial and moral aid from patrons, as becomes evident from the prefaces to her early plays which "are peopled by theater managers and licensors who threaten to suppress her plays, critics who find them obscene, audiences who shout them down, directors who rewrite their lines, and actors who mangle them" (Finke, 1993, 19). Her preface to The Dutch Lover (1673) reveals that Behn was often at the mercy of the theatre managers and directors, who changed her original play script without consulting her: "Know then this Play was hugely injur'd in the Acting, for 'twas done so imperfectly as never any was before, which did more harm to this than it could have done to any of another sort...My Dutch Lover spoke but little of what I intended for him, but supply'd it with a deal of idle stuff, which I was wholly unacquainted with till I had heard of first from him" (A1v).

The tone in this passage is sarcastic: Behn mocks the quality of the directors and actors as well as her own lack of control over the performance. She wittily shifts the blame for the failed theatre production to its poor staging and the fact that the play was changed by the director so that it was no longer recognisable to her. At the same time, Behn's suggested lack of control over the production of her plays, indicates that she lacked protection from an influential patron who could have prevented these alterations to the script. Furthermore, the preface to The Dutch Lover betrays anxiety about the attitude that critics might display towards her performed play. Behn seeks to defend herself against critics who may run her plays into the ground, by blaming the director and actor for the bad performance. This shows that her position as a dramatist without a patron was vulnerable.

Moreover, lacking financial support from a patron, Behn was held hostage by the tastes of the audiences. Behn depended upon her audiences for her income, being forced to cater for the public's demands in order to make a sufficient living. This relation of

22 However, the "poor wooman" could also be Frances Boothby whose Marcelia, or the Treacherous Friend was performed in 1669.
dependence is reflected by the epilogue of *The Amorous Prince* (1671) in which the character Cloris asks for support from the women in the audience: "But ladies 't is your hands alone/And not his power can raise me to a Throne;/Without that aid I cannot reign,/But will return back to my flocks again" (M2r). Behn often envisages her dependence on the tastes of the audiences, who offer money in exchange for her play, as sexual commodification. She draws an analogy between the seduction of clients by the prostitute and her need to allure the audience as a woman playwright by offering dramatic excitement. For instance, in the prologue to Behn's very first play *The Forc'd Marriage, Or the Jealous Bridegroom, A Tragi-Comedy* (1670) it is suggested that women will no longer court men by means of their looks, but will now also employ their wit to "seduce" the male sex:

> Women, those charming victors, in whose eyes,  
> lay all their Arts, and their Artilleries;  
> Not being contented with the wounds they made,  
> Would by new Stratagems our Light invade,  
> Beauty alone goes now at too cheap rates,  
> And therefore they like Wise and Politick States,  
> Court a new power that may the old supply,  
> And keep as well as gain the victory.  
> They'le joyn the Force of Wit to beauty now,  
> And so maintain the right they have in you…  
> You'le never know the bliss of change, this Art  
> Retrieves (when Beauty fades), the wandring heart. (A2v)

Behn as a dramatist plays upon her association with the prostitute: like the whore who uses all her "Arts" and "Artilleries" to capture men's hearts and purses, the female dramatist employs "Stratagems" to maintain a claim on her audience. Comparing herself as a playwright to the prostitute, Behn exposes the sexual commodification of women in culture at large. Recasting the obligation between dramatist and audience in sexual terms through the analogy between the whore and the female dramatist, Behn questions the legitimacy of the author's dependence upon the audience as well as the commercial practices of the theatre. Behn also suggests that wit rather than beauty makes a woman powerful. Men tend to become unfaithful when their mistress's beauty fades away, as the term "wandring heart" emphasises. By contrast, a woman's wit secures a more lasting commitment of men and the male audience, and thus may

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23 Munns argues: "Behn's prologues…employ strategies of seduction. A prologue must soften up and please the audience, and coquettish insults…as much as lavish flattery, are undoubtedly typical of the mode…. The femininity, however, is that codified as prostitution, for if the main text is the object of circulation, something that will be bought and sold, used and abused, prefatory remarks function, like all advertisements, as titillations, encouragements to purchase, to spend, and, in a sense, are the encouragements of bawds" (Munns, 1991, 49, 55). Jill Dolan addresses the issue of the female playwright in relation to the sexual commodification of the female body. See Dolan, 1998, 289.
lead to constancy: "and so they maintain the right they have in you". Furthermore, it is implied that wit ensures greater profit, since beauty goes at cheap rates.

Although Behn thus plays upon the common association of the woman writer with the whore, at the same time she distances herself as a female dramatist from the prostitute by suggesting that she guarantees a lasting affection, and thus will encourage constancy rather than bawdiness. By attributing the quality of the "wandring heart" to the male rather than the female sex, and to the audience rather than the woman writer, Behn undermines the conventional association of the female dramatist with sexual incontinence. Behn similarly questions the common representation of the female dramatist as the prostitute in her preface to *The Dutch Lover* (1673), by identifying male poets and dramatists rather than women playwrights with lewdness:

However true this is, I am my self well able to affirm that none of all our English Poets, and least the Dramatique (so I think you call them) can be justly charg'd with too great reformation of mens minds or manners, and for that I may appeal to general experiment, if those who are the most assiduous Disciples of the Stage, do not make the fondest and lewdest crew about this Town. (A2r)

In the epilogue to *Sir Patient Fancy; a Comedy* (1678) Behn expresses her refusal to apologise for her work, even if the audience does not like her play:

Now I am sure, all look that I should say
Something like asking pardon for the Play:
With low submission, and I can't tell what:
Excuse her Writing, language, and her Plot!
As crafty Pets Guilty cry their Wit,
To make you less severe in lashing it:
But, faith, she scorns such undermining ways,
Of blowing up your pity into praise; (P4r)

Behn subverts roles, showing that she is in control of the audience instead of depending upon the praise and condemnation of the theatre public: "Mark how maliciously her snares sh'as laid:/Praise or Condemn, you're equally betray'd" (P4r). Likewise in her preface to *The Dutch Lover* Behn displays an attitude of independence towards her audience of readers. She declines begging the readers' "pardon for diverting you from you affairs, by such an idle Pamphlet as this is, for I presume you have not much to do, and therefore are to be obliged to me for keeping you from worse imployment" (A2r).25

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24 Gallagher comes to a similar conclusion about Behn's representation of wit and sexuality in her prologues: "The woman's play of wit is the opposite of foreplay; it is a kind of afterplay specifically designed to prolong pleasure, resuscitate desire, and keep a woman who has given herself sexually from being traded in for another woman" (1993, 67).

25 Janet Todd argues that Behn's "growing concern with her work as her work may have been implicated in her movement towards prose fiction in her last writing years" (1998, 9).
In the preface to *The Dutch Lover* Behn argues: "if you consider Tragedy, you'll find their best of characters unlikely patterns for a wise man to pursue" (A2r). Behn's gendered comment that tragedies depict the fates of men with serious moral shortcomings is intriguing, since only three years later her own tragedy *Abdelaz'r; or, The Moor's Revenge* was entered in the stationer's register. The play is in fact the only tragedy that Behn ever wrote. Perhaps her short-lived engagement with tragedy had to do with the fact that she felt that her wit was more suited to comedy. Or, perhaps her single engagement with tragedy was prompted by the fact that the genre had come much in favour at the time, in particular with the introduction of leading tragic actresses such as Elizabeth Barry. It was this upcoming star who played Leonora, the second female lead in the play, while the part of the queen was taken by Mary Betterton. The role of Isabella was played by Mary Lee, while Thomas Betterton performed the part of Abdelazer. *Abdelazer* was a moderate theatrical success. Shareholders obtained a dividend of 25 British pound sterling, which was a great deal more than what was provided by Elkanah Settle's *Conquest of China*, for example.

Nevertheless Behn was not satisfied with her play and its reception. Critics attacked Behn for plagiarism, because *Abdelazer* was an evident adaptation of the play *Lusts Dominion, or The Lascivous Queen* which had been written around 1590, was published in 1657, and was attributed to Christopher Marlowe. Although attitudes towards adapting sources changed in the last decades of the seventeenth century, these accusations of plagiarism expose the double standard in society's treatment of male and female writers. In fact, in Restoration England many dramatists adapted pre-war plays, but these dramatists were never criticised for staying close to their sources. For instance, Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear* (1680) closely followed Shakespeare's original: he only shifted his focus to

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26 Susie Thomas states that "the earliest recorded performance of *Abdelazer, or, The Moor's Revenge* took place on 3 July 1676" (1998, 19). The play was subsequently published in 1677 by J. Magnes and R. Bentley.

27 As Derek Hughes comments: "In the light of Behn's later concentration on social comedy, *Abdelazer* might seem an anomaly in her output; but only with hindsight" (2001, 57)

28 See Duffy, 1977, 123.

29 See Todd, 1996, 189.

30 It is, however, not certain that Marlowe wrote the play. Although his name was mentioned on the title page, the play could as well have been written by John Marston or Thomas Dekker. It has also often been assumed that the play was the same as one called *The Spanish Moor's Tragedy* (1600). See Harbage's *Annals* (1964).

31 As Paulina Kewes points out, "[i]n the last decades of the age the demand for the explicit acknowledgement of sources intensified. The preoccupation with the integrity and legitimacy of source materials reflects a new perception of the relationships, links, and affinities between old texts and new ones. An awareness of the rapidly expanding market for printed playbooks prompted an enquiry into the licence of authors to appropriate older texts" (1998, 96).
Cordelia rather than the king, thus constructing a love story between Edgar and Cordelia, and he added a scene in which Edmund seeks to rape Cordelia.\(^{32}\)

As Behn confessed in a personal letter to the actress Emily Price, printed in Thomas Brown's *Familiar Letters of Love and Gallantry* (1718), her plot was similar to that of *Lust's Dominion*: "the world treated me as a plagiary, and, I must confess, not with injustice... For being impeach'd by murdering my Moor, I am thankful, since, when I shall let the world know, whenever I take the pains next to appear in print, of the mighty theft I have been guilty of" (128).\(^{33}\) Despite many similarities between the two plays, *Abdelaz'r* and *Lust's Dominion* are also different. Behn altered the names of the characters: her queen is called Isabella, while the Isabella in *Lust's Dominon* is named Leonora. In addition, she introduced some characters that cannot be found in *Lust's Dominion*, such as Elvira, "woman to the queen", and Roderigo, "creature to the moor". Some characters from the original are left out, namely the King of Portugal. In addition, Behn omitted some scenes, such as the King Philip's deathbed scene, and she drastically revised the ending of the play. Whereas in the source the queen lives to repent her wickedness, in Behn's play the queen is murdered. Unlike the moor Eleazer in *Lust's Dominon*, Behn's Abdelazer is deceived by his servant Osmin, who brings about his downfall.\(^{34}\)

9.3. Women and "amorous discourse" in the Play.

As one of the first women to write for the public stage, did Aphra Behn cater for the audience's views by confirming the dominant ideas about women, speech and sexuality? Or, rather, did she question the current notions on female discourse in order to defend her own position as a woman playwright? One way of finding answers to these questions is by analysing Behn's complex representation of queen Isabella. On the one hand, the depiction of the queen appears to endorse the conventional association of the verbally assertive woman with lechery. Queen Isabella is involved in an adulterous relationship with the moor Abdelazer. Indulging her amorous feelings for Abdelazer and being unfaithful to her husband, the king of Spain, Isabella is also a woman who insists upon speaking her mind and being listened to. In the opening scene, Abdelazer insults the queen by rejecting her amorous advances, and by rudely commanding her to leave him. When the queen demands to know the

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\(^{33}\) See also Duffy, 1977, 136.

\(^{34}\) For a detailed account of the differences between the source and Behn's tragedy see also Susie Thomas, 1998, 19-20.
reason behind his conduct, and Abdelazer refuses to answer her question and listen to her, the queen raises her voice:

Abdelazer. I will not answer thee, nor hear thee speak.
Queen. Not hear me speak! - yes, and in thunder too. (I, i)\(^\text{35}\)

Queen Isabella uses her eloquence as a tool to sexually attract men and manipulate them. The Cardinal is "bewitch'd" by the "Spell Hid" in the queen's "charming Lips", that is, in her speech (V, i). Apart from this, Queen Isabella phrases her desire for revenge in sexual terms: "revenge, although I court thee with my fatal ruine,/ I must enjoy thee! There's no other way/And I'm resolv'd upon the mighty pleasure" (III, i).

While the stereotype of the wanton, outspoken woman is thus evoked, in her representation of Isabella Behn generally challenges the dominant gender discourses. A comparison between Behn's representation of the adulterous Isabella and the queen that is depicted in the earlier play, reveals that the connection between Isabella's speech and her wantonness is made more explicitly in Lust's Dominion. In this play Eleazer explicitly identifies the queen's speeches with lasciviousness: "'Tis true, how often have I stopt/Thy unchast songs from passing through mine ears? (V, ii, 312-13). By contrast, in Behn's text no connection is suggested between the fact that Isabella has committed adultery and her self-assertion. Thus, Behn has omitted the overt link between woman's speech and wantonness that is made in the original.

In her characterisation of Isabella Behn attenuates the picture of the extremely lustful queen that is drawn in Lust's Dominion. Like their counterparts in Lust's Dominion the male characters in Abdelazer frequently refer to Isabella's lustful nature. Isabella's son Philip argues that his mother "suffer'd" the king's "bed to be defil'd with Lust" (I, ii). Abdelazer alleges that Isabella has decayed his youth "only to feed thy Lust" (I, i). However, Behn suggests that these definitions of Isabella's nature as lustful are unreliable. She does so by showing that Abdelazer's assumption that the women around them are sexually impure is wrong, issuing from his own wanton inclinations.\(^\text{36}\) For instance, Abdelazer unjustly views his wife's conversations with the king as proof of her inconstancy to him: "I'le interrupt your amorous

\(^{35}\) References are to the 1677 edition of the play, which is divided into acts and scenes.

\(^{36}\) Behn often represents male characters who unjustly suspect virtuous women of lack of constancy. For instance, in The Forced Marriage (1671) Phillander unjustly thinks that Erminia "has broke her Vows which I held sacred/And plays the Wanton in anothers Armes" (II, iv). In The Dutch Lover (1673) Alonzo wrongly assumes that Euphemia is a curtizan who has come "to bargain for a night or two", because she is veiled and because her "discourse is free and natural" (I, iii). Subsequently, Marcel mistakes the veiled virgin Euphemia for his wanton sister Hippolyta (III, iii). Depicting men who fail to guess a woman's sexual nature correctly by mistaking virgins for whores, Behn shows that the binary opposition of the silent virgin and the outspoken prostitute is very unstable.
discourse" (I, ii). Florella's speeches to the king are, however, innocent expressions of respect rather than wanton "flattery" (II, ii). Furthermore, Abdelazer calls Isabella's maid a "Bawd" without any seeming reason: "Bawd, fetch me here a Glass" (I, i). Abdelazer's misjudgements therefore appear to result from his own sexual immorality: Abdelazer is unfaithful to his wife, and later on in the play he attempts to rape the virtuous princess Leonora. Considering his own distorted perceptions on women's nature, Abdelazer's representation of the queen as extremely lascivious seems dubious.

The unreliability of Abdelazer's representation of Isabella is endorsed by the function of the mirror in the first scene. Abdelazer wants to hold up a mirror to the queen's face in order to confront her with the lustful nature that he reads in her countenance: "Thy face and eyes!- Bawd, fetch me here a Glass. (to Elvira)/And thou shalt see the balls of those eyes…decay'd my Youth, only to feed thy Lust!" (I, i). However, the queen is never represented as actually looking in a mirror, since she is not shown to respond to a mirror image of herself, and since there is no mention in the stage directions of a mirror being actually held up to her face. What the queen is therefore shown is not a mirror image, but Abdelazer's representation of her. The description of the queen's eye-balls as reflections of vile lust should consequently be interpreted as an image that is distorted by Abdelazer's own lascivious outlook on life. Looking in the queen's eyes, Abdelazer sees his own reflection, hence his own immorality.37

At the same time, the scene comments on society's sexualisation of women. Playing upon the idea that drama holds up a mirror to society, Behn suggests that society sees its own lasciviousness reflected by the play. Implying that it is Abdelazer's rather than Isabella's image which is mirrored, Behn draws an analogy between the moor's eroticisation of Isabella, and society's sexualisation of women. In pointing out that Abdelazer's views on Isabella as a natural bawd are flawed, Behn indirectly creates the impression that society's fear of women's "unnatural" sexuality is distorted as well.38 Considering the fact that Behn's play was staged with actresses performing in it, Behn also appears to criticise the audience's view of the actresses as lascivious. Abdelazer is the mirror held up to the male members of the audience,

37 Abdelazer similarly projects his own wanton desires upon the princess Leonora. When he attempts to seduce Leonora, Abdelazer argues that the princess's eyes will wantonise men: "In your bright Eyes there is, that may corrupt 'em more" (V, i). This remark seems out of touch with reality, since Leonora sets great store by her sexual purity. Thus, it is revealed that Abdelazer tends to shift responsibility for his own lascivious intentions to the women around him.

38 As Owen argues, "Behn criticizes sexual double standards. She also extends qualified sympathy to prostitutes, victimized by double standards" (1996, 16).
his lustful perception of Isabella reflecting the wanton gazes of the audience on the female performers.

The representation of queen Isabella as an extremely lustful creature is further undermined by the Abdelazer's performance of the role of the prostitute in their relationship, offering his affection to Isabella only in exchange for material goods and status. The queen is furious about Abdelazer's rejection of her affections, since she has made him wealthy: "Have I for this… Exhausted Treasures that wou'd purchase Crowns./To buy thy smiles…And is it thus- my bounties are repaid?" (I, i). Behn depicts the affair between Isabella and Abdelazer as the moor's opportunity to climb the social ladder and increase his riches. The queen desires a relationship divested of materialism, suggesting that they "need no Crowns; Love best contented is/In shadie Groves, and humble Cottages" (I, i). By contrast, Abdelazer argues that "Love and ambition are the same to me" (I, i). Thus, as in the prologues to her plays, Behn exposes the commercial nature of male-female relationships in the culture at large. The common association of the outspoken woman with the whore is challenged by Behn's presentation of a member of the male sex as someone who requires payment and social advancement in return for his sexual favours.

The suggestion that Isabella is solely driven by lust is further undermined by the fact that Abdelazer only uses the terms "lust" and "lustful" (I, i) in relation to their affair, whereas the queen describes her passion for Abdelazer as love: "How dare you, Sir, upbraid me with my Love?" (I, i). The queen feels sincere affection for Abdelazer, which is also revealed by the song "Love Arm'd" at the opening of the play. The text of the song was written specifically for the play, even though "Love Arm'd" was frequently reprinted in collections of Behn's poetry. The song describes the suffering of a lover who has fallen victim to the "Tyrannick pow'r" of love. Although both the "I" and the beloved are victimised by "Tyrannick" love,\(^{39}\) they are not equally affected by its power. While the "I" in the poem is struck with "ev'ry killing Dart" from the beloved, the lover experiences no pangs of love:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{From me he took his sighs and tears} \\
\text{From thee his pride and cruelty…} \\
\text{But my poor heart alone is harm'd,} \\
\text{Whilst thine the Victor is, and free. (I, i)}
\end{align*}
\]

In the play the queen has ordered the music that is to be played: "Play all your sweetest Notes, such as inspire/ The active Soul with new and soft desire" (I, i). Yet Abdelazer is irritated by

\(^{39}\) In fact, the idea that the "I" and the lover have set up tyrannic love as a deity suggests criticism on the absolute power of the king. The persona has honoured the monarch as a God, but is victimised by the king's power over him/her. This may refer to the anger experienced by Behn when she had acted as a spy on behalf of the king, but was refused financial support by Charles II in order to be released from prison.
the song: "On me this Musick lost? - this sound on me/ That hates all softness?" (I, i). Since Isabella enjoys the song, whereas Abdelazer dislikes it, the "I" of the poem appears to be identified with Isabella, whereas Abdelazer seems to embody the cruel lover. Thus, the Petrarchan discourses of the poem are allocated to a female speaker. This implies a shift in the Petrarchan poetic tradition, in which the persona is often male.

Isabella's love for Abdelazer is indeed sincere, whereas Abdelazer's devotion to the queen was only inspired by ambition and lust: "the influence of this- must raise my glory high" (I, i). Although she commits adultery with Abdelazer, the queen views their relationship as a marriage. This becomes clear from her statement that she has "neglected" all her "vows" to the king of Spain, "and sworn 'em here a-new" (I, i); a statement which accentuates the tension between the queen's fidelity to Abdelazer on the one hand, and her adultery on the other hand. In contrast with Isabella's constancy to the moor, Abdelazer's interest in the queen has already disappeared, and he now acts as the cruel, rejecting lover described in the poem: "Away, fond woman…Away, away, be gone" (I, i). In addition, like the beloved in the song Abdelazer is the "victor" in that he completely controls Isabella's words and behaviour because of her infatuation for him: "That this same Queen, this easie Spanish Dame/May be bewitcht and dote upon me still" (I, i). For instance, Abdelazer succeeds in making Isabella declare the falsehood that Philip is a bastard child, issued from her extramarital relationship with the Cardinal: "Oh give me leave to blush when I declare,/ That Philip is- as he has rendred him" (III, iii). Because the queen's narration of her adultery is invented and commanded by Abdelazer, her use of the discourses of the lascivious woman should not be interpreted as proof of her wanton nature. The song, which serves as a prologue to the play, therefore emphasises the contrast between Isabella's sincere, unchanging affection and Abdelazer's self-interested, short-lived passion, and stresses the ways in which the queen's behaviour is a role imposed upon her by the moor.41

40 In fact, Isabella is similar to Hippolyta in *The Dutch Lover* and Angellica Bianca in *The Rover* in that all three women are victimised by the men with whom they have an extramarital relationship. In all three cases, the male lovers prove to be unfaithful and untrustworthy, while the women are sincere in their affections for them. While Hippolyta lives "in whoredom, with an impious villain", Antonio, she has been betrayed by her debaucher who had promised to marry her: "But prethee tell me why thou treat'st me thus?/ Why dist thou with the sacredvows of Marriage,/ After a long and tedious courtship to me,/ ravish me from my parents and my husband?" (I, ii).

41 Todd argues that "Love Arm'd…makes Abdelazer seem the embodiment of …lust in a work that circles round the themes of sexual submission and domination" (Todd, 1996, 184). In *The Rover* the prostitute Angellica Bianca is outraged because her lover Willmore has been unfaithful, while she cherished sincere passions for him. As Boebel states: "Angellica Bianca… plays a double role. Speaking with the voice of outraged feminine virtue, she becomes the phallic enforcer of chastity" (1996, 67). See also Copeland, 1998, 150.

Behn challenges the common equation of female speech with lechery by relating the words spoken by Florella and Leonora to sexual virtue. Through the characterisation of Florella, a foil to the adulterous Isabella, Behn shows that a woman who is outspoken can nevertheless be sexually pure. Florella is "wondrous forward" (II, i), in that she does not refrain from speaking with other men than her husband, having intimate conversations with the king. Despite her transgressive speeches from a gendered point of view, Florella is represented as sexually honourable: "so sacred and so innocent (I, ii), "as chaste as vestals" (III, iii).

The amorous king at first uses their interviews to persuade Florella into a love affair with him, in exchange for political and financial favours: "say, wou'dst thou have thy Husband share my Crown? / Do but submit to love me, and I yield it" (I, ii). However, Florella refuses to accept his offers and refrains from amorous discourse with the king. As she argues, she will only give "love as humble Subjects owe their King" (I, ii). Instead, Florella is outspoken to the king in order to defend her chastity and her loyalty to her husband: "Ah Sir, the Gods and you would be more merciful,/ If by a death less cruel than my fears,/ You would preserve my honour quickly" (III, iii). She rejects the king's expressions of love to her, claiming that she will never yield to his passion: "A deed like that my Virtue wou'd undoe…A sin, that wou'd my hate, not passion move;/ I owe a duty where I cannot love" (III, iii). Florella's speeches prove to be a defence of sexual purity rather than signs of her wantonness. The king is impressed by Florella's assertion of her virtue and will therefore not harm her chastity: "No, my Florella, I adore thy Virtue,/ And none prophane those Shrines, to whom they offer" (III, iii).42 Showing that a woman's self-assertion need not imply sexual impurity, Behn undermines the conventional association of woman's self-expression with lasciviousness. Thus, she questions the dominant gender discourses and implicitly legitimises woman's self-expression.

Linking Florella's self-expression to sexual purity and representing her self-assertion as a defence of chastity, Behn associates the king's and Abdelazer's words with wantonness. Considering Florella's marriage to Abdelazer, the king's amorous discourses towards Florella go against the sacred vows of marriage: "I wooe thee, for mercy on my self;…who himself

42 The Rover also presents a woman whose outspokenness is not paralleled by sexual incontinence, and whose wit helps her to protect her virginity. Although Helena is "free and witty" in her speeches, she is an "honest person of Quality" who will not surrender sexually to Willmore before he marries her (part I, I,ii). Furthermore, she manages to gain Willmore's respect through her wit, so that he consents to wed her before sexual consummation. See also Kavenik, 1991, 184.
lies dying,/ Imploring from thy eyes a little pity" (I, ii). Although Behn displays some understanding for Abdelazer's urge to gain the crown of Spain that was unjustly appropriated by Philip of Spain from his father, she comes up with a negative portrayal of Abelazer's sexuality. Abdelazer employs his eloquence in order to secure gratification of his lust.43

Making his passions for her known to Leonora, the moor alludes to copulation:44

But since 'tis not to be resisted here---
You must permit it to approach your Ear…
Its language I'le deliver out in sighs
Soft as the whispers of a yielding Virgin…
Coy mistress, you must yield, and quickly too
Were you devout as Vestals, pure as their fire
Yet I wou'd wanton in the rifled spoils
Of all that sacred Innocence and Beauty.  (V, i)

The fact that Abdelazer likens the sounds of his language to a "yielding virgin" and commands that Leonora "must yield" to him, displays a connection between Abdelazer's speech and rape. This connection is underlined by Leonora's refusal to listen to Abdelazer's language, because she "cannot hear it…with honour" (V, i). Besides, Leonora is shown to assert her voice mainly to defend her chastity. When Abdelazer claims that she is to be his, the princess replies that her heart "never can be yours! That, and my vows/, are to Alonzo given" (V, i).

9.5. The Function of Religious Discourses in the Play.

Behn further legitimises woman's self-expression by contrasting Florella's and Leonora's honourable use of religious discourses with Abdelazer's sacrilegious resort to religious language. Florella invokes "heaven" in order to defend her spiritual morality and honour Christian laws. When Abdelazer commands her to kill the king with a dagger, she indignantly replies: "heaven forbid" (III, i). Similarly, Leonora uses religious discourse in order to express her observation of God's will: "heav'ns will I'm not permitted to dispute" (V, i). Furthermore, the princess refers to "heaven" in order to praise honourable behaviour. As she says to Osmin,

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43 In fact, Behn often represents male characters who use their eloquence to seduce women. In her "Selinda and Cloris" (printed in Miscellany, various authors, 1685) Behn presents a dialogue between Cloris who has been abandoned by her lover for another woman, Selinda. Cloris advises her rival: "Then from his charming Language fly,/Or thou'rt undone as well as I" (P1r). Furthermore, the male characters in her plays often use discourse which signal their wanton natures. For instance, in The Dutch Lover (1673) Marcel immediately tends to forget about his vows of marriage to Clarinda when he gets a letter from her inviting him to come to her chamber at night: "Without the ceremonious tye of Marriage:/ That tye that does but nauseate the delight" (I, ii).

44 As Hodgson-Wright points out, "the point at which Abdelazar's discourse with Leonora turns from that of lover into that of rapist is crucially at the point when she has insulted him" by rejecting his masculine desire (2000, 157-58).
who has come to her rescue when Abdelazer threatened to rape her: "heaven bless thee for thy goodness" (V, i).

Abdelazer, however, employs religious discourse in order to mask his appropriation of political power. For instance, in proposing Leonora as the queen of Spain, Abdelazer defends his assumption of political power by claiming: "She must be Queen, I, and the Gods decree it!" (V, i). Abdelazer's reference to the divine power as "Gods" rather than "God" makes clear that he has pagan rather than Christian religious affiliations. Abdelazer attempts to prevent Leonora's marriage to Alonzo by unjustly presenting his will as the will of heaven: "heaven and I, am of another mind,/And must be first obey'd" (V, i). At times, he even voices his resistance to God's control over the world: "No matter what Heaven will, I say it must" (III, i). Abdelazer's blasphemous use of religious discourses is underlined by the fact that he is associated with hell. As he claims, he would often pass through a "vault deep under ground,/Into which the busie Sun ne're entred,/But all is dark, as are the shades of Hell" in order to reach the queen's appartments. Behn's representation of Abdelazer as the antithesis of Christianity is further elaborated in his feud with king Philip. The latter signifies the victory of Christianity over the heathen Moors governed by Abdelazer's father. Abdelazer's opposition to the king underlines his abuse of Christian discourses, and intensifies the contrast between his irreligious speeches and the women's Christian discourses.

9.6. Gender and Subjectivity in Abdelaz'r.

It is notable that there are no scenes in the play in which women characters communicate with one another. The queen speaks to Abdelazer, her sons Philip and Ferdinand and the cardinal, but she does not converse with Florella and Leonora. Florella only figures as a speaker in relation to Abdelazer and the king, and Leonora solely communicates with Abdelazer, Osmin and her brother Philip. As we saw, in earlier tragic plays by women, woman's conversation is set in a private, all female context, and in many of the closet dramas female characters are only shown to speak to members of their own sex. Isabella's, Florella's and Leonora's acts of self-expression are not confined to an enclosed, female setting. This reflects Behn's forfeiture of closet drama and her choice to write for the male-dominated audience of the public theatre. At the same time, the fact that Isabella, Florella and Leonora only communicate with men illustrates the division between the women in the play. Behn points out that woman's infatuation for men obstructs female bonding. For instance, the queen, besotted by her
affections for Abdelazer, seeks to remove her rival, Abdelazer's wife Florella, by suggesting that Florella is adulterous:

…grant the Love-sick King,
may find admittance to Florella's arms;
…till my Moor returns;
Where in her Lodgings he shall find his Wife,
Amidst her Amorous dalliance with my Son.-
My watchful Spies are waiting for the knowledge;
Which when to me imparted, I'le improve,
Till my Revenge be equal to my Love. (III, ii)

It must be noted that Behn's queen asserts her right to an audience more expressively than the queen in Lust's Dominion. Isabella's indignation that the moor will not hear her speak contrasts with the queen's humble request for an audience in Lust's Dominion: "I prithee speak to me and chide me not...'I'll kill myself unless thou hear'st me speak" (I, i, 68-71). Nevertheless, Behn's queen lets herself be reduced to the role of the listener by Abdelazer's angry commands, and she submits to Abdelazer's representation of her. She seems to have lost the capacity for constructing an independent self-image, relying for her identity on Abdelazer. She does not resist his definitions of her as "Ugly as Hell"; an interesting definition in the light of the association of Abdelazer with hell in the play, which exemplifies how he projects his own wicked nature upon her:

Queen. Am I grown ugly now?
Abdelazer. Ugly as Hell-. (I, i)

Due to her obsession for Abdelazer, the queen even consents to represent herself to the outside world as a whore. When Abdelazer wants Isabella to proclaim Philip a bastard, and thus, to display herself as an adulterous, lewd woman, Isabella readily submits to the role that he imposes upon her: "There's reson in thy words, but oh my Fame!" (III, i). Isabella's dependence upon the moor for her self-representation even leads to an inability to assert her identity in public. When her son Philip calls her "vilest of thy Sex...a thing I have miscall'd a Mother", he makes it impossible for Isabella to manifest herself as a speaker: "We must not paret so, madam...I first must let you know your sin and shame:--nay, hear me calmly,-- for by heav'n you shall" (I, ii). The characters who witness Isabella's humiliation by Philip, do not speak up in defence of her: "Are ye all mute, and hear me thus upbraided?" (I, ii).

Behn's representation of Isabella as the powerless victim of her own amorous

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45 For more details on Behn's use of monologue and dialogue in her plays see Zimbardo, 1991, 375.
46 For a reading of the female body and representation in Behn's drama see Green, 1993, 121.
passion underlines the points that Behn makes in her prologues, such as the preface to *The Forced Marriage*: a woman is disempowered by her sexual attraction to men, and her beauty can only enthrall men temporarily. By contrast, woman is empowered by wit, which cannot fade and which consequently secures man's lasting respect and love for her.\footnote{In *The Rover* Behn also points to the ways in which women are disempowered by their affection for men. The whore Angellica becomes infatuated with Willmore, and thus, for the first time loses control over the commodification of her body. Falling obsessively in love with Willmore, Angellica is deprived of the power to assert herself. When Willmore is offensive, Angellica does not reply, and her maid Moretta wonders: "Sure, she's bewitcht, that she can stand thus tamely and hear his sawcy railing" (part I, II, ii). Since Angellica can only offer the pleasure of her body, Willmore gets tired of her affections as soon as he has enjoyed her. As Angellica says: "In vain I have Consulted all my Charms,/In vain this Beauty priz'd, in vain believ'd./My Eyes cou'd kindle any lasting fires;/I had forgot my Name, my Infamie" (III, i). By contrast, Willmore's passion for the witty Helena, who offers verbal rather than sexual titillation, proves lasting. See also Nash, 1994, 79, Diamond, 1999, 44-45, and Finke, 1993, 27.} This idea is also endorsed by the play. Whereas Isabella has no influence on the moor's thoughts, no longer being considered attractive by him, she manages to affect Alonzo's mind through her witty speeches: she succeeds in making him believe that his sister Florella is "a Whore" (III, ii).

Behn also suggests that wit is a quality through which women gain power. Behn plays with the notions "legitimate" and "illegitimate", pointing out that these concepts are very unstable in relation to gender. In the world of the play maternity is a sensitive issue, since the male characters' claim to a social position depends upon the question whether they are legitimate offspring or bastards. Isabella's statement that Philip is a bastard child undermines his right to the throne of Spain. Isabella's exposition of Philip as illegitimate progeny, whereas he is lawfully begotten, displays the instability of the notion "legitimate" as well as woman's power over the definition of the term. A woman may represent herself as either a "natural" or an "unnatural" mother by adopting the role and assuming the discourses of the good wife or fallen woman, respectively. Since gender can be seen in these contexts as role-playing, the distinction between the good, chaste woman and the wicked, wanton woman becomes less clear: a woman may play the role of the virtuous wife when she is in fact lecherous, or the other way around.\footnote{Heidi Hutner discusses Behn's explosion of the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore in *The Rover*. See Hutner, 1993, 106.} Through her representation of the queen, Behn questions who has control over the process of signification, and undermines the stability of gender notions. Through her witty characterisation and her way of presenting the plot, Behn exercises power over language and its meaning.

At the same time Behn suggests that women should raise their voices in order to control their public image. The play includes a scene in which Philip pesters Abdelazer with Florella's intimacy with the king, suggesting that the moor may be cuckolded by his wife:

Quoth Philip, thy wife! proud Moor...Doesn't make thee snarle!.

\footnote{In *The Rover* Behn also points to the ways in which women are disempowered by their affection for men. The whore Angellica becomes infatuated with Willmore, and thus, for the first time loses control over the commodification of her body. Falling obsessively in love with Willmore, Angellica is deprived of the power to assert herself. When Willmore is offensive, Angellica does not reply, and her maid Moretta wonders: "Sure, she's bewitcht, that she can stand thus tamely and hear his sawcy railing" (part I, II, ii). Since Angellica can only offer the pleasure of her body, Willmore gets tired of her affections as soon as he has enjoyed her. As Angellica says: "In vain I have Consulted all my Charms,/In vain this Beauty priz'd, in vain believ'd./My Eyes cou'd kindle any lasting fires;/I had forgot my Name, my Infamie" (III, i). By contrast, Willmore's passion for the witty Helena, who offers verbal rather than sexual titillation, proves lasting. See also Nash, 1994, 79, Diamond, 1999, 44-45, and Finke, 1993, 27.}
Abdelazer. Shall I be calm, and hear my wife call'd Whore? (II, i)

Remarkably, Florella is present at this scene, but she does not assert her voice to resist Philip's imputations. Her silence, though properly feminine, is self-incriminating, yet her mute presence suggests that Florella is not the outspoken woman that Philip describes. Her failure to speak up in defence of herself makes her the helpless victim of the plots invented by Abdelazer and the queen, who use Florella's supposed adultery to have her and the king removed: Abdelazer employs his suspicions of Florella's adultery as the means to blackmail his wife into killing the king, while Isabella induces Florella's brother Alonzo to murder his sister by referring to Florella's blemished reputation. By thus implying that a woman's silence leads to her disempowerment and victimisation, Behn voices another way of understanding the function of silence and women's roles.

Generally Isabella fails to exercise narrative command over her existence and the course of events. As a result of her excessive love for Abdelazer, Isabella seeks to satisfy the moor's desires by obeying his commands. Thus, in her actions she is partly directed by him. As we have seen, Isabella acts out the role of the mother of a bastard child when Abdelazer tells her to assume this part, albeit reluctantly. Isabella follows Abdelazer's direction in conjuring the cardinal "not to engage with Philip,/ Who aims at nothing but the Kingdoms ruine" (IV, i) in order to protect the rule over Spain that Abdelazer has appropriated. Although Isabella benefits from opposing Philip, encouraged to revenge his public abuse of her as an unnatural mother, the revenge plot that she tries to set into motion is not her own but Abdelazer's. Even when the queen does not directly follow Abdelazer's orders, she proves to be directed by him. For instance, when Isabella kills Florella out of envy, she stabs her with a dagger. She enacts Abdelazer's aim of the phallic destruction of women, recalling the analogy that the queen draws between rape and daggers earlier in the play:

My Son, be like thy mother, hot and bold;
And like the Noble Ravisher of Rome,
   Court her with Daggers, when thy Rongue grows faint,
   Till tho hast made a Conquest I're her Virtue. (III, ii)

Acting out the part of the phallic ravisher by murdering Florella, Isabella resembles Abdelazer who seeks to rape Leonora towards the end of the play.

In showing that the queen's behaviour issues from Abdelazer's influence on her actions, Behn not only points to the disempowering effect of love relationships on women, but also criticises the principle of wifely obedience. As was pointed out previously, queen Isabella perceives her relationship with Abdelazer as a kind of marriage, and her submission
to Abdelazer's plans can therefore be interpreted as her observation of marital submission. However, in satisfying Abdelazer's will, Isabella has to engage with fraud, flattery and abuse. Similarly, Florella's observation of wifely obedience means that she is to be implicated in sin. Abdelazer hands Florella a dagger, commanding her to kill the king should he make further amorous advances to her: "take this dagger...to stab a heart...that loves thee/ Till thou hast kill'd thy Image in his breast" (III, i). In fact, Abdelazer wants Florella to slay the king, so that he himself may advance in regaining the crown of Spain. Florella, however, refuses to obey her husband: "No! though of all I am, this hand alone/ Is what thou canst commad, as being thy own/ yet this has plighted no such cruel vow:/ No Duty binds me to obey thee now" (III, i). Behn thus suggests that woman's resistance to man's will is at times justified, and, in doing so, challenges gender roles.

In *Abdelazer* woman is represented as a commodity on the marriage market. Florella, though very much in love with king Ferdinand and being loved in return, was forced to marry Abdelazer by the king:

King. Politique Sir, who would have made her other?  
Against her will, he forc'd her to his arms…  
Florella. Sir, I was ever taught Obedience;  
My humble thoughts durst ne'er aspire to you,  
And next to that---death, or the moor, or any thing. (II, ii)

Likewise, Leonora is promised by her father to Alonzo: "The King, Alonzo, with his dying breath/To you my beauteous Sister did bequeath;/And I his generosity approve,/And think you worthy Leonora's love" (I, ii). While presenting women as objects of exchange that cannot exercise control over their own fates, Behn does not endorse the conventional tragic representation of women. Rather, she attempts to expose the injustice of a social system in which women have no autonomy as marriage partners.49 She shows that marriages into which women are forced cause a lot of grief:

King Ferdinand. "But Heav'n well knew in giving thee away  
*Florella weeps.* (I, ii)

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49 Behn similarly criticises the marriage system and woman's social roles in *The Forced Marriage* (1671). The king has the power to give Erminia away to Alcippus when he asks for this favour in return for his courage in war. That Erminia already has an understanding with Phillander does not seem to matter (See I,i). See also Markley: "Behn's political attacks on the Whigs in the 1680's and the Commonwealthsmen of the 1650's are efforts to demystify what we might call the masculinizing of desire- the creation of women as other and object- that is crucial to a sexual ideology that insist on the indivisibility of feminine chastity and feminine identity" (Markley, 1995, 116).
Behn exposes the system of forced marriages as an improper way for men to satisfy their thirst for power. This is revealed by Alonzo's response to his sister's supposed adultery: "My Sister's in my power, her Honour's mine; I can command her life, though not my Kings" (III, ii). As Behn makes clear, the idea that women will bend their wills to men may lead to excessive maltreatment of women's "sacred Innocence and Beauty" (V, i).

9.7. Gender and Death in the Play.

The ending designed for Behn's queen Isabella is completely different from the queen's final fate in Lust's Dominion. Preparing her lodgings for an amorous night with Abdelazer, Behn's queen is stabbed to death by Roderigo, on commission of Abdelazer. By contrast, in Lust's Dominion Eleazer's plan to kill the queen fails. The queen, still alive at the tragic closure, deplores her adultery: "I have been deadly impious, I confess/Forgive me, and my sin will seem the less" (V, iv, 3360-61). She is ordered by her son Philip to spin out the rest of her life at a solitary home in the countryside, in order to repent her sins and purify her defiled soul. Why did Behn choose to have her queen killed instead? One reason why Behn did not copy the end of her source play may lie in the fact that Lust's Dominion confirms the cultural dichotomy of the chaste "nun" and the prostitute that Behn questions in her drama. In Lust's Dominion the lecherous queen is sent off to a sort of convent, which suggests that she has to transform from a wanton woman into a chaste queen. Thus, chastity and prostitution are presented as the two choices available to women. On the other hand, it may be argued that Behn strove to follow the tragic conventions according to which the wanton, wordy woman is eliminated at the tragic closure to satisfy the tastes of the audience.

Considering Behn's representation of the queen as the victim of her passion for Abdelazer as well as her explicit subversion of gender notions in the play, a more likely explanation can be given for her "murder" of Isabella, that is, that Abdelazer's commands to have Isabella murdered, and his exultation at her death, underline his wicked, self-interested nature:

Farewell my greats Plague--
Thou wert a most impolitique loving thing,
And having done my bus'ness which thou wert born for,
'Twas time thou shouldst retire. (V, i)

50 "Aphra herself well understood the dilemma that young women of her time faced: the contradiction between independence and desire, the oppression of the system of arranged marriages, the bankruptcy of the institution
Susie Thomas argues that Behn displays more sympathy towards the moor than the author of the source text. In her view, Eleazer's wickedness is accentuated through the queen's repentance: "The primary effect of this contrition is to make the unrepentant Eleazar a yet blacker devil as the Queen throws the responsibility for her evil actions onto him...Once she is freed from her infatuation with the Moor, the Queen's most ardent wish is to embrace her son...and become again a good mother" (1998, 21). Thomas asserts that Behn plays up the queen's evil "in order to play down the Moor's" (1998, 22), by leaving out the queen's repentant confession, and by having her killed off.

Although Thomas is correct in assuming that Behn displays some sympathy for Abdelazer's cause for revenge, I do not think it is correct to view Isabella's death as Behn's attempt to emphasise her wickedness. On the contrary, I feel that the murder of queen Isabella accentuates Abdelazer's wicked nature and stresses the victimisation of the queen through her obsessive passion for the moor. Abdelazer's implication in Isabella's elimination is underlined by her insightful remark: "thou' rt my Murderer" (V, i). His cruel abuse of the queen is revealed by his expressions of relief at being released from the burden of her passion, and his suggestion that he no longer needs her as the instrument to reach his aims.

The fact that the queen does not reach transcendence over her death reveals that the murder is a sign of her victimisation. Isabella achieves some glory when dying through her insight that Abdelazer is the driving force behind her death, and through her resistance to becoming the passive victim of a murder plot: "But shall I die thus tamely unrevenged?" (V, i). Because the queen does not manage to secure revenge for her murder, she fails to direct the plot according to her last desires. Above all, she does not achieve control over her discourse in her last speeches. Although conscious of Abdelazer's betrayal of her, the queen does not succeed in divesting her speech to him from amorous discourse: "And whilst I hear thy voice--thus breathing Love/It hovers still--about--the gratefull-- sound" (V, i). As her remark makes clear, Abdelazer still exerts a discursive spell over the queen: he controls Isabella's words, and her representation.

The place in which Isabella is stabbed to death is a chamber designed for an anticipated amorous encounter: "Fit to receive my Moor" (V, i). By having Isabella murdered in the bedroom, Abdelazer confines her to the meaning of the lustful whore that he had attempted to impose upon her throughout the play. Abdelazer also establishes Isabella's public.
Aphra Behn's *Abdelaz'r, or The Moor's Revenge*

image after her death: "Know Prince, I made thy amorous Mother/ Proclaim thee Bastard...I made her too, betray the credulous Cardinal...And having then no farther use of her./ Satiated with her lust/ I set Roderigo on to murder her" (V, i). Abdelazer defines Isabella as lustful, and only grants her an identity as his instrument. Yet, his last moment of self-assertion, which displays Isabella's failure to command her representation beyond the grave, at the same time underlines the point made throughout the play: that a woman cannot reach a sense of selfhood and autonomy once she has lost her heart to a man. Behn uses the tragic convention, according to which the transgressive woman ends up deprived of control over her self-image, in order to expose and criticise woman's dependence upon men.

Although Florella does not end her life herself, she achieves transcendence over death. Despite the fact that she is killed, Florella argues: "I did resolve to dye,- and have my wish" (III, iii). In fact, Isabella slays Florella with the dagger that the latter held up in order to kill herself. Having been commanded by Abdelazer to assassinate the king, Florella decides to disobey her husband:

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though of all I am, this hand alone.  
Is what thou canst command, as being thy own;  
Yet this has plighted no such cruel vow:  
No Duty binds me to obey thee now. (III, i)
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Due to her independence from her husband, Florella attains subjectivity. She assumes control over the plot, deciding that she will neither soil her hands with murder, nor kill the man that she loves. Therefore she herself will die instead of the king:

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King. How! Can that fair hand acquaint it self with death?  
-What wilt thou do, Florella?  
Florella. Your destiny divert,  
And give my heart those wounds design'd for yours. (III, iii)
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Since Florella had already decided to end her life, and since therefore Isabella's murder of her does not go against the "plot" that Florella has in mind for herself, Florella experiences a degree of autonomy over her existence. Yet, this autonomy is restricted, in that it is apparently impossible for Florella to spare both the king and herself. However, compared to Maria, her counterpart in *Lust's Dominion*, Florella displays more independence from social laws. She expresses defiance of her husband's commands, thus forfeiting the social law of wifely obedience, and chooses to kill herself in order to uphold her own morality. By contrast,

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52 This confirms Pearson's view that the female characters in Behn's plays often see death as the only solution of the dilemma between submission and agency, "between authorising texts and being consumed texts" (1999, 119).
Maria's determination to commit suicide is affected by the social demand that a woman should mind her sexual honour and obey her husband:

Then this ensuing night shall give an end
To all my sorrows, for before foul lust
Shall soil the fair Complexion of mine honour
This hand shall rob Maria of her life…
Both to preserve my Royall Soveraignes life,
And keep my self a true and Loyall wife. (II, iv, 1357-89)

Florella also transcends death in memory. Having died, the king memorialises Florella by giving a public account of her goodness and by mourning her death: "by all the Gods she was as chaste as Vestels!…Be gone! And trouble not the silent griefs,/ Which will insensibly decay my life,/ Till like a Marble Statue I am fixt,/ Dropping continual tears upon her tomb" (III, iii). Queen Isabella, on the other hand, is not memorialised by he other characters. Apart from Abdelazer's remarks on her character in his dying speech, the other dramatis personae no longer speak about Isabella after her death, and thus seem to have forgotten her completely. Thus, Behn appears to repeat the conventional tragic closure, according to which the lecherous woman is confined to oblivion, whereas the chaste woman is committed to memory. The difference with the conventional plot, is, however, that Florella, while chaste, transgresses the norms of femininity through her outspokenness and defiance of her husband's authority. Perhaps Behn's relegation of Isabella to forgetfulness underlies her desire to eradicate the stereotype of the wanton, wordy woman, that Isabella partly corresponds to. By assigning Isabella to oblivion Behn erases the gender ideal and stereotype of the dependent, victimised woman from the "cultural memory". Instead Behn proposes a new representation of woman: the outspoken, yet virtuous female who achieves control over her representation, language and life through her independence from androcentric society.


In the preface to The Lucky Chance (1686), Behn voices a rejection of formal dramatic conventions: "In short, I think a Play the best divertisement that wise men have; but i do also think them nothing so, who do discourse as formally about the rules of it, as if 'twere the grand affair of humane life" (preface). As we have seen, Behn was nevertheless inspired by the conventions of tragic subjectivity when she wrote Abdelazer. In her representation of Isabella she evokes the stereotype of the assertive, lascivious woman figuring in most late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tragic plays. Her use of the chaste Florella and the adulterous Isabella reminds one of Shirley's opposition of the virtuous Albinia and the wanton
Marpisa in *The Politician*. Behn employs the conventional tragic foil of female characters in a different way, namely in order to challenge the use of binary opposites in defining women, and as the means to subvert the dominant gender notions. Albinia contrasts with Marpisa, in that she is modest in speech, whereas Marpisa is verbally assertive. No such contrast exists between Isabella and Florella, since both women equally transgress the boundaries of feminine silence, and since the identification of Isabella with lewdness is partially exposed as the distorted vision of the male characters in the world of the play. Behn's reconstruction of the tragic foil characters implies that a woman may be outspoken, but virtuous at the same time. 53

Behn appears to adopt the conventions of tragedy according to which the transgressive woman is deprived of control over language, command over her self-image and authority over her existence. Isabella's disempowerment is similar to the lack of control that tragic female characters such as Tamora, Beatrice Joanna, Evadne and Annabella are destined to. Behn's adoption of the conventions of female tragic subjectivity has a different significance. Whereas in most tragic plays the disempowerment of the transgressive woman serves to restore the gender status quo, and to eliminate the threat that women may pose to the gender order, Behn employs the conventional plot line to point to the dangers of woman's obsessive love for and dependence on men. Criticising the principle of wifely obedience, Behn reveals that women who are independent from men and assert their voices can exercise more control over their self-representation and fate than women who are submissive to their husbands. In other words, Behn recontextualises the conventional tragic plot with regard to the transgressive woman, and lends an alternative significance to this plot line: the plot line does no longer serve to condemn a woman's self-assertion or to reinstate male power over women. Instead, the plot line is embedded within a context of female victimisation, so as to criticise man's power over the female sex as well as man's lasciviousness. Thus, Behn criticises and deconstructs current gender discourses.

53 In this respect, *Abdelazer* is similar to *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, which also represent the equation of woman's speech with wantonness as the product of men's lecherous nature. *Abdelazer* is particularly similar to *Othello*, moreover, in its exposure of woman's reputation as vulnerable to slander: like Desdemona, Florella falls victim to false imputations of adultery. However, Behn goes a step further than Shakespeare by suggesting that the dominant discourses concerning female utterance are a tool men may use to manipulate women: Abdelazer attempts to make Florella assassinate the king by expressing his suspicions that she may be adulterous, due to her conversations with the king. Whereas the moor Othello is the victim of the dominant equation of woman's speech with lechery, as evoked by Iago's insinuations, the moor Abdelazer is a villain who deliberately employs the dominant ideology in order to gain social status and power. In fact, he is similar to the villain Maligni in Thomas Porter's *The Villain*, in that he assumes wanton discourses and attempts to rape an innocent young woman.
Behn has adopted the common characterisation of female tragic characters as marriageable objects of exchange as found in, for instance, *The Changeling*. Whereas *The Changeling* confirms the patriarchal ideology which assigns women the role of commercial, exchangeable vessels, *Abdelazer* exposes and criticises the commodifying of women on the marriage market. Similar to John Ford in *The Broken Heart*, Behn stresses the pain and grief caused by forced marriages. Yet, Behn goes even a step further by presenting the objectification of women on the marriage market as the cause of man's violence against women in the form of rape. Behn thus evokes the common representation of women as objects of exchange in order to question woman's social position.

At the end of the play queen Isabella appears relegated to oblivion. Like many earlier female tragic characters, such as Tamora and Evadne, queen Isabella is denied a continued presence in memory. While in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* it is suggested that Tamora should be forgotten because of her extraordinary sinfulness, in Behn's tragedy no overt connection is made between Isabella's erasure from the "memory" of the text and the characters and her transgressions. In other words, there is no evidence that Behn eradicates Isabella from the text to make a point against woman's transgression of gender ideals. Perhaps, therefore, it is possible to read Isabella's confinement to absence and silence as Behn's eradication of the stereotypes of the wanton, wordy woman and the phenomenon of female submission.

9.9. The Play as a Tragedy for Performance.

The performative nature and performative elements of *Abdelazer* endorse Behn's subversion of gender notions and her legitimisation of female utterance. In the play the idea of performance in the sense of acting out a part is central. Queen Isabella often describes her actions as the assumption of a part. When she wants to make Don Alonzo believe that his sister Florella is adulterous, the queen argues that she will "prepare my story for his Ear" and asks "all that's ill in Woman-kind" to "furnish" her "with sighs and feigned tears" (III, ii). As we have seen, Isabella's actions in the play are generally performative, in that she assumes the discourses and enacts the deeds that Abdelazer prescribes for her. Emphasising Isabella's role-playing, Behn points out that gender is not natural, but the performance of a particular part. At the same time Behn's suggestions that Isabella acts out a part under the direction of Abdelazer implies a subversion of the idea that the female actresses on the public stage are natural.
bawds. Analogous to Isabella, who is playing the role that Abdelazer designs for her, the actresses are often playing erotic parts forced on them by the directors of the theatre.

As a play written for the public stage, *Abdelazer* contains many visual elements, such as the battle between Philip's men and Abdelazer's party in Act IV. Apart from this, various references to the visual can be found in the play. Abdelazer describes the queen's "face and eyes" as reflections of her lust: "Thou shalt see the balls of those eyes/Burning with fire of Lust" (I, i). Abdelazer also translates his suspicions of his wife's adultery in visual terms. He wants Florella to murder the king in order to kill "thy Image in his brest" (III, i). Furthermore, he believes that he can read proof of Florella's lust for the king in her eyes: "So innocent!-damn thy dissembling tongue…he gaz'd upon thy face, whilst yours as wantonly/ return'd , and understood the Amorous language" (III, i). He thus even transfers language as a verbal medium to the realm of the visual.

Showing how the female characters are subjected to the male gaze, and are subsequently unjustly identified with wantonness, Behn alludes to and criticises the visual consumption and sexualisation of actresses by the male audience. Just as Abdelazer transfers his own wanton desires to the women around them, and consequently views them as spectacles of lust, the male members of the theatre may have considered the actresses as objects of sexual titillation because of their own lascivious fantasies. Moreover, Behn suggests that women are often merely judged on ground of their visual appearance. When Florella seeks to defend herself against Abdelazer's accusations of sexual impurity, her words go unnoticed by Abdelazer. He rejects her defensive speech as the product of her "dissembling tongue" (III, i), and only appears to trust his eyes. Thus, Behn exposes society's tendency to silence women as man's ability to control woman's identity and dominate the signifying process. At the same time, Behn's exposure of the objectification of women

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54 For more details on possibilities for staging the female body in performance, see Aston, 1995, 95.
55 Nash states that in Behn's drama "women characters are often objectified by a controlling male gaze, but Behn also explores what happens when women adopt the gaze for themselves" (1994, 77).
56 As Franceschina points out, Behn often displays man's perspectives on women as distorted as well as misleads the audience through the use of devices such as disguise: "Both audience and characters are asked to differentiate between the sign vehicle, or signifier, and its referent… Behn re-encodes this relationship in such a way that nothing can be taken for either its face or its mask value" (1995, 29). Diamond argues: "Aphra Behn, more than any other Restoration playwright, exploits the fetish/commodity status of the female performer, even as her plays seek to problematise that status" (1999, 37). A good example of this problematisation of the female performer as a spectacle can be found in *The Rover*. The portrait of Angellica that is hung out to attract customers stresses the commodification of the actress's body by the theatre world.
57 As Lewcock states: "What is unique to Behn is not only her appreciation of the visual effects of a performance but also the way that she uses this to affect the perceptions of the audience and change their conception and comprehension of her plots" (1996, 66).
implies a rejection of the ideal of feminine silence, since this would signify complicity with man's subjugation of the female sex.

9.11. Conclusion: *Abdelazer* and Tragedies by Female Precursors.

Behn wrote her tragedy for an audience different from those of her female precursors. Yet, the ways in which she undermines the dominant gender discourses and legitimises female utterance are similar to those manners in which Sidney, Cary, Philips, Cavendish and Polwhele subvert the equation of woman's self-expression with lasciviousness. Similar to Cary, Behn evokes the stereotype of the wanton, wordy woman and contrasts this stereotype with an alternative representation of the female speaking subject: that of the assertive, yet sexually pure woman. Thus, like Cary, Behn challenges the binary opposites of the voiceless, chaste female and the eloquent, talkative prostitute, by suggesting alternative presentations of womanhood.

In Behn's play religious discourses are related to her representation of sexuality. In this respect, Behn's drama is similar to Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* and Polwhele's *The Faithful Virgins*, which also associates man's speech with sacrilege and woman's speech with Christian principles. Moreover, like Sidney and Philips, Behn subverts the dominant association of woman's speech with wantonness by showing that men's representation of the female characters as unchaste is a flawed perception issuing from their own lack of sexual morality. Similar to Cary, Behn stages an innocent woman who becomes the victim of man's slander of her reputation. Yet, unlike previous female dramatists, Behn unveils the social commodification of women, in particular the commodification of women in marriage and on the stage. In this way Behn displays a "new power" as a subversive dramatist.

We have seen that Sidney, Cary and Philips rewrite the common tragic plot according to which the outspoken woman is divested of her power over discourse, representation and the course of events before she is killed off. In contrast with these dramatic "foremothers", Behn repeats the plot conventionally reserved for the transgressive woman. She does not so much rewrite these conventions, but recontextualises them, and thus gives them a different meaning. As we noticed, Cavendish also evokes the conventional tragic plot, but does so in relation to virtuous women, showing that women are victimised by adhering to the norm of feminine silence. Behn uses the established tragic plot patterns in relation to the adulterous woman in the play, yet she also evokes the conventional plot line in order to criticise woman's
dependence upon men. Like Cavendish, Behn represents female utterance as a defence against man's cruelty and sexual impurity.

Unlike all the other tragedies by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women playwrights, Behn's play does not represent woman's speeches in an all-female context. This illustrates Behn's difference from Sidney, Cary, Philips and Cavendish, who wrote closet tragedies, and, in line with their generic choice, placed women's speech in enclosed, feminine settings. *Abdelazer* refers to its own status as a text designed for public performance through suggestions of role-playing and allusions to visibility. Like Polwhele, Behn depicts the behaviour of her female characters as acted out parts. In a way similar to Polwhele, Behn stresses woman's commodification as object of the male gaze. She uses references to the visual in order to expose men's control over the female sex, and to criticise the commodification of actresses in the public theatre. Like Cavendish, Behn associates visibility with the unspeakable. Implicit in Abdelazer's assessment of women on the basis of their visual appearance is his desire to make women "unspeakable", that is, silent. Abdelazer's transference of representation to the visual ironically makes visible what is "unspeakable" in society: that men project their own desires on the female sex, and thus, are unable to represent women properly. This suggested inability of men to represent women correctly, undermines the current gender norms and notions invented by men. Behn appropriates the dramatic gender discourses: her "new power" as a dramatist may "supply the old" androcentric stage representations and conventions.
Figure 13: Title page of *The Tragedie of Mariam* by Elizabeth Cary (British Library).
Concluding Remarks.

i. New Tragic Contexts.

The painting on the front cover, probably from the hand of Thomas Bradwell, depicts the Restoration actress Anne Bracegirdle. Bracegirdle defiantly returns the gaze of the spectator, while holding up a mask, the symbol of the dramatic genre, in her left hand. Proudly presenting the mask as if it were a trophy, the portrait suggests that Bracegirdle is in control over the medium of drama: she displays her talents in drama on the public stage, acting being second nature to her. Bradwell's painting illustrates women's successful appropriation of the public stage in the second half of the seventeenth-century.

While up till the 1980s literary studies have mainly focused on women's contribution to public drama during the Restoration, women's access to the public stage as actresses and dramatists was preceded by a long period during which women participated in private forms of dramatic entertainment. As was illustrated in the first chapter, the contradictions within the dominant discourses made it possible for Renaissance and early Restoration women to engage with drama. Renaissance Englishwomen's first involvement with drama was marked by silence and privacy. Although Queen Henrietta Maria was restricted to the private sphere of the household as an actress, she cast off the socially prescribed norm of silence by adopting speaking parts in drama. During the Protectorate, when the public theatres were closed, women and men were equally excluded from public acting. The subsequent confinement of drama to the private sphere led to women's increasing participation in theatrical performances. When the theatres re-opened in 1660, women were at last admitted to the public stage.

The move from the private to the public sphere also characterised the position of women playwrights in the period. The first women writers involved with drama were without exception noblewomen who often translated plays by foreign male authors into English. Whether translations or pieces of original writing, Renaissance Englishwomen's plays were all designed for consumption within the domestic sphere. Presented as closet dramas, these first dramatic writings by women did not transgress the boundaries of feminine privacy. Yet, being part of an aristocratic culture in which men and women would often come together in households to enjoy private dramatic entertainments, it is not unthinkable that these closet plays by women were performed, albeit in front of an audience of intimates. This study helps to uncover the performative elements in closet tragedies by English Renaissance women, and
This study also contributes to previous research on closet drama, in that it points out the developments within the genre which eventually led to women's engagement with public drama. Being at first embedded within a private theatrical counterculture in which noblemen also participated, women's drama gradually became more public. The development from privacy to publicity that marked women writers' engagement with drama is reflected by the tragic plays by Mary Sidney, Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish, Katherine Philips, Elizabeth Polwhele and Aphra Behn. In chapter four we saw that Mary Sidney's *The Tragedie of Antonie* (ca. 1590) closely follows the conventions of closet drama. The play ends with a symbolic enclosure of speech, namely Cleopatra's final words within the confined space of the tomb. Although Sidney's tragedy also contains allusions to performance and the visual, the nature of the drama as closet drama is emphasised.

As illustrated in chapter five, Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam* (ca. 1604-09) was meant as a closet play and incorporates several characteristics of the genre. However, making an issue of woman's right to a public voice, Cary evokes a tension between the contents and form of her tragedy, which simultaneously challenges its confined nature as a closet play. Furthermore, Cary questions the desirability of a constrained female self-expression, and her tragedy does not end on the enclosure of speech characteristic of closet drama. Finally, Cary's drama suggests stage directions and frequently alludes to the visual. This points to the fact that *The Tragedie of Mariam* may have a hitherto undiscovered performance history.

Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy* (ca. 1650) clearly underlines its nature as closet drama. Despite the fact that the sociable virgins favour woman's participation in the public sphere, they never move out of their private circle themselves. This shows that Cavendish thought of woman's participation in a public sphere of discourse, such as the playhouse, as a fantasy, but not a reality. At the same time that Cavendish endorses the nature of her play as closet drama, she also suggests the need to break free from constrained forms of dramatic expression. Cavendish discards the closet form at a moment when she expresses her criticism on the ways in which society constrains womanhood. This partial release of the closet form is paralleled by frequent allusions to performance and visibility in the play. A woman's role is presented as the performance of a socially imposed part instead of a natural given, and Cavendish uses stage directions to reveal social taboos. We saw in chapter seven that Philips's *Pompey, a Tragedy* (1663) has an ambiguous status in relation to the areas of privacy and publicity. Being originally intended as a closet play, Philips's drama was converted into a
drama for performance under the influence of the Earl of Orrery. There is a contrast between
the fact that the female protagonist Cleopatra mainly raises her voice in the company of other
women, and the legitimisation of the heroine's engagement with politics and public discourse.

From 1570 till 1665 women emphasised the private nature of their drama. However, at
the same time one can speak of a gradual release of closet drama and private discursive
settings. The tension between privacy and publicity present in Philips's and Cavendish's
tragedies in particular eventually developed into tragic drama by women writers that was
written for public performance. The first tragic play by a woman that was designed for the
stage, Elizabeth Polwhele's *The Faithfull Virgins* (ca. 1670), displays the author's anxiety
about the public status of her tragedy. Polwhele depicts women whose acts of communication
only take place in a feminine, private context. Yet, while the suggestion of closet drama in
*The Faithfull Virgins* may reveal the author's discomfort about her public voice, at the same
time the elements of closet drama play a major role in Polwhele's criticism of gender norms.
Polwhele uses the convention of the messenger to dissociate woman's speech from the female
sexual body, thus undermining the common association of female speech with lasciviousness.
The setting of the hearse is used to underline society's constrainment of woman's self-
expression. Polwhele uses performative elements alongside conventions of closet drama in
order to point to what is unspeakable in her own culture, namely woman's unjustified
subjugation. Thus, like Cavendish, Polwhele resorts to the visual in order to denounce social
abuses that are usually kept in the closet.

The visual comes to play an even more prominent part in Aphra Behn's *Abdelaz'ir; or:
The Moor's Revenge* (1677): frequent references are made to society's commodification of
women as objects of the male gaze, which hints at the eroticisation of actresses. Moreover, the
absence of specific women-to-women conversations in her play shows that the setting of the
public theatre is summoned up and reflected in Behn's tragedy.

As we have seen, far from being a marginal genre which did not relate to the public
sphere, closet drama was an essentially political choice of genre which enabled women to
voice their sometimes subversive ideas through tragedy. Being excluded from writing plays
for the stage, women writers could suggest an alternative dramatic culture by taking up closet
drama, thus overcoming their exclusion from the public dramatic networks. At the same time,
women dramatists could use closet drama as a form through which they could discuss issues,
such as woman's voice, woman's social role and woman's position in marriage in a safe way.
As this study suggests, because women's engagement with private literary forms which
closely intersected with the masculine public sphere, it will be essential to investigate the
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cultural phenomenon of closet drama as well as any other domestic literary countercultures in further detail.

ii. New Perspectives on the Female Voice.

As became clear from the readings of several tragic plays in chapter three, Renaissance and early Restoration tragedies generally confirmed the dominant idealisation of feminine silence and the association of woman's words with wantonness. The dominant ideology is often voiced by female foil characters: one silent and chaste female character and one outspoken, indecent woman. This is, for instance, the case in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Politician*. There are a few plays which challenge the dominant gender discourses concerning woman's voice by exposing the idea that outspoken women are adulterous as a projection of men's wanton minds. The dominant ideology is, however, more often used as a means of slandering women unjustly. *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Villain* are cases in point. Yet, while these tragedies thus challenge the dominant gender norms, at the same time the heroes who unjustly suspect the women characters of adultery are not always criticised. Othello's final moment of assertion does not include a sense of recognition on his part that it is unjust to kill any woman on grounds of adultery; he only resents having slain Desdemona because she was innocent: "But that I did proceed upon just grounds/ To this extremity" (V, ii, 137-40). While in plays such as *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Politician* the concept of wantonness is linked with men's voices, the idea that assertive women are sexually immoral is not undermined.

This study contributes to our understanding of gender representations in early modern English tragedy, showing that alternative discourses on women and speech were developed by female playwrights. The idea that outspoken women were lascivious that was prevalent in tragedy was challenged from within the genre, for Renaissance and early Restoration women playwrights revised the conventional tragic stereotype of the expressive woman. Those female writers who engaged with tragedy generally sought to represent woman's speech as acceptable by dressing up their female assertive protagonists with feminine qualities. The discourses of maternity, privacy, religion and sexual purity adopted by the contemporary women writers discussed in chapter two, are also employed by these dramatists as strategies to legitimise assertive women by feminising them. Often, these women dramatists' justification of female utterance are accompanied by a reconstruction of the conventional tragic foil, and the transfer of qualities associated with woman's speech to man's words. While Cary evokes the tragic foil of Mariam and Salome in order to dissociate her heroine's outspokenness from sexual
flagrancy, at the same time she discards the convention of the foil in her process of legitimising woman's speech. Adding the character of the silent, chaste Graphina to her source material, Cary represents Mariam as a character that falls in between these two types of womanhood: Mariam is neither modest in speech, nor lascivious. Thus challenging the cultural categorisation of women according to binary opposites, Cary proposes a legitimate woman speaker. Furthermore, Cary rewrites the tragic foil by using it to contrast a male and a female character: Cary opposes Mariam's virtuous speeches to Herod's wanton discourses. Similar to Cary, Cavendish subverts the dominant ideology by contrasting woman's pure speeches with man's bawdy words, and by opposing woman's honourable use of religious discourses to man's blasphemy. Polwhele also contrasts man's lecherous speech and woman's pure expression: the female protagonists mainly raise their voices against men in order to defend their chastity against man's lascivious imputations, and whereas the men assume religious discourses in order to secure their lust, the women allude to religion for moral purposes. The legitimising strategies adopted by Cary, Cavendish and Polwhele can also be discerned in Behn's representation of the female voice. Contrasts are evoked between man's indecent discourses and abuse of religious allusions on the one hand, and woman's purity of speech and honourable use of Biblical language on the other.

At the same time one can speak of an emerging resistance to the gender order, and to woman's submission in general, in tragedies by late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women writers of tragic plays. This study reveals the feminist consciousness emerging in tragedies by women: it offers a new perspective on female dramatists by showing that these women not only endorsed gender roles by modelling themselves and their heroines on feminine norms, but also subverted gender discourses. Women playwrights voice an awareness of the desire for power that underlies the prevalence of the ideology of feminine silence, and suggest that silence is harmful to a woman.

In Cary's tragedy "recognition" is concerned with the unjust application of the dominant gender discourses on women. Thus Cary questions the validity of judging women on basis of their speeches and silences and she subverts the ideology of the voiceless female by re-interpreting tragic "recognition". Cavendish, several decades later, analyses the social system behind the ideology of feminine silence. She exposes the dominant veneration of feminine silence as an instrument of social oppression, pointing out that the ideal of woman's speechlessness is used as a tool through which men seek to control women. She demystifies the cultural idealisation of the silent woman, showing that modest women are maltreated by their husbands and male relatives. In criticising the dominant gender discourses and the
mechanisms of oppression underlying them, Cavendish is more radical than Sidney and Cary who mainly seek to attack man's classification of women. Cavendish's attack on women's subjugation is endorsed by the function of the chorus in her text. Unlike most tragedies, in which the chorus represents the dominant social values against which the protagonist's actions are measured, The Unnatural Tragedy includes a chorus which criticises women's compliance with the dominant gender norms.

The subsequent women dramatists who wrote tragedies for the public stage continued to expose the mechanisms behind the dominant gender discourses. These women relate the cultural silencing of the female sex to society's tendency to consider women as titillating spectacles. Elizabeth Polwhele's The Faithful Virgins shows that the stereotyping of women as inconstant creatures is a prejudice resulting from man's refusal to listen to women. Polwhele's criticism of man's visualisation of women implies criticism of the ways in which Restoration audiences sexualised the actresses they saw on stage. Polwhele makes clear that women are at times forced to be unfaithful to their beloveds due to the commodification of women on the marriage market, and women are shown to turn into adulterous beings because of their husbands' lechery. Thus, Polwhele shows that the dominant gender discourses result from men's oppression of women's wills and voices and men's maltreatment of the female sex.

Similar to Polwhele, Aphra Behn points out that men view women as spectacles without listening to them, and that they project their own fantasies upon the female sex. She subverts the common belief that women who assert themselves are whores, by shifting the role of the prostitute partially to the male protagonist. Pointing to a collective set of strategies used by female authors, this study opens up ways of investigating women's writings from different genres along side one another and suggests the existence of a female literary tradition through which women writers inspired each other.

iii. A Revision of Tragic Subjectivity.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis of tragic plays by Shakespeare, Kyd, Middleton and Rowley, Beaumont and Fletcher, Webster, Ford, Shirley, Porter and Lee in chapter three is that most Renaissance and early Restoration tragedies are based on plots that confirm the dominant gender norms. The assertive female characters conventionally lose the subjectivity that they display earlier on in the play, and end up as silenced corpses. These transgressive women are generally not granted transcendence over death: they are denied a last moment of self-assertion, cannot fashion their own deaths and are relegated to oblivion.
This is, among others, the fate reserved for the outspoken women in *Arden of Faversham*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Changeling* and *The Maid's Tragedy*. There are many instances of sexually active, assertive tragic women who are further punished for their cultural transgression by being deprived of their motherhood. Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, Annabella in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and Marpisa in *The Politician* are examples in case. The death of the transgressive woman is often staged as a reinstatement of order and reason: Evadne's death in *The Maid's Tragedy* marks the reassuring end of the sense of madness experienced by the male characters. When female tragic characters enjoy control over their existence, it is usually only when they shape their own deaths by committing suicide. Thus, the subjectivity that female tragic characters manifest is usually bound up with the subsequent annihilation of the woman's capacity for subjectivity.

Alternative representations of tragic subjectivity emerged by the Jacobean period. Webster's Duchess of Malfi stages an assertive woman who achieves transcendence over death: her dying speech constitutes a glorious moment of self-representation, and the Duchess's voice figures as an audible presence beyond the grave. Tragedies from the Caroline period onwards display more sympathy for the transgressive female character, assigning her autonomy over her death as well as a final moment of self-assertion. However, when lecherous, outspoken female characters, such as Ford’s Hippolyta and Shirley’s Marpisa, enjoy transcendence over death it is often to take revenge upon male characters who are equally transgressive and who victimise the pure, feminine women in the play. The level of subjectivity and transcendence granted to the appropriately feminine characters is always higher than the transcendence that these overreaching women achieve.

As Sue-Ellen Case stated in 1998, "constructing woman as subject…is the future, liberating work" (145) of a new feminist dramatic poetics. This study reveals that a feminist tragic poetics is not a contemporary phenomenon, for it was already developed by seventeenth-century women dramatists. Although critical analyses of gender stereotypes in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tragedies have been published over the past few decades, so far hardly any scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which women dramatists actively engaged with these conventional representations of tragic subjectivity. This study may, however, contribute to a deeper understanding of women's roles in the transformations of seventeenth-century tragedy with regard to speech, sexuality, transgression and transcendence. It also points out how female dramatists acted as agents of cultural change by transforming gender discourses in general, thus challenging the idea that early modern Englishwomen did not exert any control over the processes of signification. By emphasising
the role of women dramatists in changing the tragic tradition, this study may also help to challenge the established literary canon. Since seventeenth-century English women dramatists played a significant role in shaping the tragic genre, their plays deserve further critical attention, and a more central place in literary history. At the same time, this study may contribute to a different understanding of the tragic genre itself, showing how the genre was influenced by dominant and alternative gender discourses, and emphasising that seventeenth-century tragedy incorporated a great variety of conventions.

The aspects of tragedy that Renaissance and early Restoration women playwrights reconstructed are discussed in detail in this study. As we have seen, Sidney particularly revises the concept of tragic transcendence by granting her assertive Cleopatra the possibility to voice self-awareness in her dying speech, and a Stoic command over her existence. Cary also subverts the conventions of tragic transcendence. Although Mariam is submitted to the ending traditionally reserved for the forward female, namely death, she is allowed a glorious speech of resistance before she is led to the scaffold, and her voice transcends the grave of silence that Herod had committed her to.

Women playwrights from the Renaissance and early Restoration also transformed the tragic genre by reversing its conventional role patterns. Cary challenges the conventional tragic ending. The tragic conclusion is marked by a reversal of the conventional plot line, in that Mariam attains a level of subjectivity that she had not enjoyed before. In addition, Herod is subjected to the fate that usually befalls the tragic transgressive woman, losing all his power over discourse, the plot and representation. This reversal is bound up with Cary's justification of female utterance, and suggests the possibility of a reversed gender order. Apart from this, madness rules rather than disappears at the ending of her tragedy. Cary also drastically undermines the established tragic ending by having the wordy, wanton Salome live on rather than killed. The threat of woman's appropriation of subjectivity is not eliminated.

Philips also reverses the gender roles assigned to characters in most seventeenth-century tragedies. Her assertive female protagonists Cornelia and Cleopatra enjoy control over language, representation and their lives throughout the plot, whereas the male characters are deprived of this control in the course of the play. Unlike Mary Sidney's Cleopatra who can only command her own existence, Philips's princess also manages to direct the wills of others. Philips reconstructs the tragic conclusion in that Cleopatra and Cornelia are not "punished" for their assertiveness and agency by losing their lives. Both women are still alive at the ending of the tragedy, and Cleopatra even manages to achieve lasting fame during her lifetime. Philips appears to have transferred the conventional tragic plot line to the male
characters in the play, possibly because the men's immorality contrasts with the women's defence of honour and justice.

Among the female playwrights studied in this book, there are also a few who repeat the conventional tragic plotline, but who give it a different significance. For instance, Cavendish's follows the conventional plotline, but in relation to a woman who abides by the norms of silence rather than a woman who oversteps gender boundaries, as is usually the case. This shift of the traditional ending towards the silent, chaste woman serves to criticise the dominant gender ideology. Polwhele repeats the conventional tragic plot line in relation to Isabella, who is obliterated from the play, as well as in relation to the virgins whose female subjectivity is intertwined with self-annihilation. However, her use of this traditional plot line does not necessarily imply a confirmation of the dominant gender norms. In the light of Polwhele's criticism on the ways in which men reduce women to objects of the gaze, her exposure of the miscommunication between the sexes as well as her point that women are forced to identify against themselves because of social restrictions, Polwhele's adoption of the conventional plot seems the instrument to criticise gender norms. Polwhele appears to make a connection between the fact that her female characters fail to achieve the status of subjects, and the male characters' refusal to grant women that position by silencing them.

Behn's Isabella also undergoes the ending reserved for tragic transgressive women. Yet, Behn resorts to the conventional tragic closure not in order to reinstate the cultural status quo, but to show how women can lose their power to act and speak as subjects through their infatuation with men. Thus, Behn voices criticism on woman's dependence on the male sex as well as the relationships between the sexes that involve woman's commodification.


Considering the fact that Renaissance and early Restoration women writers made public drama accessible to female engagement, it is remarkable that for a long time Aphra Behn was the only woman writing plays for public performance.¹ Some tragedies were written by women between 1678 and the 1690s, but these were specifically presented as drama that was not meant to be staged. Anne Lee Wharton wrote a tragedy *Love's Martyr, or Witt above Crowns* (1685), which was intended as closet drama. The tragedy is addressed to Mrs Mary Howe, being embedded in the traditions of female address, for Wharton concludes that her address to Mrs

¹ As Marta Straznicky argues, "one of the more striking ironies of English dramatic history" is that "the first era to have women become professional playwrights was also the first to foster a thoroughly privatized closet drama" (1997, 703).
Howe "cannot aspire to the name of dedication" (preface). Wharton also claims that the play was "never deserved nor was ever designed to be publick" (preface). Likewise, Anne Finch wrote *The Triumph of Love and Innocence* (1688) as a play which was not meant for public staging.²

According to some historians, the fact that by the 1680s women writers resorted again to closet drama can be explained by the disappearance of direct patronage and support of the public theatre by the monarchy. While James II shared his brother's passion for the theatre, the troubled years of his reign from 1685 to 1689 saw a general reduction of his engagement with theatrical activity.³ The shift from an aristocratic to a bourgeois public theatre may have made it more difficult for respectable, educated women to enter the stage as writers, for as we saw, Polwhele and Behn could use their Royalist connections as routes of access. However, it may well be the case that this generation of women playwrights were discouraged from having their plays staged because of the common association between the female dramatist and the whore from which Aphra Behn also suffered.

It is an undeniable fact, however, that the mid 1690s were marked by an explosion of tragic plays by women that were presented in the public theatres. As Nicoll states, in the year December 1695 to December 1696 "audiences saw no less than five new plays by female writers…Mrs Trotter's *Agnes de Castro*, Mrs Manley's *The Lost Lover* and *The Royal Mischief*, and Mrs Pix's *Ibrahim* and *The Spanish Wives*" (1992, 75). These tragedies were followed by "Ariadne"s *The Unnatural Mother* (1697), Catherine Trotter's *The Fatal Friendship or The Fate of Disobedience* (1698), Susannah Centlivre's *The Perjured Husband or the Adventures of Venice* (1700) and Jane Wiseman's *Antiochus, the Great* (1701), among others. The enormous output of tragedies by women for the stage seems to have resulted from women's increasing influence as theatre managers by 1695. In March of that year a conflict over wages led the leading actors Thomas Betterton, Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegidle, Mrs Bowman and Mrs Leigh to break away from the United Company, securing a license to start their own company. The four actresses gained shares in this new Betterton's Company. ⁴ The fact that Catherine Trotter's and Delarivier Manley's tragedies were performed by Betterton's company suggests a relationship between the influence of the women actresses in theatre

² For an analysis of the ways in which Finch established herself as an anti-performance writer, see Straznicky, 1997, 706.
³ See Howe, 1992, 6-8.
management and the emergence of tragic plays on the public stage. Elizabeth Barry being a highly popular tragic actress at the time, it is not surprising that many women started to write tragedies for the public stage. However, it must be noted that many among this generation of "Female Wits" were prompted to write tragedies for the public stage out of economical necessity: for example, being an unmarried mother with no family to provide for her, Delarivier Manley was forced to earn a living by her pen.

While by the mid 1690s women followed in Aphra Behn's footsteps by becoming professional playwrights, the tragedies written by these women still recall the tradition of closet drama. Mary Pix's *The False Friends* (1699) is preceded by an address to the Countess of Burlington in which Pix requests approval from the countess. In this prologue Pix disclaims interest in the reception of her play by public audiences: "Applause, that food of Scribblers, were it mine, wou'd not satisfie my Ambition" (A2r). She would feel more transported if the play would appeal to the countess, who "hath reached the bright Path of Virtue" (A2r). The setting of the play in the context of female, private communication, away from the public theatre, suggests the closet drama tradition. Perhaps the prologue should be read as Pix's effort to mask her engagement with public drama, for her play was performed at Lincoln Inn's Fields in May 1699.

Delarivier Manley playfully alludes to the tradition of closet drama in *The Royal Mischief* (1696). The female protagonist falls in love with Levan Dadian, Prince of Colchis, on the basis of the reports that she hears about his honourable nature: "Love enters at the ears as well as eyes. His fame has touched her mind, his form her heart" (II, i). By contrast, Levan becomes enamoured with Homais upon seeing her picture: "Now when I put the colours to my lips/ My heart flew at the touch, eager to meet/ Her beauties. I'll gaze no more, there's magic/ In the circle" (II, i). Whereas the male character is thus associated with the visual, the female protagonist Homais is identified with a tradition of listening. In aligning Homais with the verbal, Pix appears to refer to the closet tradition of reading out drama, in opposition to the "masculine" visual drama of the public stage.

The contrast between Homais, whose affection is stirred by honourable reputation, and Levan, whose interest is evoked by visual beauties, has an additional function in the play. It exposes the tendency of the male sex to eroticise women, to project their own lust on the female sex and to neglect women's speeches, being more interested in them as objects of the

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5 Constance Clark contends that these plays by the new generation of women writers were part of mainstream theatre. See Clark, 1986, 332.
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In fact, the revised tragic tradition constructed by Renaissance and early Restoration women dramatists had a great influence on the tragedies written by later women playwrights in several other respects. The idea that the ideology of woman's silence is used as a tool of manipulation, as expressed by Elizabeth Cary, Elizabeth Polwhele and Aphra Behn, can also be found in Anne Wharton's *Love's Martyr*. Marcellus comes to believe that his future bride Julia has been dishonoured and that "each fool will point at me" (III, i) on the grounds of the suspicions that her secret conversations with Ovid signal her loss of chastity. However, these unjust suspicions have been aroused by Tiberius, who, out of envy, seeks to destroy Marcellus. Likewise, in Manley's *The Royal Mischief* Ismael seeks to bring down Levan's power by slandering his innocent wife Bassima, suggesting that her conversations with Osman are proof of her infidelity. Similar to Cary, Manley exposes the dominant gender discourses by connecting the hero's moment of recognition to an awareness of the injustice of these dominant representations of female speech: "And Bassima that monster she was made./ O injured saint, dart from thy Heaven upon me" (V, i). Like *The Unnatural Tragedy*, Catherine Trotter's *The Fatal Friendship* (1698) reveals that the dominant association of outspoken women with wantonness is rooted in man's lust for power. When Felicia dares to contradict her brother Bellgard as far as her consent to marriage is concerned, Bellgard responds to this defiance of his power by unjustly labelling her a prostitute: "No, strumpet, he but served his lust with thee" (III, ii).

We have noticed that Elizabeth Polwhele and Aphra Behn display sympathy for the outspoken, lascivious woman, by showing that her conduct often results from man's adultery and oppression of the female sex. This sympathy for the villainess is further developed by the "Female Wits". For instance, in *The Royal Mischief* sympathy is created for the adulterous, assertive Homais through Manley's representation of her as the victim of an arranged marriage to an extremely possessive, impotent husband: "I'm a woman, made/ Passionate by want of liberty" (I, i). Homais's death is preceded by her strong self-assertion. Homais suggests that it is her husband's fault that she has become adulterous, successfully shifting responsibility for her transgression to him: "Thou dotard, impotent in all but mischief,/ How could'st thou hope, at such an age, to keep/ A handsome wife?" (V, i). Furthermore, in her dying speech Homais suggests that her death will not end her power, creating the impression that she will "feast at large" in an afterlife: "Oh, I shall reign / A welcome ghost, the fiends
will hug my royal mischief" (V, i). Thus, although being transgressive, Homais transcends mortality. Apart from the power that she displays in her final appearance on stage, Homais manages to direct the events of the plot throughout the play, her eloquence securing support from the armed forces, who defect to her side. Like Cavendish and Philips, Manley represents woman's self-expression as an empowering quality. In view of the fact that the later generation of women playwrights adopted similar techniques in deconstructing gender norms, legitimising female utterance, and recreating tragic subjectivity, we can conclude that the impact of Renaissance and early Restoration women dramatists upon the subsequent development of the tragic was significant.

Taking off the "mask" of silence and privacy that society commanded women to hold up to their faces, Renaissance and early Restoration female playwrights opened up the genre of tragedy for participation by women, first only in private and later also in public theatrical settings. Moreover, these women dramatists deconstructed the dominant gender discourses concerning female utterance, holding up a mirror to society in order to expose the existing gender system. In relation to their revision of the dominant tragic representations of the female voice, these women writers reconstructed the tragic conventions of subjectivity. Thus, they created new "masks", that is new roles for female characters, and new role-models for the women writing after them.