



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

Female Agency in Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter*

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Grau combinat en Estudis d'anglès i francès

June 2026

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Laia Puig Company and David Owen, for their guidance and advice during this dissertation. Their valuable insights and feedback were instrumental to the improvement of this work.

Additionally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement, particularly in the most challenging periods. Their support motivated me to continue working to complete this dissertation.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the contrasting representations of female agency in Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter* through the comparative analysis of the characters Widow Ranter and Semernia. Situated within the political and social context of Restoration colonial Virginia, the study explores how gender, race and colonial ideology shape the possibilities and limitations of female autonomy within the play. While Widow Ranter embodies social mobility, performative masculinity, and adaptability within settler society, Semernia represents Indigenous sovereignty, communal responsibility, and resistance to colonial expansion.

Through the analysis of themes such as identity, religion, romantic relationships, authority, social expectations, and cross-dressing, this dissertation argues that Behn grants both women significant forms of agency, although their narrative outcomes differ substantially. Widow Ranter survives because her unconventional femininity remains compatible with the emerging colonial order, whereas Semernia's political and cultural identity becomes incompatible with colonial modernity. Drawing upon Restoration feminist criticism and postcolonial approaches, this paper demonstrates that both characters work within patriarchal structures to assert autonomy on their own lives, while being loyal to their values and morals established throughout the play.

Keywords: The Widdow Ranter, Aphra Behn, female agency, Restoration theatre

Introduction

The representation of women in literature often reflects broader social, political and cultural tensions. In Restoration theatre, female characters frequently occupy contradictory positions: they are granted a degree of visibility and agency uncommon in earlier theatrical traditions but remain constrained by patriarchal and social expectations. This contradiction sparked my interest in Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia*, as I found its gender dynamics both surprisingly relevant to contemporary culture and unexpected given the historical distance between the Restoration period and the present day.

The Widdow Ranter (1689) is set during Bacon's Rebellion in Colonial Virginia, where society is marked by political instability, colonial expansion and conflict between English settlers and Indigenous communities. While the rebellion and its political consequences provide the historical backdrop, Behn's treatment of female characters offers a perspective on the colonial world.

This thesis will examine the main female characters in the play, Semernia, the Indian Queen, and the Widdow Ranter. Specifically, it will examine the two contrasting models of femininity they represent and analyse how this opposition allows Aphra Behn to investigate themes of power, gender, colonialism, and race. Although they occupy very different positions, both challenge conventional expectations of femininity and exercise forms of authority within a society dominated by men.

Scholarship on Behn's work has frequently addressed issues of gender, female agency and colonialism. Studies of Restoration theatre have examined the changing representation of women on the stage and the relationship between gender, sexuality and social expectations (Cartwright; Gill). More specifically, critics have explored the ways in which Behn's work engage with colonial discourse and racial difference. Hutner (101) argues that colonial drama

often uses Indigenous female characters to displace the violence of colonial expansion, portraying them as sacrificial figures whose death reinforce colonial narratives.

This dissertation asks the following research question: How does Aphra Behn construct Semernia and the Widow Ranter as contrasting models of femininity, and what does this contrast reveal about the intersections of gender and colonial power in colonial Virginia? It argues that although both characters challenge patriarchal expectations and demonstrate forms of female agency, their opposite positions ultimately determine the extent of their freedom and shape their narrative outcomes. Through this contrast, Behn exposes both the possibilities and limitations of female authority within a colonial society.

To address this question, the dissertation adopts a feminist and postcolonial approach. Feminist literary criticism provides a framework for examining the construction of female identity, agency, and authority in Restoration drama (Cartwright; Gill). At the same time, postcolonial perspectives on race and colonial discourse, particularly those developed in studies of Behn's colonial writings, help discern the unequal distribution of power between settler and Indigenous women in the play (Hutner; White).

The dissertation is organised into four chapters. Chapter Two provides a brief overview on the plot, while Chapter Three introduces the main female characters examined in this study. Chapter Four constitutes the main analytical section of the dissertation by comparing Semernia and the Widow Ranter through several thematic categories, including identity, religion, love and power and loyalty to self. The conclusion in Chapter Five summarises the main findings and reflects on the significance of Behn's representation of female agency in a colonial context. Additionally, the Annex contains the relevant historical and literary context necessary for understanding the play, focusing on Bacon's Rebellion and female representation in Restoration theatre.

1. Plot

The play revolves around the conflict between the Council, the colony's rulers, the Indigenous tribe, and Lieutenant Nathaniel Bacon and his supporters. Bacon is portrayed as a charismatic but controversial leader who rebels against the Council because he believes they have failed to defend settlers against Native American attacks.

Despite being officially declared a traitor by authorities, he is represented as brave, honourable and committed to protecting the colony. The Council on the other hand is presented as a leaderless group of incompetent cowards. Differing from historical events, the figure of governor is absent from the play, "but for want of a Governour we are ruled by a Council" (Behn Act I, Scene I), as they are waiting for his arrival from England.

At the same time, Bacon meets with the Indian King and Queen, where it is evident that both Semernia, the Queen, and Bacon hold romantic feelings for each other. As Downright, a council member declares, Bacon "passionately Admires the Indian Queen" (Behn, Act I, Scene I). While both demonstrate emotional self-awareness., they are on opposite sides in this conflict, in which tensions are increasing due to the Indian King distrusting Bacon's word that he wants a peaceful resolution.

The Widow Ranter is a wealthy widow known for her heavy drinking and other unconventional behaviour. She openly pursues her love interest, Dareing, a soldier in Bacon's forces, while also mocking many of the men around her.

When Bacon's influence rises, the council meets to discuss a resolution that does not bring them into open conflict with the rebellion. While Bacon and his men face the Council in passive encounters, the relationship between the Widow Ranter and Dareing develops through arguments and comic confrontations.

As the violence increases between the council and the rebels, so do the conflicts between Bacon's forces and the Native Americans. It is during one of these battles that the rebels kill the Indian King, Cavarnio. Semernia, as the new sole leader of her people, decides to defend her people and protect Bacon by entering the battlefield dressed as man where she consequently is mortally wounded and dies in Bacon's arms. Her death signifies an end to Indigenous resistance in the play, as both leaders have been killed in the conflict.

Meanwhile, the Widow Ranter, motivated by her devotion to Dareing, decides to also disguise herself as a man to enter the battle. She excels in the fight, demonstrating courage and military competence. "Ranter fighting like a Fury by [Dareing's] side, he putting her back in vain; they fight out." (Behn Act V, Scene I).

Semernia's death affects Bacon deeply, to the point where he orders his camp destroyed and set fire, as he states that life now is meaningless. Bacon then returns to battle, believing that "there are Nobler ways to meet with Death" (Behn Act V, Scene I).

With Bacon dead, the council and the rebels seem to come to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The colonial authorities issue pardons to the rebels and restore order in the colony. Dareing praises the Widow's bravery in battle and declares her to be "a fit Wife for a Soldier" (Behn Act V, Scene IV), hinting at a marriage between the two in the future.

At the end of the play the council has restored order among settlers and beat the Native Americans. The play closes with hope for peace and prosperity in the colony: "Come, my brave Youths, let all our Forces meet, To make this Country happy, rich and great; Let scanted Europe see that we enjoy Safer Repose, and larger Worlds, than they." (Behn Act V, Scene IV).

2. Brief introduction to the characters

This section introduces the two female characters that will be explored in greater detail in the next section. Semernia and the Widdow Ranter are two contrasting characters who represent different models of femininity within the play.

3.1 The Widdow Ranter

The Widow Ranter, and namesake of the play's title, is one of the most unusual characters in this narrative, as she constantly challenges the traditional expectations of women throughout the plot. Unlike Semernia, whose experiences are fraught with tragedy and emotional suffering, Widow Ranter is independent and economically unbound by social duties usually imposed on women at the time.

Her status as a wealthy widow allows her to be loud and behave outside of accepted gender norms. She refuses passive femininity, Hutner describes: "She drinks, swears, and smokes a pipe, but she also negotiates her desires effectively and remains ... uncontrolled and unvictimised by men." (Hutner 104)

Her behaviour is not punished or judged in the play, and she is instead rewarded by being appreciated by her love interest, Dareing, which is significant. As Lecky mentions: "The comedy of the Widdow's betrothal supplants Bacon's tragic failure to take over the settlement with Semernia by his side" (Lecky 192). For this reason and as I can observe in the final part of the plot, only the Widow is allowed survival and integration into society.

3.2 Semernia the Indian Queen

Semernia is one of the main characters of the play, being the Indian Queen, wife of Cavarnio and ruler of the Native American group. One of the major plot points of the play centres around her forbidden love with Bacon, as he is both the man she loves and the man who aims to

conquer her people and lands. He also later becomes her husband's murderer, although she admits even despite that she cannot stop loving him.

She struggles throughout the play with her duty as a wife and ruler and her feelings for the enemy. This impossible conflict follows her throughout the story, portraying a woman trapped by the colonial power structures. However, Semernia is not only a victim with no control over the historical events that are taking place around her. If Semernia is Behn's representation of indigenous women, they are "depicted as weak and needing white male protection" (Hutner 100). Even though her character is portrayed as solemnly resigned to her duties and fate, Behn gives Semernia emotionally powerful speeches that convey her struggle between passion and honour, desire and duty, love and political loyalty.

4 Comparison of characters

In this section I will explore both characters through a comparison of different aspects presented in the play. Several scholars have related to this relationship between the two, and the two women oppose in most direct aspects throughout the narrative.

4.1 Identity and personal background

Semernia and Widow Ranter are two contrasting female characters whose identities are shaped by radically different social, political and cultural backgrounds. Although both women challenge traditional expectations of femininity within Virginia, they emerge from different worlds: Semernia from Indigenous sovereignty threatened by settler expansion, and Widow Ranter from the unstable social mobility of colonial society.

Widow Ranter's character is defined by social mobility and reinvention. From the moment she is first mentioned, the play emphasises that she is a woman who rose through opportunity rather than inherited status. Friendly introduces her to Hazard explaining:

“a Woman bought from the ship by old Colonel Ranter; she served him half a Year, and then he marry'd her, and dying in a Year more, left her worth fifty thousand Pounds Sterling, besides Plate and Jewels: She's a great Gallant, but assuming the humour of the Country Gentry, her Extravagancy is very pleasant, she retains something of her primitive Quality still, but is good-natur'd and generous.”

(Behn Act I, Scene I).

This description establishes Widow Ranter as a socially ambiguous figure. Before the events of the play begin, she had already experienced servitude, social elevation, widowhood and sudden wealth. Her selfhood is thus rooted in instability and transformation, rather than lineage as most of her peers.

The stage directions on her appearance in her banquet in Act II, Scene II, introduce her through collective drinking and public sociability: “Enter the Bagpiper, playing before a great

Bowl of Punch, carry'd between two Negroes, a Highlander dancing after it; the Widow Ranter led by Timorous; Chrisante by Dullman; Mrs. Flirt and Friendly, all dancing after it; they place it on the Table" (Behn Act II, Scene II).

Not only is Widow Ranter presented as an inherent part of the settler group despite her background, she also almost presides over it. She asserts authority over this environment by declaring: "S'lfe, not for the world—Major, I bar Love-making within my Territories, 'tis inconsistent with the Punch-Bowl, if you'l drink, do, if not, be gone." (Behn Act II, Scene II).

Lecky argues that Behn deliberately leaves Widow Ranter's origins unclear to emphasise her fluid social position within Virginia. She describes the Widow as "an unfree woman who gained manumission and wealth through marriage" while still retaining traces of "difference" connected to "class, gender, race, and servitude" (Lecky 180). More specifically, Widow Ranter represents the unstable social possibilities created by colonialism, where traditional English class structures become less fixed.

The play repeatedly reinforces this social ambiguity. Friendly explains that although Widow Ranter has adopted "the Humour of the Country Gentry," she still "retains something of her Primitive Quallity still" (Behn Act I, Scene I). I argue this phrase suggests that no amount of wealth can entirely erase her lower origins. Hutner similarly contends that Widow Ranter is fundamentally hybrid, combining lower-class origins with upper-class performance. Hutner describes her as "a positively portrayed lower-born woman, a former servant who moved up the social scale by marrying her now-deceased former master" (Hutner 90).

This background explains Widow Ranter's unusual behaviour throughout the play. Unlike conventional heroines with similar social standing, she drinks heavily, smokes publicly, swears and openly pursues men. Dareing mockingly describes her behaviour by saying: "she'll rail and smoke till she choke again; then six Gallons of Punch hardly recovers her," (Behn Act IV,

Scene III). Rather than concealing these behaviours, the play presents them as signs of her vitality and independence. Her masculinity and sociability become forms of authority in themselves, unavailable to more conventional women.

Christopher Hill's discussion of the social instability produced by the English Revolution helps contextualise this kind of female figure. Hill argues that the mid-seventeenth century disrupted traditional hierarchies of class, gender, and authority, creating opportunities for socially marginal individuals to challenge inherited structures (Hill 204). Widow Ranter reflects this atmosphere of destabilization. Her upward mobility, public speech, and refusal to conform to respectable femininity resemble the kinds of social transformations Hill associates with radical sectarian and lower-class movements. Hutner similarly contends that "the elevation of the lower-class Ranter thus functions as one more sign of the destabilization of social categories in Behn's play" (Hutner 105).

James's analysis further deepens this interpretation by arguing that Behn uses Widow Ranter to expose the instability of social and ideological categories within colonial Virginia. James explains that Behn creates in Widow Ranter "a fantastic portrayal of female potential in a vibrant New World setting" that complicates "the female grotesque, the witty heroine, and the moneyed widow" (James 30).

Semernia's background, in contrast, is fundamentally different. Unlike Widow Ranter, Semernia does not rise socially through political and social instability. Instead, she begins the play already connected to Indigenous political authority and the responsibility of her people. While Semernia is presented within the conventions of Restoration tragic romance, White asserts that the character draws heavily upon the historical Pamunkey queen Cockacoeske, one of the most important Indigenous political leaders during and after Bacon's Rebellion (White

656). Semernia therefore enters the play not as a socially mobile individual but as the representative of an existing political order threatened by English colonialism.

Where Widow Ranter's identity is socially constructed and unstable, Semernia's is inherited. White (648) contends that Cockacoeske represented "matriarchal leadership of Indigenous women" erased or romanticised by colonial narratives.

It is my view that her role as a ruler profoundly shapes her characterization within the play. Semernia consistently speaks in the language of honour, duty and sacrifice. Unlike Widow Ranter, who openly embraces pleasure and social excess, Semernia fears emotional surrender because she understands love as politically dangerous. Her personal desires are inseparable from political responsibility.

Hutner asserts that Semernia is trapped between loyalty and her attraction to Bacon. She is "torn between her political and familial allegiances" and must choose whether to "remain true to her husband/king, or... follow her passion for Bacon" (Hutner 100). Instead of gaining freedom through adaptation and performance, Semernia experiences this instability as destructive. She experiences conflict as tragic because her inherited role as queen leaves little room for personal freedom.

Lecky contends that Widow Ranter's flexibility exposes "the profound challenges that resourceful nonelite women... posed to colonial projects dependent on a shared sense of Englishness" (Lecky 188). Meanwhile, White demonstrates that Semernia's character reflects the erasure and romanticization of Indigenous female authority (White 648). Put differently, Semernia is both a threat to the emerging political landscape in Virginia and threatened by it.

4.2 Religion

Behn presents religion and belief as intrinsically linked to politics and colonial power. Through both characters Behn explores two radically different systems of values: the libertine and socially performative beliefs associated with “Ranter” culture, and the communal, spiritual and sacrificial worldview attached to Indigenous ceremonial identity. Even though neither of these characters are conventionally religious, both are guided by systems of belief that shape their actions and understanding of themselves.

Widow Ranter’s worldview is shaped by the libertine and anti-authoritarian philosophy of the Ranter movement, which emerged in the seventeenth century in England. Historically, Ranters became associated with irreverence toward organised religion, rejection of moral restraint, hostility to social hierarchy, and resistance to institutional authority during and after the English Civil War. Hill explains that contemporaries frequently described Ranters as figures who denied conventional morality and “pretend[ed] that they only had attained to perfection that could do what they would and not sin” (Hill 205). According to Hill (205), Ranters were repeatedly associated with the belief that external moral laws no longer governed the spiritually liberated individual.

This ideological framework is essential for understanding Widow Ranter’s characterization in *The Widow Ranter*. Although Behn never explicitly identifies Widow Ranter as a literal religious Ranter, the character embodies many symbolic traits associated with Ranter discourse: irreverence, bodily excess, anti-authoritarian sociability, and resistance to conventional structures of morality and gender.

According to Hill, Ranter philosophy often rejected externally imposed moral systems in favor of experiential freedom and embodied existence. He notes that some Ranters denied “that there was any such thing as sin” and rejected traditional doctrines of judgment and divine

punishment (Hill 207). Widow Ranter's social world similarly privileges pleasure, immediacy, and self-expression over religious discipline or inherited morality.

Hill further notes that Ranter discourse frequently blurred distinctions between divinity, nature, and the human self. Some Ranters believed that "God is in everyone and every living thing" and that divinity existed within the material world itself (Hill 206). This emphasis on embodied existence and material immediacy illuminates Widow Ranter's focus on bodily pleasure, performative identity, and lived experience rather than spiritual transcendence or moral restraint.

Semernia's worldview operates according to radically different principles. Her belief system is tied to her community's beliefs. The play repeatedly associates Semernia with ritual devotion and ceremonial spirituality. While being pursued by soldiers after her husband's death, they discover her: "finding the Queen at her Devotion there with all her Indian Ladies" (Behn Act IV, Scene II). The phrase "at her Devotion" emphasises that Semernia's selfhood is grounded in sacred responsibility and collective obligation rather than individual pleasure or emotional self-expression.

Semernia's obligations as a ruler also extend to the religion her community practices. In the following scene, the Indigenous group perform a ritual to ask one of their deities for a prophecy on the result of the war against the settler group:

A Temple, with an Indian God placed upon it, Priests and Priestesses attending: Enter Indian King on one side attended by Indian Men; the Queen enters on the other with Women. All bow to the Idol, and divide on each side of the Stage. Then the Musick playing louder, the Priests and Priestesses dance about the Idol with ridiculous Postures, and crying (as for Incantations) thrice repeated, Agah Yerkin, Agah Boah, Sulen Tawarapah, Sulen Tawarapah.

After this soft Musick plays again: then they sing something fine: after which the Priests lead the King to the Altar, and the Priestesses the Queen; they take off little Crowns from their Heads, and offer them at the Altar.

(Behn Act IV, Scene I)

This is the only religious ceremonial sequence portrayed in the play, and it is staged as a solemn ritual with specific rules. In my opinion Semernia's religion is another aspect where her restraint and discipline are also clearly portrayed. Her duty to her people also extends to their religion, in which she is also strictly bound to the beliefs, rituals and her role as a religious leader.

This environment sharply contrasts with Widow Ranter's social spaces organised around sociability and bodily excess. Semernia's world is rigidly structured instead around ritual hierarchy and communal identity. This contrast is still observed the next section, where I compare both characters' romantic relationships.

4.3 Romantic relationships

Both characters also show clear opposition on how they approach romantic feelings and interpersonal relationships. Although both women love men connected to rebellion and warfare, their relationships function in radically different ways. Widow Ranter's attachment to Dareing is comic, aggressive, and socially liberating, while Semernia's love for Bacon is tragic, sacrificial, and politically destructive.

Widow Ranter's relationship with Dareing is characterised by role reversal, masculine performance, and social equality. Unlike conventional Restoration heroines, Widow Ranter openly pursues her lover rather than waiting to be courted. Her behaviour repeatedly inverts traditional gender expectations.

Nováková maintains that Widow Ranter's masculinity is not merely theatrical disguise but a defining aspect of her characterization. She explains that "Ranter swears, smokes a pipe, drinks punch and plans to fight a duel with her lover as a way of courting him" (Nováková 39). This description captures the unusual dynamics of the relationship. Widow Ranter's love is

expressed through aggression, competition, and masculine sociability rather than modesty or passivity. Love initially appears secondary to communal drinking and performative sociability. Yet the comedy of this statement also reveals Widow Ranter's emotional vulnerability. Although she publicly mocks romance, she consistently pursues Dareing throughout the play.

Her courtship rejects ideals of feminine restraint. A clear example of how she aggressively pursues Dearing is the mock battle that takes place after Dareing discovers Widow Ranter is disguised as a man and mocks her:

Dar. Ranter—Gad, I'd sooner marry a she-Bear, unless for a Penance for some horrid Sin; we should be eternally challenging one another to the Field, and ten to one she beats me there; or if I should escape there, she wou'd kill me with drinking.

[...]

Ran. A pox on him, how he vexes me.

Dar. Then such a Tongue—she'll rail and smoke till she choke again; then six Gallons of Punch hardly recovers her, and never but then is she good natur'd.

Ran. I must lay him on—

Dar. There's not a Blockhead in the Country that has not—

Ran. What—

Dar. Been drunk with her.

Ran. I thought you had meant something else, Sir. [In huff.

Dar. Nay—as for that—I suppose there is no great difficulty.

Ran. 'Sdeath, Sir, you lye—and you are a Son of a Whore.

[Draws and fences with him, and he runs back round the Stage.

(Behn Act V, Scene III)

The violence and vulgarity of the scene transform courtship into public contest. Nováková argues that Widow Ranter's masculinity allows her to participate in forms of emotional expression normally reserved for men (Nováková 42). Her relationship with Dareing also destabilises traditional gender hierarchy. Unlike many Restoration heroines whose

relationships culminate in submission or containment, Widow Ranter maintains authority and independence throughout the play. Hutner further describes her as “a positively portrayed lower-born woman” whose social mobility destabilises conventional class and gender structures (Hutner 91).

Furthermore, I argue that while Dareing seems to be accusing her of being promiscuous, he still later will happily marry her, confirming the insult is part of their flirting dynamic rather than judgement on his part. Widow Ranter is therefore not only not marginalised by men regarding this behaviour but appreciated for it and encouraged to continue participating in the same manner. Her relationship with Dareing becomes possible precisely because it works through mutual unconventionality.

On the other hand, Semernia’s relationship with Bacon functions according to entirely different emotional and political principles. In complete opposition of Ranter’s comic and liberating romance, Semernia’s love becomes tragic because it cannot be separated from colonial violence and her duty as a ruler.

From the beginning, Semernia associates desire with conquest and destruction. When Bacon attempts to persuade her emotionally, she responds: “Take all our Kingdoms —make our People Slaves, and let me fall beneath your conquering Sword” (Behn Act II, Scene I). As I argued in previous sections, Semernia is extremely aware of her own position, and immediately relates the conquest of herself to the enslavement of her people.

Unlike Widow Ranter and Dareing’s relationship, their love immediately becomes political. Semernia understands that emotional surrender to Bacon threatens not only herself but her people and sovereignty. Hutner establishes that Semernia is divided between “political and familial allegiances” and her attraction to Bacon (Hutner 89). Yet her conflict should not be

interpreted as passivity. Rather, Semernia consistently demonstrates loyalty to sacred communal obligations even when doing so leads toward suffering and death.

The emotional contradiction defining her relationship appears most clearly when she confesses: “I adore this General” while simultaneously calling Bacon: “the Murderer of my Lord” (Behn Act V, Scene III). These opposing statements reveal the impossibility of reconciling love with political loyalty, but also her awareness of it. Bacon represents both emotional desire and colonial destruction.

Contrary to Ranter’s tavern-based courtship culture, Semernia’s emotional world is associated with mourning, and communal responsibility. This difference fundamentally shapes how each woman experiences desire and loyalty. Bacon himself frames love in destructive terms, calling it: “a resistless Fire” (Behn Act II, Scene I). The metaphor anticipates the catastrophic outcome of their relationship.

Her death scene ultimately transforms love into sacrifice, and their relationship culminates in death and impossibility. Her romance with Bacon becomes tragic because it attempts to reconcile irreconcilable political systems: Indigenous sovereignty and imperial expansion. However, for Semernia, being with Bacon would also mean losing all her autonomy, both as a ruler and an indigenous woman. In the following section I will discuss the concept of power for both characters more in depth.

4.4 Power and authority in society

Behn deeply explores power through female characters in *The Widdow Ranter*. Although both Semernia and the Widow hold positions of unusual authority within their own social structures, the two women exercise political power through radically different methods and ideological frameworks. Behn contrasts two competing forms of female political influence

within Virginia: one aligned with the emerging structures of colonial modernity and social reinvention, and the other rooted in Indigenous systems of collective authority increasingly threatened by imperial expansion.

Widow Ranter's authority depends largely upon her ability to navigate and manipulate the unstable political and economic environment of Virginia's colony. Unlike aristocratic heroines whose power derive from lineage or patriarchal protection, Widow Ranter gains influence through her state of widowhood, which increases her social standing and financial power. While Widow Ranter's authority is strengthened through sociability and participation in her collective culture, Semernia's authority isolates her within a system of communal expectation that leaves no room for personal freedom.

Lecky asserts that the Widow "holds social and ultimately legal power by manipulating the flow of commodities produced by the Atlantic slave trade" (Lecky 184). Her political influence is inseparable from systems of commerce, exchange, and imperial circulation. Rather than ruling formally, she exerts authority socially and economically through participation in colonial networks of trade and sociability.

Unlike conventional female figures in Restoration drama, who are often confined to domestic or romantic settings, Widow Ranter is present at mixed social gatherings that resemble taverns, military clubs, and political assemblies. Her presence within these communal environments is neither passive nor marginal. Instead, she frequently directs conversation, controls social behaviour, and becomes the central figure around whom male sociability is organised. Early in the play, the atmosphere of her social world is established through noise, movement, and communal festivity.

Rather than being excluded from such masculine sociability, Widow Ranter presides over it. Herman argues that colonial Virginia in the play emerges as a distinct social culture

increasingly detached from traditional English restraint and hierarchy (Herman 306). As such, Widow Ranter becomes one of the clearest embodiments of this new environment because her authority depends upon collective participation rather than private domestic virtue.

Her participation in these group interactions also protects her from the severe moral condemnation often directed toward socially transgressive women. Although male characters joke about her drinking and her aggressive behaviour, they nevertheless continue to seek her company and treat her as socially valuable. Her interactions with peers thus reveal that society tolerates her transgressions because she contributes to the communal structures of entertainment, commerce, and political sociability.

Her authority also shapes how she interacts with others, especially male peers. When speaking to a member of the Council about the rebellion she has the following interaction:

Ran. Hark ye, Charles, by Heaven, if you kill my Daring I'll pistol
 you.

Friend. No, Widow, I'll spare him for your sake.

(Behn Act I, Scene II)

This acceptance also becomes particularly visible in moments of collective drinking and masculine camaraderie. During one social gathering, the men discuss alcohol, politics, and pleasure together with Widow Ranter fully integrated into the conversation. Timerous, as part of the settler group, praises their gatherings compared to those he experienced in England, "[...] for they had neither Bowl of Punch, Bottles of Wine or Tobacco before 'em, to put Life and Soul into 'em as we have here" (Behn Act II, Scene II).

Velissariou agrees that Bacon's Rebellion reflects political tensions unique to Virginia that destabilised traditional English systems of legitimacy and governance (Velissariou). Widow Ranter thrives within these unstable conditions because her authority is flexible and socially

constructed rather than hereditary. She uses power strategically through alliance-building, emotional loyalty, and participation in colonial social networks.

Semernia, on the other hand, exercises political authority according to entirely different principles. Her authority derives from inherited sovereignty and political responsibility. As I have shown in previous sections, White directly relates the figure of Semernia to the historical Pamunkey leader Cockacoeske and as a result reflects forms of Indigenous female political leadership frequently marginalised within imperial discourse (White 656).

Velissariou's discussion of settler political ideology further argues that imperial systems frequently denied the legitimacy of Indigenous governance and territorial authority (Velissariou). Semernia therefore occupies an increasingly impossible political position within the colonial world of the play: although she is queen, imperial ideology refuses to recognise Indigenous sovereignty as legitimate.

In my opinion, in the same manner that Widow Ranter's authority allows her to interact with peers, Semernia's position of leadership separates her from the group of people she represents. Unlike Widow Ranter, who flourishes within noisy communal gatherings, Semernia is repeatedly separated from ordinary social environments and placed within formal collective structures defined by hierarchy. Her interactions with peers are shaped more by the burden of leadership than by companionship.

The play also repeatedly emphasises Semernia's isolation from ordinary social companionship. After her husband's death, although physically surrounded by others, Semernia remains fundamentally alone because her position requires her to bear communal grief publicly and symbolically. The collective female mourning scene contrasts sharply with Widow Ranter's communal tavern culture. Widow Ranter's group interactions generate

freedom, laughter, and participation; Semernia's generate solemnity, responsibility, and sacrifice.

These collective interactions emphasise order, ritual obligation, and political symbolism. Semernia does not participate as an equal member of the group but as its representative and ceremonial centre. Even her emotional life is subordinated to communal duty. In conversation with Bacon, she repeatedly frames personal decisions in terms of collective consequence, aware that she cannot make decisions based on her feelings without consequences for the group she represents.

4.5 Cross-dressing as a bridge to commonality

One of the most significant moments of convergence between Widow Ranter and Semernia in Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter* emerges through their adoption of masculine performance, particularly through scenes involving the battle between the rebels, the Indigenous group and the council.

Both characters enter spaces traditionally reserved for male political and military authority, and both temporarily access forms of agency otherwise restricted by patriarchal colonial structures. Their movement toward masculine identity does not simply function as theatrical disguise or comic inversion; rather, it reveals how deeply power, political action, and autonomy within the play are associated with masculinity itself. By symbolically "becoming men," Widow Ranter and Semernia expose the limitations imposed upon women within this society while simultaneously demonstrating their capacity to act beyond those constraints.

Widow Ranter's adoption of masculine behaviour is the most overt example of this process. Throughout the play, she repeatedly occupies spaces associated with male sociability, military

culture, and public authority. Her language, drinking habits, aggression, and participation in military action consistently blur conventional gender distinctions.

Widow Ranter refuses exclusion from masculine spaces of warfare and rebellion. Rather than remaining within domestic or passive feminine roles, she inserts herself directly into military action. The battlefield becomes one of the clearest symbolic spaces of masculine authority in the play, and Widow Ranter consciously crosses into it, even after she accomplishes her goal of receiving Dareing's romantic attention.

Ran. Nay, faith, let's see the Wars at an end first.

Dar. Nay, prithee take me in the humour, while thy Breeches
are on—for I never lik'd thee half so well in Petticoats.

Ran. Lead on, General, you give me good encouragement to wear them.

(Behn Act IV, Scene III)

Nováková argues that Widow Ranter's gender performance destabilises the boundaries separating masculine and feminine behaviour within Restoration drama. She notes that the character "appropriates male-coded behaviour without relinquishing female identity" (Nováková 42). This distinction reveals that Widow Ranter does not become masculine to reject womanhood entirely. Instead, she reveals the artificiality of the social limitations attached to femininity. Her performance suggests that authority, courage, and public participation are not inherently male qualities, even though patriarchal society treats them as such.

The play repeatedly reinforces this connection between masculinity and political self-determination. During scenes of rebellion and military conflict, Widow Ranter participates alongside male soldiers rather than observing from a distance. Cross-dressing allows her temporary access to forms of movement, authority, and action socially restricted to men.

Lecky's discussion of colonial instability helps explain why Widow Ranter can successfully inhabit this masculine role. Virginia destabilises inherited English hierarchies and produces "fluid social identities unavailable within traditional metropolitan society (Lecky 186-187). Widow Ranter's masculine performance therefore becomes possible because imperial instability weakens rigid social categories. Her cross-dressing reflects a broader colonial environment in which individuality itself becomes increasingly negotiable.

Semernia's relationship to masculine performance is more restrained but in my opinion equally significant. Unlike Widow Ranter, she does not participate in any actions considered masculine before this point. Nevertheless, she repeatedly assumes roles associated with political leadership, conventionally coded as masculine within both settler and Restoration political discourse. Her authority consistently exceeds the passive femininity often imposed upon tragic heroines.

Most importantly, Semernia's actions throughout the play repeatedly align her with political responsibility. During moments of conflict, she prioritises collective survival and sovereignty over private emotional fulfilment. Her language frequently resembles military or political discourse rather than romantic submission.

I argue that this behaviour places Semernia within a heroic tradition historically associated with masculine honour culture. Like Widow Ranter, she enters symbolic spaces of masculine authority because the political realities surrounding her demand active participation rather than passive obedience.

White's analysis I discussed previously of the historical Cockacoeske is particularly important here because it demonstrates that Indigenous female authority often occupied positions European colonial ideology coded as masculine. Read through this historical

framework, Semernia's authority appears not anomalous but politically coherent within Indigenous traditions of female leadership.

At the same time, the outcomes of these performances reveal the unequal historical positions occupied by the two women. Widow Ranter's masculine sociability and military participation can ultimately be absorbed into the emerging colonial order because her actions remain compatible with expansion and social reinvention. The play, for Herman, imagines Virginia's colony as a space where new societal structures become possible outside traditional English structures (Herman 303). Widow Ranter's cross-dressed agency becomes survivable within colonial modernity.

Semernia's authority, by contrast, remains tied to Indigenous sovereignty and communal continuity, forms of power colonialism cannot ultimately accommodate. Although she symbolically enters masculine spaces of warfare and political leadership, the future represented by Bacon leaves no stable position for the sovereignty she embodies. Her movement toward masculine authority reveals not only strength, but also the impossibility of preserving Indigenous political legitimacy within the new political order emerging around her.

4.6 Loyalty to self

Another notable moment of intersection between Widow Ranter and Semernia in Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter* lies in their shared refusal to abandon the identities, values, and systems of loyalty that define them. Although the two women initially appear to occupy opposite dramatic and ideological positions as I argued in the previous segments, both characters ultimately demonstrate remarkably similar forms of autonomy grounded in fidelity to selfhood.

Despite their contrasting personalities and social positions, both Widow Ranter and Semernia ultimately demonstrate strong forms of personal determination through their refusal to abandon the values and identities that define them. Although the two women occupy very different relationships to colonial society, Behn presents both characters as consciously acting according to internally coherent systems of loyalty rather than simply submitting to external pressures. Their narratives suggest that female autonomy in *The Widdow Ranter* is expressed not through unrestricted freedom, but through the ability to remain faithful to one's sense of self under political and emotional constraint.

Semernia's autonomy is frequently overlooked because her authority is expressed through restraint, political responsibility, and loyalty rather than through open social rebellion. In my opinion, however, throughout the play she consistently demonstrates awareness of the consequences attached to her relationship with Bacon. Rather than functioning as a passive tragic heroine, Semernia consciously prioritizes political and cultural loyalty even while acknowledging her attachment to Bacon.

As I discussed previously, Hutner (75–76) argues that Semernia is divided between emotional desire and political obligation, yet the character repeatedly demonstrates agency through her awareness of these conflicting pressures. White's (648–649) discussion of the historical figure Cockacoeske further reinforces this interpretation by situating Semernia within traditions of Indigenous female political leadership shaped by diplomacy, communal responsibility, and resistance to imperial expansion. Read through this historical framework, Semernia's final choices reflect not submission, but ideological consistency under impossible conditions.

Widow Ranter similarly refuses to modify herself to conform to conventional expectations of femininity. Throughout the play she remains socially aggressive, economically independent,

and publicly outspoken despite repeated criticism from male characters. Unlike many Restoration heroines whose unconventional behaviour is ultimately disciplined or corrected, Widow Ranter retains her masculine sociability and performative authority until the end of the play. Nováková (41) argues that her masculine behaviour functions as “a stable component of her identity rather than a temporary disguise”. Her survival does not depend upon abandoning her unconventionality, but upon maintaining it.

Semernia’s final actions demonstrate how she exercises autonomy through sacrifice rather than adjustment. She decides to join the battle disguised as man, where she is injured by Bacon who only recognises her after she has been fatally wounded:

Bac.	Hah—a Woman’s Voice,—what art thou? Oh my Fears!
Queen.	Thy Hand has been too cruel to a Heart—whose Crime was only tender Thoughts for thee.
Bac.	The Queen! What is’t my sacrilegious Hand has done!
Queen.	The noblest Office of a gallant Friend, thou’st sav’d my Honour, and hast given me Death.
Bac.	Is’t possible! ye unregarding Gods, is’t possible?
Queen. my	Now I may love you without Infamy, and please dying Heart by gazing on you.

(Behn Act V, Scene III)

Even in death, Semernia prioritises honour, political integrity, and belonging above survival itself. Her death becomes an assertion of agency rather than simple defeat. Instead of surviving by adapting to colonial transformation, Semernia preserves authority through fidelity to her principles and responsibilities.

The contrast between the two women ultimately reflects the unequal conditions under which female agency operates within the world of the play. The Widow Ranter’s can be absorbed into settler society because her flexibility and social mobility remain compatible with the emerging political order. Semernia instead represents a form of Indigenous sovereignty that

colonial expansion cannot accommodate. Nevertheless, both women preserve a strong sense of personal integrity throughout the narrative. Widow Ranter survives without surrendering her individuality, while Semernia dies without abandoning her political and emotional loyalties. Through both figures, Behn suggests that female agency is not defined solely by survival, but by the ability to remain faithful to one's values despite historical and political constraints.

5 Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have explored both the clear opposition and the underlying similarities between Widow Ranter and Semernia as women operating within a colonial context. Although the two characters initially appear to occupy radically different ideological and social positions, Behn ultimately grants both women significant forms of agency. However, the outcomes of that agency differ profoundly. Widow Ranter benefits from the instability of settler society and is ultimately able to achieve emotional and social fulfilment, while Semernia is forced toward sacrifice because her political role and emotional desires cannot coexist within the settler structures surrounding her.

Through these contrasting trajectories, Behn reveals the limitations of female agency within Restoration settler discourse. While *The Widdow Ranter* employs familiar Restoration theatrical conventions such as cross-dressing, witty heroines, and tragic romance, Behn transforms these conventions through the political realities of colonialism. Both Widow Ranter and Semernia demonstrate autonomy, political awareness, and emotional self-determination, yet imperial structures ultimately determine which forms of female selfhood remain historically survivable. Settler legitimacy therefore shape the limits of female agency, demonstrating that gender in the play cannot be separated from settler power.

Semernia's death should not be interpreted as passive submission or tragic feminine defeat. Rather, it represents a final act of fidelity to selfhood under conditions in which survival itself would require ideological fragmentation. By dying while defending her people and remaining emotionally loyal to Bacon, Semernia preserves political loyalty, personal honour, and emotional integrity simultaneously. Widow Ranter similarly refuses to abandon the qualities defining her identity, maintaining her social authority, masculine performance, and emotional independence throughout the play. In this sense, both women are ultimately defined

not by whether they survive, but by their refusal to surrender the identities and systems of value that structure their sense of self.

Ultimately, Behn constructs Widow Ranter and Semernia as figures shaped by radically unequal relationships to the colony's future. Widow Ranter emerges from social mobility, settler commerce, and reinvention, whereas Semernia represents inherited sovereignty, communal responsibility, and resistance to the emerging political order. Widow Ranter's unconventional femininity can be incorporated into the emerging settler order because it remains compatible with modernity. Semernia's Indigenous sovereignty, by contrast, cannot survive within that same structure. Through this contrast, Behn exposes both the possibilities and the limitations of female power within Restoration colonial discourse.

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Annex: Historical context: Restoration era and Bacon's Rebellion

1. Bacon's Rebellion

The play dramatizes the historical events of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 and 1677, one of the earliest uprisings in colonial Virginia. It started when Nathaniel Bacon, leading the frontier settlers, rebelled against Governor William Berkeley. Rice argues that Bacon's rebellion "was primarily structured not by social or political divisions among the English" (Rice 736) but to eradicate and destroy the Indian presence in Virginia.

Although the main point of conflict was Berkeley's policies on the Indian tribes, it also reflected the deep tensions regarding economic hardship, class division and political corruption within colonial society. With the increasing population of settlers, the farmable soil was quickly decreasing, bringing farmers to continuously search for new land. Violence escalated in 1675 after attacks between settlers and Native Americans along Virginia's frontier. The governor decided to approach the conflict with caution with defensive forts and selective alliances with the Native American groups. Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy settler, demanded permission to actively attack these groups in direct confrontation. He began to quickly gain support from all struggling in the current climate and viewed Berkeley's government as "'negligent and wicked, treacherous and incapable, the laws unjust and oppressive.'" (Wertenbaker 24).

The momentum in Bacon's movement weakened as supplies became scarce and support for the rebels declined as they looted plantations and disrupted normal life. The rebellion quickly collapsed upon Bacon's death of dysentery, and English troops sent by King Charles II arrived to restore order (Wertenbaker 41).

Although Bacon's rebellion failed, it had large consequences on how the colony was ruled after. The ruling elite became alarmed after witnessing an alliance of the lower classes against Virginia's government (Wertenbaker 33). "In the wake of the rebellion 'Virginia's

ruling classes replaced most white indentured servants with slaves, ‘proclaimed that all white men were superior to black,’ and offered their ‘social (but white) inferiors’ better economic opportunities and more political power.” (Rice 727).

2. Female characters in English Restoration Theatre

After an 18-year ban on public stage performances by the Puritan regime, the restoring of the monarchy in 1660 brought the reopening of theatres and the beginning of the Restoration era in English theatre. This period was historically affected by political and dynastic uncertainty with intense intellectual engagement (Munns 142).

Female characters took the spotlight in Restoration drama, as actresses entered the stage for the first time. These characters were often portrayed as witty, sexually aware and sometimes rebellious against traditional gender expectations. The idea that intellectually, at least, women could be equal or even superior to men was widespread.” (Munns 144). Female sensuality was for the first time portrayed by actresses in England and would often become the focus of the performance.

Cartwright asserts that the female body became a theatrical tool, powerful because it provoked strong emotional responses from audiences. “She becomes the object of looking and response.” (Cartwright 148). Cartwright also argues that these characters challenged the concept of early theatre being misogynistic, as it portrayed them as intelligent, eloquent and with moral authority (Cartwright 144).

However, most of the female characters were still bound to patriarchal structures and expected to contribute morally and politically within them. “A woman must be prepared to give ‘wise counsaile’ to her husband.” (Cartwright 145).

The act of cross-dressing became popular in this period, in which female characters would disguise themselves as men, as Munn asserts, to “reverse the usual flow of power” (Munns 145). These cross-dressing and outspoken heroines defied traditional ideas of female obedience and male authority. Nevertheless, Gill notes that many plays reinforce social norms by punishing women who appeared to “trespass far into masculine cultural domains [were] generally forcibly returned to their ‘proper’ feminine spheres.” (Gill 195).

In Restoration theatre, women are portrayed as spectacles and emotionally powerful figures, “objects of knowledge”, as Cartwright describes, meaning their identities are constantly interpreted, watched, and questioned (Cartwright 156). This perception connects closely to the act of cross-dressing, as the disguise dramatizes the instability of identity and gender presentation.