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# In Defence of Absolutes: The Evolution of Aphra Behn's Political Views

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**Abstract:** The evolution of Aphra Behn's political views is a point of scholarly contention. The analysis of her dramatic works starts with her early tragicomedies, like *The Young King* and *The Amorous Prince*, and continues through her well-known Exclusion Crisis's sexual comedies, like *The Roundheads* and *Sir Patient Fancy*. This paper argues that Behn's on-stage royalism was considerably diverse, reflecting various degrees of support for the monarchy. Behn altered her political positions in response to the development of the fierce rivalry between different political parties. Following her concerns and discontent about the king's ability to rule the country in her early plays, Behn developed a remarkable tendency for supporting Charles II and created an image of an impeccable king beyond any criticism. The results suggest that Behn's Toryism did not reflect an unwavering and unchanging support for the newly restored monarchy, as was assumed previously.

**Keywords:** Aphra Behn, political stage, Restoration, Tory, Whig.

## 1 Introduction

Many critics and scholars of Restoration drama argue that royalist Restoration plays reflected absolute support for the newly restored monarchy. Such general arguments oversimplify the scene and see the plays of the 1660s and the early 1670s as a mere act of gratitude to the king, who, in addition to restoring order and the rule of law, restored drama and patronized the talents of the brilliant playwrights of the age. In fact, this study argues that, royalism on stage was considerably diverse and reflected various degrees of support for the monarchy. Unlike the claims of the previous studies, early Restoration royalism was more colorful than what many writers perceive. The new optimistic atmosphere in the country and the wide hopes of improvements in all aspects of life encouraged playwrights to reflect people's hopes for a better future. Men of letters understood this, and while swimming with the current of patriotism, they strove to please the eager playgoers with more than praising the return of the king and condemning the chaos of the Interregnum.

To resist the temptation of generalizations and broad judgments is to grasp the full understanding of the colorful political milieu of the Restoration stage. Away from arguing for or against the dramatic merit of Restoration drama or simply classifying playwrights as supporters or opponents to the court, this study carefully examines the complex,

problematic, and sometimes contradictory political attitudes of Restoration playwrights. In addition to being the prominent female writer of the period, Aphra Behn is a prime example of such a complex dramatic political figure. On the following pages, the paper discusses how Behn's works responded to some of the political quarrels and controversies that engulfed England during the Restoration period, but it is useful before doing so to briefly review the historical progress of events that led to the many political crises of that age.

In April 1660, the Declaration of Breda was issued by the young prince-in-exile, Charles, to announce his rightful claim to the throne of England. Shortly afterwards, the Conventional Parliament announced support for the prince and declared him as the legitimate successor to King Charles I, who was executed in 1649 (De Krey 2007, 16–17). Despite this relatively smooth transition of power, the early few years of Charles II's rule were marked by an unsettled relationship between the court and Parliament. The bitter legacy of the Interregnum and the ever-increasing religious dissent shook the very foundations of the new regime. By the end of the first decade of the Restoration, Protestant dissenters and Catholics became a major source for uneasiness among the country's Protestant majority. The unprecedented Catholic influence at court was directly connected with the increasing doubts regarding French hegemony and influence on the new king. With the absence of any legitimate heir to the crown, the Parliament decided to exclude Charles II's Catholic

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brother, James, from succession. Reports about external conspiracies, like the "Popish Plot" of 1678, spread public suspicion about the continuity of the Stuart rule.

The rising opposition power in Parliament expressed clear dissatisfaction with the government's policies. The fierce parliamentary efforts for a larger share in decision-making and the king's disapproval of such proposals hastened political polarization in the country. James Jones explains that a few years into Charles II's reign "the political nation was becoming divided into irrevocably hostile factions" (1961, 211). The crisis initiated by the Popish Plot in 1678 and the subsequent Exclusion Crisis boosted the emergence of the major party labels of the Restoration period, the Whigs and the Tories. The Whigs formed a strong oppositional movement led by the Earl of Shaftesbury, whereas the Tories showed support and loyalty for Stuart rule. In "Interpreting the Politics of Restoration Drama," Susan Owen argues that the Whigs claimed to oppose absolute rule and tyranny in favor of protecting civil rights and Protestantism. The Tories accused the Whigs of being the new republicans and showed full support for the "legitimate monarchs" (1993, 91).

It was not a wonder, perhaps, that such concerns found their way to stage. In *Restoration Theatre and Crisis*, Susan Owen explains that "[f]rom the outbreak of the Popish Plot scare in the autumn of 1678 onwards, the dramatists denounced the plot as a piece of theatre and suggested that there was more truth and less artifice in the theatre than outside it in the 'theatre of news'" (1996, 3). Although Aphra Behn's works received considerable attention over the previous decades, especially for her feminist insights, few critics have dug deep enough into the nature of her Tory identity. This study comes to mend the half-acknowledged assumptions that usually oversimplify the quality of her political allegiances.

Behn's connections to the court date back to early 1664 when she was said to be recruited as a political spy in Suriname. She was sent to spy on the English exiles in European cities like Antwerp and Bruges (Vander and Vermeir 2015, 280). Nevertheless, her political "pattern" of the 1660s and early 1670s was not an ordinary one. Her dramatic production reflected a moderate example of a royalist writer who, while expressing support for the monarchy, established a distinctive dialogue that reflects the nation's complaints and uncertainty about Charles II's ability to solve some of the pressing political, religious, and economic problems. Behn's *The Young King* (1664?) and *The Amorous Prince* (1671) can be seen as an attempt of a loyalist writer to expose some of the major political challenges of the time while holding the stick in the middle and retaining her pro-royalist sympathies.

## 2 Behn's Early Plays

### 2.1 *The Young King*

Aphra Behn's tragicomedy *The Young King*, or, *The Mistake*

was one of her earliest works, probably composed during the first half of the 1660s, but it was only published in 1683. Like Behn's early dramas, the play discusses issues related to the newly restored monarchy and the heated discussions over Charles II's political performance. The play is set in the ancient kingdom of Dacia, a vast territory that primarily corresponds to present-day Romania and Moldova. The play tells the story of the imprisonment and coronation of Orsames, the prince and heir to the throne of Dacia. The prince has been kept in an isolated castle since his infancy after an oracle predicted that he will be a tyrant once he ascends to the throne. The Queen Mother has no other option except to prepare her only daughter, Cleomena, to rule the country in place of Orsames. As a result of this unusual upbringing in isolation and ignorance, the young prince develops an uncontrollably aggressive behavior. As Dacia faces foreign invasion, the need for a strong male ruler escalates in the country. Orsames is set free and given the chance to rule for one day. The old prophecy immediately proves true; the ignorant prince attempts to rape a woman, orders his teacher to be executed, and acts as a dictator. Orsames is sent back to his exile again, but he is later summoned by the army to rule the country and fight against the Scythian invasion. This time, the young prince proves his merit and saves the country. The play closes with marriage and peace.

The play has many parallels with its contemporary political scene. A few years into his reign, Charles II's political performance posed serious public discontent in regard to the way the country was run. Many royalist playwrights tended to allude to the general atmosphere of public dissatisfaction about Charles II's rule excesses. Anne Hermanson argues that plays like Edmund Waller's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1664), the anonymous *Irena* (1664), and Roger Boyle's *The Black Prince* (1665) depict the rulers' failure in performing their very essential political duties, thus falling short of their subjects' expectations (2014, 37).

Charles II's libertine behavior and political irresponsibility were among the major concerns of critics. Arthur Marotti explains that even high officials in Charles II's administration expressed their uneasiness toward these issues. For instance, Samuel Pepys, a naval administrator and member of Parliament, recorded in his diaries the observations of the wide disapproval with the king's sexual relationship with Lady Castlemain (2000, 103). Such pressing issues about the unfaithfulness and irresponsibility of the king and his uncontrolled passions gave ammunition to dramatists who turned these topics to allegorical stories on stage about exotic settings that allude to their domestic scene.

With the absence of influential political opponents to the king during the early 1660s, royalist playwrights, like Behn, were maintaining an approach that supported the newly restored monarchy, on the one hand, while directing mild

critique against the court's rakish behavior, on the other. Unlike their stubborn support for the king during the Exclusion Crisis, early royalist plays such as *The Young King* present a relatively moderate representation of English royalty. *The Young King* speaks of the nation's complaints about the irresponsible manners of the royal court of Charles II. Nevertheless, what is remarkable in Behn's case is that she presented an attempt by a royalist dramatist to justify the king's behavior. In the play, Orsames grows up in strange conditions and fails to control his wild desires as a result. Todd and Hughes argue that this could be seen as "a topical reference since the play portrays a king learning to control appetite, much as the country must have hoped Charles II would do" (2004, 84). In the play, Orsames is not genuinely unqualified to hold the responsibilities of ruling over the kingdom, but he is presented as a young man trying to learn and adapt to the new changes in his life.

The play can be read as a nontraditional discourse, challenging the centuries-long Divine Right Doctrine. In a similar vein, Anita Pacheco argues that the play is a critique of one of the most controversial issues of early modern England, namely the king's divine right. In fact, this reveals the playwright's concerns about "royalist political theory" in the first decade of the restoration period (Pacheco 2015, 317). The divine right of kings is a political and religious doctrine that asserts that the king derives his right to rule from divinity and, as a result, he cannot be subject to any kind of human authority. The divine right of kings limited the power of other political institutions like the Parliament. In Restoration sermons like "The Fear of God and the King" and "God Save the King" (1660), Anglican clerics tried to defend and further instill the connection between God and kings by describing kings as "inferior gods" or "mortal gods."

What is special about Behn in this play is her bound and objective support for royalism. Contrary to the claim that the play promotes divine right, as Pacheco argues (2015, 318), Behn brought the issue before her audience and invited them to reflect on it. Behn alludes to the dangers of the outdated religious conception of divine kingship that is genuinely immune to public criticism. In the play, Geron's education does not prevent Orsames from making mistakes. On the other hand, surprisingly, the oracle's prophecy proves to be false in the long run as Orsames is restored to the throne only because he proves his valor and capabilities in protecting his country. On more than one occasion in the play, Behn alludes to the internal struggle inside Orsames, a struggle between natural male desires, on the one hand, and noble kingly commitments, on the other. Geron believes that Orsames "can be tam'd by Love and Beauty" and "he'll be fit to reign" (1664, 31).

The parallels between Orsames and Charles II are numerous in the play. Both of them were put in exile, both were invited to return and claim their legitimate right in kingship, and both developed uncontrolled sexual desires. Once these parallels are established, Behn moves to further hypothesize

and explain her views on kingship in general. Behn's play focuses on the dangers of absolute rule and all its religious justifications. Upon his return from exile, Orsames identifies himself with divine power. Orsames tells Geron that if people oppose him, he would:

[...] destroy them, and create anew.

—Hast not observ'd the Sea?

Where ev'ry Wave that hastens to the Bank,  
Though in its angry course it overtake a thousand petty ones,

How unconcern'd 'twill triumph o'er their ruine,  
And make an easie passage to the Shore,— (1664, 12)

Despite the high education Orsames receives in exile, the young man develops tyrannical behavior toward his subjects. The play does not clearly explain the source of such behavior, but perhaps Behn was more concerned with voicing her message about a better mode of monarchical government than with providing a reasonable justification of the unruly behavior of the prince. From a different perspective, Orsames's education was primarily based on the religious teachings of his tutor, Geron. This reference to education might be a hint at the importance of secular education for royalty. In fact, Behn held liberal views in terms of politics and social life. Sara Ellenzeig explains that most of Behn's works were marked by her free-thinking attitude. Behn was influenced by a Restoration-era free-thinking approach that doubted the very basics of religious dogma and celebrated reason over faith (2008, 53–79).

The analysis of *The Young King* shows that Behn was not so overwhelmed by the optimistic patriot sentiments of the 1660s. This is not to claim that she was anti-royalist; rather, she was moderate in her support for the king and a bit suspicious of the worth of an unrestricted monarchical government. At this stage of her career, Behn alluded to the inadequacy of religious training and teaching in shaping good political rule.

## 2.2 *The Amorous Prince*

Similar to *The Young King*, Behn's *The Amorous Prince* (1671) is set in continental Europe, Florence this time. In fact, the dramatists' fascination with foreign settings was common in Restoration theatre. These settings gave Restoration dramatists more freedom and protection for commenting on pressing local concerns. *The Amorous Prince* is about Prince Frederick's sexual adventures, on the one hand, and women's virtue and solidity, on the other. The prince exceeds all limits as he is involved in a sexual affair with Cloris, the sister of his friend Curtius, and then attempts to rape Curtius' fiancé, Laura. In the subplot, the suspicious Antonio persuades his friend Alberto to court his wife to test her virtue. The play is loaded with frank sexual scenes and dialogues. In the opening scene, the audience is introduced to Cloris and Frederick in the aftermath of a sexual encounter. This emphasis on the sexual behavior of high-



rank officials could not go unnoticed by Restoration spectators who were trained to allegorical works. Bridget Orr explains that Restoration audiences expected such works to be allegorical, offering various possible interpretations (2001, 11).

The political nation was increasingly annoyed by the accounts of Charles II's libertine behavior and irresponsibility towards his subjects. Despite the fact that the Licensing of the Press Act (1662) prevented direct criticism of royal behavior, English writers, like Behn, found in literary allegories a useful vehicle to reflect the nation's concerns. In *The Amorous Prince*, Behn is determined to expose more the negative sides of absolute rule. This time, the play's criticism focuses on the sexual politics of the court. Unlike its predecessor, *The Amorous Prince* downplays the military side of royalty and concentrates on moral corruption and political misuse. Derek Hughes argues that Prince Frederick, in particular, represents the misuse of Stuart royal authority (2001, 39–40). The prime focus of the play is Prince Frederick's sexual adventures, his irresponsible behavior, and his neglect of his political duties.

While Orsames' sexuality and tyranny in *The Young King* are justified to a certain extent, Behn presents no excuses for Prince Frederick's rakish behavior in *The Amorous Prince*. Frederick is portrayed as a monster driven by his sexual desires. He is unfaithful to his wife, threatens the virtuous Laura with rape, and takes advantage of his political authority to seduce married women around him. These parallels with Charles II's private life cannot be considered politically innocent. In the 1670s, it was clear to the political nation that the king was far more interested in his indulgent lifestyle than caring for the rising political challenges of his reign.

The bold criticism of the court's sexuality in the play is, perhaps, softened toward the end of the play through Behn's attempt to extend her blame to the rakish courtiers around the king for not helping to amend or solve the weakness at the English court. In a similar fashion, Alnwairan explains that other political Restoration plays, like Boyle's *The Tragedy of Mustapha* and Whitaker's *The Conspiracy*, blame ambitious councilors and courtiers for the chaos and problems at the court (2020, 18).

Just like Charles II, Prince Frederick is surrounded by immoral courtiers, pimps, and mistresses. The representations of immoral courtiers would tone down the criticisms of princely authority. Curtius presents excuses for the prince's irresponsibility, saying that "... he is just and good, only too much misled/ By youth and flattery" (1671, 8). In the play, this organized body of ambitious lecherous individuals compete to seduce the prince in order to gain money and influence. For example, Lorenzo, the whoremaster, introduces his own sister as a prospective mistress to Prince Frederick. Furthermore, Antonio persuades his best friend Alberto to court his wife in a

disgusting manner. As Antonio is obsessed with the need to verify his wife's fidelity, he persuades his friend Alberto to prostitute her, giving Alberto gifts and jewels to further seduce her because "[t]here's far more women won by Gold than industry" (1671, 15).

Although the criticism of English monarchy in *The Amorous Prince* is more serious than ever, Behn does not totally abandon her loyalty to the Stuarts. Behn directed much of her criticism to the bawdy courtiers around the king who tempted him and supplied him with all possible means of sexual indulgence. Yet, as Judy Hayden argues, the play reflects "public anxiety about the king's lack of sexual restraint" (2010, 116). Behn's early plays reflected her unique political stand which was not blindly supportive for the royal institution. While there were no serious fears of political dissent or opposition, Behn found it necessary to reflect on the court's behavior in an attempt to diagnose the sources of political insufficiency in the country. Behn's royalism at this stage of her career was moderate and objective as she presented monarchs as more human and less divine.

### 3 Behn's Exclusion Crisis Plays

With the early signs of the approach of the Exclusion Crisis, Behn's political stand developed to adapt with the new pressing challenges that faced the English monarchy. Toward the end of the second decade of Charles II's reign, the anxiety over the Catholic influence in the royal institution increased rapidly after England's alliance with the Catholic France against Holland, a fellow Protestant nation. For the majority of the political nation, the danger this time was two-fold: an alliance with a Catholic country and an alliance with an absolute mode of government, i.e. Louis XIV of France.

Moreover, in the absence of legitimate children to the king, the very Protestantism of the country was endangered by a prospective Catholic king, i.e. James, Duke of York. This new dimension to the already existing political problems and concerns about the king's performance hastened political partisanship in the country. Political opposition to the king was taking form, and hostility toward monarchy was gaining traction. Such new trends were reflected in many plays, like Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673) and Ibrahim the Illustrious Bassa (1676). As a result, old royalist playwrights like Behn had to take sides, and at that time there was no place for grey areas. Behn shifted to full and unconditional support for Charles II and his brother James. Her plays of the Exclusion Crisis reflected the change in her political stance, which was almost wholeheartedly supporting the Stuarts.

Behn's loyalism to Charles II developed more rapidly during the late 1670s as the Exclusion Crisis was taking shape. Behn took advantage of her literary talents to satirize the Whigs,

the rising opposition party. As Mary O'Donnell puts it, Behn tended to attack Whigs on her stage and dramatize them as "sexist" and greedy (2004, 6). During the second half of the 1670s, Behn was increasingly involved in the political field till; by the end of the decade, she became a prominent propagandist for the newly established Tory party. As the Earl of Shaftesbury and other opposition leaders were organizing Parliament's endeavors to interfere in the succession issue, Behn, like the majority of royalist writers, stood on the Stuart's side and supported their cause.

### 3.1 *Sir Patient Fancy*

*Sir Patient Fancy* was performed in 1678, when the Crisis of Exclusion was accelerating the political partisanship in the country. As one of the so-called "Cuckolding Comedies," the play portrays old Sir Patient Fancy, a wealthy Whig and zealous supporter for republicans during the "good days of the late Lord Protector" (1678, 17). Sir Patient is married to a charming young lady, Lucia, who is in a relationship with Wittmore, a penniless young cavalier. As zealous monarchists, the ambitious young lovers are determined to rob Sir Patient of his wealth before they publicly announce their love. The conflict between the lovers and the foolish husband makes much of the comic aspect of the play. At the end of the play, Sir Patient discovers his wife's relationship with Wittmore and Lucia tells him that she had married him for his money. The simple-minded husband easily surrenders, forgives his wife, and tells her that he will divorce her so she can unite with her lover. The play closes with the young couple planning for their new life.

In *Sir Patient Fancy*, Behn uses confusion, disguise, and bedroom farce scenes to ridicule Old Sir Patient and, on a deeper level, the faction he represents. Sir Patient is duped by almost everyone in the play, including his wife, Lucia, as well as his daughter, Isabella. Each time Lucia and Wittmore escape, Sir Patient's suspicious eye at the last moment adds a comic and suspenseful atmosphere to the play. The sexual element of this play, like many other plays by Behn, became one of the permanent ingredients in the Tory comedy of the period. In such scenes, the comic aspect shifts the focus from the unfaithfulness of the wife to her witty plans, resourcefulness, and her husband's outdated, foolish mindset. In all cases, the happy ending is necessarily connected to the defeat of the Whig.

Behn's play contrasts the image of the corrupt rich Whig who acquired his wealth during Cromwell's Commonwealth with the image of the needy young cavalier who is striving to rise again on the social ladder after being deprived from property and state under the previous regime. This idea is expressed in the first encounter between Sir Patient and Wittmore:

*Sir Pat.* I am glad of your Arrival, Sir.—Your Religion, I pray?

*Wit.* You cannot doubt my Principles, Sir, since educated at *Geneva*.

*Sir Pat.* Your Father was a discreet Man: ah,

*Mr. Fainlove*, he and I have seen better days, and wish we cou'd have foreseen these that are arriv'd.  
*Wit.* That he might have turn'd honest in time, he means, before he had purchas'd Bishops Lands.  
*Sir Pat.* Sir, you have no Place, Office, Dependance or Attendance at Court, I hope?  
*Wit.* None, Sir,—Wou'd I had—so you were hang'd. *Aside.* (1678, 18)

In addition to its comic effect, the many asides by Wittmore show the dividing line between the two political currents of the period. This conflict ended with the royalists' victory and marked the beginning of the rise of Tory party as a dominant political player in England. The so called "Tory Reaction Period"—more clearly recognized in the early 1680s—witnessed the failure of the attempts to pass the Exclusion Bill and the collapse of the Oxford Parliament in 1681.

The political partisanship is clearly visible in the Prologue to the play as Behn uses witty analogies to liken the king and the poet, on the one hand, with the Whig and the critic, on the other:

*True Comedy, writ even in Dryden's Style,  
Will hardly raise your Humours to a Smile.  
Long did his Sovereign Muse the Scepter sway,  
And long with Joy you did true Homage pay:  
But now, like happy States, luxurious grown,  
The Monarch Wit unjustly you dethrone,  
And a Tyrannick Commonwealth prefer* (1678, Prologue)

Here, Behn purposefully uses literary concerns to project her political views on stage. She criticizes the public's tendency to underestimate the talents of "good" dramatists in favor of what critics write. This case, as she alludes, is similar to those who favored the "Tyrannical Commonwealth" over the monarchy. In fact, both contemporary literary critics and the Commonwealth scrutinized playwrights and theater. Between 1642–1660, the strong Puritan influence on Parliament resulted in the closure of theaters in London. Theatrical performances were only resumed after the return of Charles II and the end of the Interregnum. In the Prologue, Behn plays on the bitter memories of the Civil War and reminds the audience of the tyranny and corruption of the Whigs' predecessors during the Commonwealth period.

In many scenes in the play, the Whig is humiliated and laughed at. Sir Patient's political discourse and religious mentality are ridiculed by the new energetic royalist generation. To exaggerate the comic effect of the play, the Whig announces his status as a cuckold at the end of the play:

*Sir Pat.* Methinks I find an Inclination to swear,—to curse myself and thee, that I cou'd no better discern thee; nay, I'm so chang'd from what I was, that I think I cou'd even approve of Monarchy and Church-Discipline, I'm so truly convinc'd I have been a Beast and an Ass all my Life.  
*Enter Lady Knowell, Isabella, Lucretia, Leander,*

Lodwick, Fanny, &c.  
*L. Kno.* Hah, Sir Patient not dead?  
*Sir Pat.* Ladies and Gentlemen, take notice that I am  
 a Cuckold, a cropear'd snivelling Cuckold. (1678,  
 89)

The defeat of the Whig is not in the domestic sphere only; rather, he announces that he is "chang'd" in terms of public concerns as well. Sir Patient is the embodiment of the decaying Whig extremists who found themselves losing power and influence in the country after Charles II had dissolved the Parliament and ruled alone until his death in 1685.

The subplot of the play poses more humiliation to Whigs as Sir Patient is fooled again by his daughter Isabella, who is courted by Lodwick. Again, the image of the young lovers is presented in a more favorable way after they reveal their love and loyalty to each other. Royalist spectators must have been delighted by the success of this love story, especially because it was against a Whig dissenter. At the end of the play, the old Whig embraces his new status as a fool and accepts the new changes that have taken place in his household and country. He addresses Lodwick:

*Sir Pat.* I forgive it you, and will turn Spark, they  
 live the merriest Lives—keep some City Mistress,  
 go to Court, and hate all Conventicles.  
 You see what a fine City-Wife can do  
 Of the true-breed; instruct her Husband too:  
 I wish all civil Cuckolds in the Nation  
 Would take example by my Reformation. (1678,  
 91)

Significantly, the play closes with a new "Reformation" and a new "Restoration." The stubborn Whig is tamed by the end of the play as he paves the way for the new generation to live happily. In fact, this change marked another social and political shift of that period. The royalists were gaining more power in decision-making while the opposition force was dramatically declining.

### 3.2 *The Roundheads*

Behn's *The Roundheads* (1682) is a sparkling example of its writer's evolving political views. Behn wrote this play at a time when royalist writers were responding violently to the opposition's attempt to disgrace the monarchy and change the political balance between the king and Parliament. The play can be considered a typical Tory propaganda that reminds Restoration audiences of the bitter memories of the Civil War of the 1640s. In fact, this trend was common among royalist writers as they tried to employ the nation's political memory as a means to achieve certain political ends.

What is special about Behn's approach is that her play was "the first post-1660 play to bring on stage, under their own names, the likes of John Lambert, Charles Fleetwood, John Desborough, and John Hewson—military commanders associated with the radical experiments of the Interregnum ..." (Cordner 2007, 45). The Dedication to *The Roundheads*

hints at many crucial political events such as the fall of Shaftesbury and the failure of the Exclusion Bill. Behn states clearly that her play shows "how the Royal Interest thrives" (1682, n.p.). The Prologue also reflects Behn's deep involvement in the political polemics of the period. The Prologue is spoken by Huson, a zealous supporter for the republic under Cromwell's command. Huson rises from the eternal flames of Hell and curses the revolution and republicans for the destruction they have brought to the country. This discourse was not surprising during the post-Exclusion Crisis period as partisanship ruled the stage too. It was, as Behn describes in the Dedication to the play, "an Age when Faction rages, and differing Parties disagree in all things" (1682, n.p.).

The political label "Roundheads," a term of abuse, was first used during the English Civil Wars to refer to the supporters of Oliver Cromwell. Similarly, during the Restoration period, the term was revived to refer to Parliamentarians and dissenters who were seen as an extension of Cromwell's project. In fact, the renewal of such pre-Restoration political labels on stage resulted from the renewal of the same political crises that led to the Civil Wars and the collapse of the English monarchy in the mid-seventeenth century. Royalist playwrights, like Behn, were skilled in investing the nation's cultural memory and agitating the public view against the opposition, claiming that their activities encouraged chaos and instability which, in turn, would result in another civil war.

Behn's political views in the play are presented through its two romantic subplots. In each subplot, married Puritan women establish complex sexual relationships with passionate royalist men. In the first love story, Lady Lambert, the wife of a member of the old Committee of Safety, is attracted to young Loveless, a royalist and "a man of honor," as Behn describes him in the play's Characters List. Behn uses this love story to contrast between the patriot cavalier and the treacherous republican. The love story is also used as a vehicle to project Behn's political views in contrast to the prevailing political scene of the 1640s. In Act IV of the play, Lady Lambert presents her lover, Loveless, with the crown and scepter of Charles I as a sign of her love. Loveless is shocked by the offer, which arouses his royalist sentiments. He immediately rejects any attempt to taint his loyalty to the English crown:

There's such Divinity i'th very Form on't,  
 Had I been conscious I'd been near the Temple  
 Where this bright Relique of the Glorious Martyr  
 Had been inshrind, 'thad spoil'd my soft Devotion!  
 —'tis Sacrilege to dally where it is;  
 A rude, a Sawcy Treason to approach it  
 With an unbended knee; for Heav's sake, Madam,  
 Let us not be profane in our Delights,  
 Either withdraw, or hide that Glorious Object.  
 (1682, 40)



Lady Lambert has a different understanding when it comes to the meaning and symbolism of royal power. She represents the ambitious, treacherous, power-hungry republicans as she cries:

Thou art a Fool, the very sight of this—  
Raises my Pleasure higher,  
Methinks I give a Queen into thy Arms:  
And where I love I cannot give enough (1682, 40)

In the play, Loveless is not tempted by the new opportunities this relationship may bring. He appears to be fulfilling a personal desire more than serving an ideological current. He has no intention to violate his loyalty to the monarchy. He addresses Lady Lambert: "Forbear, and do not play with holy things,/ Let us retire, and love as Mortals shou'd./ Not imitate the Gods, and spoil our Joyes" (1682, 40-41). These contradictory political trends widen the gap between lovers. The lady describes Loveless as "unambitious" who "would persuade [her] from [her] Glory" (1682, 41).

Skillfully, Behn uses this conflict to further illustrate the faithfulness of the cavalier in opposition to the corrupt republican rebel. Loveless' words to Lady Lambert summarize the long conflict between royalism and its republican enemies:

How truly brave wou'd your great Husband be,  
If whilst he may, he pay'd this mighty Debt  
To the Right Owner!  
If whilst he has the Army in his Power  
He made a true and lawful use of it,  
To settle our great Master in his Throne (1682, 41)

By the "Right Owner," Behn employs one of the common topical Tory references to the rightful English monarchy, the Stuarts. In the same scene, Loveless praises "the glorious Martyre," hinting at the execution of Charles I in 1649. Nostalgia to the pre-war period and praise for Stuart royal figures like Charles I were heavily used in Restoration royalist literature. Obviously, such scenes reminded Restoration audiences of the mid-17th century constitutional crises and warned of the consequences of the pressing danger of an approaching crisis that would lead to a new wave of political partisanship and unrest.

In addition to contrasting the two political ideologies, Behn changes the way she handles the question of court sexuality at this stage of her career. While she tended to be more critical about court sexuality in her early plays, Behn developed a more lenient attitude toward this issue in her post-Exclusion Crisis plays as can be seen in the above discussion of *Sir Patient Fancy*. In *The Roundheads* too, royal (or court related) sexuality is not destructive, nor is it considered a sign of irresponsibility. Loveless is faithful in his love to Lady Lambert, and he invests in this relationship for the good of his country. It is worth mentioning here that Behn links masculinity with the cavalier and, on the other hand, femininity with republicans. As an expected outcome of this conflict between the two sides, the female rebel returns to her natural position at the end; hence, presenting

the moment of sexual conquest.

Similar to the plot of *Sir Patient Fancy*, the love story of *The Roundheads* is based on one of the most popular royalist stereotypical images of the post-Restoration Parliamentary family in which the husband is cuckolded by a young passionate cavalier. Cordner explains that in this "civil war stereotype the potent cavalier invaded the Roundhead bed in order to perform the offices an inadequate husband left unperformed and then went carefree in his way" (2007, 65). This humiliating discourse was invested very efficiently in loyalist drama, especially in the Tory Reaction Period. As a political tool to further humiliate Whigs, and to comment on the recent Tory victory, royalist playwrights like Behn presented Whig husbands as incapable of managing their own household. In *The Roundheads*, Behn prepares for this theme very early in the play. In a conversation between the two cavaliers of the play, Loveless and Freeman discuss the possibility of cuckolding the Roundhead lords. Loveless shows hesitation toward this dangerous attempt while Freeman sees it as an opportunity for revenge:

Free. But suppose 'twere the new Protectoress herself, the fine Lady Lambert?  
Lov. The greatest Devil of all; Damn her, dost think I'll Cuckold the Ghost of old *Oliver*?  
Free. The better; there's some Revenge in't; do'st know her? (1682, 5)

This sexual aspect is also clear in the play's subplot. Freeman is in love with Lady Desbro, who is married to another Roundhead leader. The cuckolding stereotype is presented again as Freeman tries to convince the lady with his good intentions: "you've only lent your Body out to one whom you call Husband, and whom Heav'n has mark'd for Cuckoldom. Nay, 'tis an Act of honest Loyalty, so to revenge our Cause" (1682, 32).

Perhaps one of Behn's brilliant modifications to cuckolding plays of the era is that she uses the cuckolding plot not only to humiliate the other but also to allude to a possible settlement between the different political parties of her time. In the play, the ambitious Roundhead wives realize the inevitable change on the horizons, namely the Restoration. They decide—whether out of fear or love—to renounce their ambitions of power and to seek their royalist lovers' protection. With the help of Loveless and Freeman, Lady Lambert and Lady Desbro escape the angry mob who seek their husbands' lives. In the last Act of the play, the republican forces vanish and the Parliamentary regime collapses. In her final appearance on stage, Lady Desbro abandons her past lifestyle while her lover Freeman offers his protection to her:

La. Lam. ... ah, adieu! And all my hopes of Royalty adieu. —  
Free. And dare you put yourself into my Protection? Well, if you do,  
I doubt you'll never be your own Woman again. (1682, 55)



Freeman's words indicate that the future relationship between the royalist male and the rebel female will not give the later as much freedom as she used to have under her previous marriage, an indication, perhaps, of the change in power relations between Tories and Whigs.

Another alternative way to gauge Behn's changing political views in her later dramatic production is to closely study the depiction of Stuart monarchs on stage. Unlike her plays of the early 1670s, *The Roundheads* presents kingship in a more majestic and ideal way. In the play, Lady Lambert praises Loveless's "God-like Virtue" (1682, 53) in a way that casts similar attributes on the monarchy for which Loveless works. When Lady Lambert offers Loveless the royal crown and scepter, he immediately replies that these belongings should be returned "To the Right Owner" (1682, 41) in an allusion to the "martyred" King Charles I. Royalty in this play, whether of the past days (Charles I) or the approaching future (Charles II), is shrouded by a romantic aurora. This is so evident when we know that the play's production coincided with one of the greatest political crises of the Restoration period, namely the Exclusion Crisis. To illustrate the shining side of the monarchy, Behn excludes royalty from the usual libertine activities of her early plays and replaces it with idealistic and romantic allusions from the past. Libertinism and passionate sexual pursuit in *The Roundheads* are only associated with rakish courtiers.

#### 4 Conclusion

The plays under discussion in this study show the evolution of Aphra Behn's political views during the Restoration period. In her early plays, Behn directed coded criticism against the royal institution. She employed allegorical characters and plots as a smokescreen to express her concerns towards complex political issues like court sexuality and the royal succession. Much of the criticism in these plays is directed at courtiers around the king who fail to mend their king's follies. Behn's early tragicomedies indicate that her royalism was moderate and sometimes suspicious of the new regime's ability to cope with the challenges of that age. One explanation of such trends among royalist writers may be the fact that in the early Restoration period there was no significant political opposition, nor serious concerns about political partisanship. Writers like Behn found themselves obliged to reflect public concerns about these major issues. At this early stage of her career, Behn's plays presented royalty as more human and less divine.

The second "phase" of Behn's political transformation started with the early signs of the approaching Exclusion Crisis. Gradually, Behn developed a new political angle that totally sided with the English monarchy. She directed her literary merit to attack the rising Whig party as she became a prominent propagandist for the Tory party. Behn skillfully linked the image of Restoration period Whigs with

Cromwell's Puritans of the Interregnum period to take advantage of the accumulating hostile sentiments toward dissenters in the popular imagination. On the other hand, royalism in her Exclusion Crisis plays is portrayed as more ideal, majestic, and immune to criticism. To illustrate the legitimacy of the monarchy during the hard times of the Crisis, Behn excluded royalty from the sexual scenes of her plays. In plays like *The Roundheads* and *Sir Patient Fancy*, Tory's sexuality is associated with young cavaliers who seek revenge from their political enemies. The sexuality of young lovers in these plays is presented in a more sympathetic way, especially after they reveal their true love and promises of loyalty. In addition, any negative sentiments that new sexual adventures may trigger are softened by the fact that the offence is against an enemy—a republican or a Whig dissenter. Behn's new approach in dramatizing royalty on stage paved the way for future royalist playwrights who supported the monarchy and opposed the calls for political reform.

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