The Unity of Thomas Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage: or, The Innocent Adultery:* A Reconsideration[1]

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Abstract

The present study discusses Thomas Southerne's tragicomedy *The Fatal Marriage* (1694), based on Aphra Behn's earlier novella *The History of the Nun* (1688). Modern criticism has tended chiefly to point out the simplification of Behn's main heroine in Southerne's play, as well as Southerne's introduction of the comical subplot that appears to be irrelevant to the main tragic story. The present essay defends the structure of Southerne's piece, observing both ideological and artistic themes that permeate both plots and create a dramatic unity in Southerne's work. The essay further argues that, in order to achieve this, Southerne's play is informed not only by Behn's prose text, but also by a number of tropes from Behn's dramatic *oeuvre*, as well as by Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Shakespeare's great tragedies, which both enjoyed considerable popularity when *The Fatal Marriage* was originally staged.

Keywords: Thomas Southerne, *The Fatal Marriage*, Aphra Behn, *The History of the Nun*, *Decameron,* Shakespeare, adaptation

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Celebrating, Reading and Adapting Aphra Behn

In 2024, the City of Canterbury, together with several local academic and charitable organisations, organised "Canterbury's Aphra Behn," a year-long celebration of the city's famous native, Behn (1640–1689), to bring her greater recognition not only among scholars and students of literature and theatre, but also among popular audiences, as well as citizens of and visitors to Canterbury. The festival included a public reading of Behn's lesser-known comedy *A City-Heiress* (1682), a production of another comedy of hers *The Amorous Prince* (the first since its premiere in 1671), an exhibition on Behn's times, life and work in the city museum, an academic conference held by the Aphra Behn (Europe) Society, and several other events, both formal and informal. As a kind of culmination of the celebrations of England's first professional

1 This study is dedicated to Kateřina. "I've lost my self, and never wou'd be found, / But in these Arms."

female writer, Canterbury decided to unveil a bronze 5' 10" statue of Behn by the sculptor Christine Charlesworth in the city centre, not far from the memorials of the other two great literary figures connected with Canterbury, Geoffrey Chaucer and Christopher Marlowe.

One of the leitmotifs of the events was, naturally, Aphra Behn's sex and a discussion of the extent to which a woman of her times could fashion, control and maintain her reputation. Even the generally accepted story of Behn's dying in poverty in 1689 seems to be a male re-imagination of Behn's life and (allegedly unsuccessful) career; and let us not forget that her canon and literary legacy were posthumously shaped chiefly by her male fellow writers and publishers. Aphra Behn's name as a canonical author was only revived in the early twentieth century by the novelist and journalist Vita Sackville-West's 1927 biography of Behn and, perhaps more famously, by a mention in Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, in which Woolf argued that "[a]ll women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds" (49). The renaissance of modern Aphra Behn studies was inspired by authors such as the poet and playwright Maureen Duffy, whose 1977 volume *The Passionate Shepherdess: Aphra Behn 1640–89* stimulated new research that continues until the present day in the form of (besides other endeavours) *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Aphra Behn*, an ongoing project under the general editorship of Elaine Hobby, Claire Bowditch, Gillian Wright and Mel Evans.[2] As emphasized in one of the public lectures during the festival, the aforementioned statue of Aphra Behn is a great feminist gesture by itself, being an extremely rare case of a statue of a non-royal woman under thirty in the UK.[3]

In this context, it is somewhat paradoxical—but at the same time hardly surprising—that the male-controlled image of Aphra Behn still largely influences critical and cultural discourses surrounding the author, whether intentionally or not. When, for the occasion of "Canterbury's Aphra Behn," the Canterbury Commemoration Society issued a leaflet introducing the author to general audiences, it characterised Behn as (contrary to the view mentioned above) "spectacularly successful in her day" as a writer, who by her works "proved extraordinarily skilful in an unusually broad range of genres" (Canterbury Commemoration Society). As a visual illustration to one of Behn's greatest literary achievements, the novella *Oroonoko* (1688),[4] the leaflet

2 One can hardly blame Zdeněk Stříbrný, author of the celebrated volume *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe*, working in socialist Czechoslovakia of the 1980s and drawing from earlier critical traditions, for simply dismissing Aphra Behn's dramatic works as "průměrné, neženský obhroublé komedie a tragikomedie ze života vyšší společnosti [mediocre, unwomanly indecent comedies and tragicomedies on the life of upper-class society]," while only praising her novella *Oroonoko* for its "pokrokové hodnoty [progressive values]" (*Dějiny anglické literatury* 1: 274). Countries of the former Eastern Bloc are still waiting for their own boom of Aphra Behn studies that would surpass the somewhat isolated English departments at universities and reach local living theatre and reading cultures.

3 Although Aphra Behn died at the age of forty-nine, Christine Charlesworth depicted her as a seventeen- to eighteen-year-old girl, which was roughly the age when Behn left Canterbury for London.

4 Charlesworth's statue of Aphra Behn is, anachronistically, holding a copy of *Oroonoko* in her right hand. (The novella was, in fact, written and published shortly before Behn's death.) The importance of the work for Aphra Behn studies can be illustrated by the excitement of the scholarly community

reproduced a late early-modern print of a scene from the story—which, however, was made not from Behn's original prose, but rather from its same-titled 1695 stage adaptation by the Restoration dramatist and Behn's professional admirer Thomas Southerne (1660–1746).[5]

Indeed, in the epistle dedicatory of the printed edition of his *Oroonoko*, Southerne emphasized that "[s]he [Behn] had a great Command of the Stage;" on the other hand, he wondered why such a competent dramatist "would bury her Favourite Hero in a *Novel*, when she might have reviv'd him in the *Scene*," clearly seeing the stage representation as a more natural and even superior form to the then-still emerging genre of prose fiction (2: 102). Southerne's words soon proved to be apposite. While Behn's "novel" was reprinted several times throughout the eighteenth century in the collections of her prose works,[6] it appears that its dramatic adaptation had quickly become the go-to version of the story for both theatregoing and reading audiences of the time. After its successful premiere in late 1695 at Drury Lane, Southerne's *Oroonoko* became "one of the most frequently performed works in the eighteenth-century theatre," being a repertory staple of the theatre up until 1744 "with a customary three to five performances every year" (Southerne 2: 91). Then, after a six-year hiatus, the play was revived by the Drury Lane Theatre in 1751 with eleven performances that season. The first printed edition of the play seems to have appeared within a few weeks of its opening night (dated 1696 on its title page, but probably published already in December 1695), with three more editions appearing by the end of the century. By Southerne's death in 1746, at least thirteen subsequent editions of his *Oroonoko* circulated, with the publication flow continuing for the rest of the century. Furthermore, in the years 1759–60, three theatrical adaptations of Southerne's *Oroonoko* were printed, two of which had also enjoyed successful stage runs.[7] It could easily be argued that, by popularising Aphra Behn's story just at the time when the notion of Behn's literary canon began to form, Southerne effectively overshadowed the original author for decades, if not centuries to come.

The present study will focus on another case of a popular stage adaptation of Behn's prose fiction that almost entirely replaced its source in the minds of theatregoers and readers for the whole of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its author was, again, Thomas Southerne, who, a year before his adaptation of *Oroonoko*, took Behn's novella *The History of the Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker* (printed 1689) and turned it into a tragicomedy titled *The Fatal Marriage: or, Innocent Adultery* (premiered in

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when, completely unexpectedly, an undocumented, nearly perfect copy of the first edition of *Oroonoko* surfaced during the Aphra Behn conference in Canterbury in July 2024 (see Thorpe).

5 For a reproduction of the picture, originally published in Volume 6 of *The New English Theatre* (1776) and showing the actor John Horatio Savigny as Oroonoko stabbing the actress Anne Miller as Imoinda, see, for instance, Highfill et al. 220.

6 *All the Histories and Novels Written by the Late Ingenious Mrs. Behn* was first printed in 1696 (without the initial *All* in the title, which was only added in the subsequent editions), having enjoyed its ninth edition (either in a single volume or divided into two) by 1751.

7 One was published anonymously, the other two were made by the writer and book editor John Hawkesworth and the actor, poet and playwright Francis Gentleman, respectively. For a recent discussion of the four dramatic versions of *Oroonoko* from the perspective of their racial and marriage politics, see Dominique 27–69.

February or March 1694 at Drury Lane,[8] first printed later the same year). Unlike with *Oroonoko*, whose literary and stage lives co-existed throughout the eighteenth century and whose story always remained associated with Aphra Behn as its original author, the source novella for *The Fatal Marriage* did not make it into the Behn canon until the twentieth century and its single Restoration edition soon disappeared into oblivion. Although three prose adaptations (or rather re-tellings) of Behn's story appeared in print in the 1720s and 1730s,[9] none of them mentioned *The History of the Nun* as their direct source or Behn as its author; Southerne, on the other hand, received highest praise for his piece by contemporaneous critics, including John Dryden (1631–1700) (Southerne 2: 6), and his play remained staged in its original form or, later, in David Garrick's (1717–1779) revision *Isabella: or, the Fatal Marriage* (1757), well into the nineteenth century (Southerne 2: 7).[10] Furthermore, a reference to the act of *reading* the play in Henry Fielding's (1707–1754) novel *Tom Jones* (1749) suggests that Southerne's dramatic adaptation soon assumed the role of a literary text, replacing Behn's original prose as a piece for more intimate enjoyment as well.[11]

Besides the names of the original author and the adaptor, and the similar reception histories, what Southerne's *Oroonoko* and *The Fatal Marriage* have also in common is the rather atypical genre and structure of the pieces. As Robert D. Hume has pointed out, Southerne's dramatic works do not easily fall into neat categories and, generically speaking, they are "disconcertingly unusual" (290)—a fact that may have contributed to Southerne's critical neglect in the past. *Oroonoko* and *The Fatal Marriage* are both examples of split-plot tragicomedies, meaning that their main tragic plotlines, based on Behn's narratives (*Oroonoko* and *The History of the Nun*, respectively), are supplied by smutty, light-hearted comedic sub-plots that rarely overlap with the main story-strands. In Southerne's *Oroonoko*, the comedic portion with Widow Lackit might have been vaguely inspired by Behn's final play, *The Widow Ranter* (1689); the sources and inspirations for the sub-plot following Fernando and his family in *The Fatal Marriage*

8 The opening took place before the split of the United Company, so, unlike with *Oroonoko* that was staged in 1695 by the surviving company's lesser actors, for *The Fatal Marriage*, Southerne could rely on the best and most experienced London players, including Thomas Betterton for the role of Villeroy and Elizabeth Barry for Isabella.

9 For detailed analyses of the eighteenth-century adaptations of *The History of the Nun* (including Southerne's play) against Behn's model, focusing on the delineation of the main heroine(s), see Pearson and Hultquist.

10 While the epistle dedicatory in the printed editions of *The Fatal Marriage* mentions that Southerne "took the Hint of the tragical part of this Play, from a Novel of Mrs. *Behn*'s, called *The Fair Vow-Breaker*" (Southerne 2: 10), the title page of the first printed edition of Garrick's *Isabella* only mentions that the play was "Alter'd from SOUTHERN" (Garrick 2) and neither does the "Advertisement" prefixed to Garrick's play mention Behn's novella or her name, but states only vaguely that the plot "has been always esteemed extremely natural and interesting" (3). When, in 1909, Paul Hamelius attempted to identify the source of the main plot of Southerne's play, he failed to find a corresponding work by Aphra Behn mentioned by Southerne in his epistle, maintaining that "not one of Mrs Behn's tales corresponds with Southerne's description in his *Dedication*, or with the subject of his tragedy" (353). The rare 1689 edition of *The History of the Nun* as the source for Southerne's piece (and, consequently, as another entry in Behn's canon) was only re-discovered several years later by Montague Summers (see Summers).

11 For a commentary on the literary history of *The Fatal Marriage* in the eighteenth century, see Pearson 240.

will be discussed below in more detail. In the epistle dedicatory to *The Fatal Marriage*, Southerne in a rather self-deprecating way admits that he supplied the comedic part of his play "*not from my own Opinion, but the present Humour of the Town*" (2: 10). When, some sixty years later, David Garrick revised the play into the already mentioned *Isabella: or, The Fatal Marriage*, he decided to remove the comedic sub-plot entirely (just as Hawkesworth, Gentleman and the anonymous adapter did with the sub-plot of Southerne's *Oroonoko* a couple of years later), deeming it "not only as indelicate but as immoral" and maintaining that "the mixed drama of the last age called Tragi-Comedy has been generally condemned by the critics, and perhaps not without reason" (3).

Indeed, contemporaneous criticism praised Garrick for his choice, denouncing "this absurdity of tacking together two different plots, the one comic, the other tragic" and adding that "[t]his comic plot of this play [Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*] [...] is as unskilfully as dissolutely managed: the alterer has done a real service to the public in disincumbering this tragedy from all that lumber" (*The Theatrical Review* 60–61). Writing a century and a half later, Paul Hamelius considered the comedic portion of Southerne's play as merely "an unsavoury comic underplot, which [...] is cumbersome for the progress of the main action" (352). Montague Summers, editor of the 1915 collection of Behn's works, on the other hand, claimed that though the sub-plot had been "almost universally decried," it was still, in his opinion, "first-rate comedy" showing that Southerne's comedic talents "were certainly of a very high order" (155). Only Jacqueline Pearson, writing in 1993, recognised that in the two plots of the dramatic piece "Behn's single heroine is split apart" into two very different images of femininity: one represented by the innocent Isabella (in the tragic plot) and the other by the witty and subversive Victoria (in the comic sub-plot) (236–37), thus ascribing a clear dramaturgical purpose to the play's structure.

The present study will argue that the relationship between the two plots of Southerne's play is deeper and even more complex than that and, contrary to the playwright's apologetic words from the epistle dedicatory to the printed version of *The Fatal Marriage*, the two strands of the story offer two alternative outlooks on, and solutions to, female oppression by societal structures, which Southerne made the central theme of his play; indeed, the analysis will maintain that these two treatments of this issue were meant to complement each other to create a seamless, yet ambiguous whole that was rather insensitively simplified after Southerne's death by Garrick in the name of neo-classical taste.

Boccaccio, Behn and Shakespeare: Thematic and Structural Unities of Southerne's Adaptation

Since Behn's novella is not generally known outside Aphra Behn studies, a short summary of its story will be useful here. The father of the titular nun, Count Henrick de Vallary, hands over his infant child Isabella to the care of her aunt, the abbess of an Augustinian convent. Growing up, Isabella becomes famous for her virtue and devotion, but also for her wit and beauty, for which she is pursued by many young men, whom she rejects. She ultimately falls in love with Henault, brother of a fellow nun and son

of a wealthy noble named Van Henault. After much inner struggle, Isabella eventually agrees to flee the convent and marry him. Van Henault disinherits his son and refuses to forgive him unless he goes to the war against the Turks—a decision that makes Isabella so distressed that she miscarries. Henault reportedly dies in a battle and, after three years of mourning, Isabella agrees to marry one of her former suitors named Villenoys, with whom she lives happily for five years. One night when Villenoys is away hunting, Isabella is visited by a mysterious man, who turns out to be Henault. He had survived the wars and spent the past seven years in slavery, from which he ultimately managed to escape. Not loving her first husband any longer—"for love, like reputation, once fled, never returns more" (Behn 181)—and in agony that she would lose her second husband and comfortable life-style, Isabella smothers Henault in his sleep. Upon Villenoys' return, Isabella convinces her husband that Henault returned and died of a broken heart once he learned about the second marriage. To save his and his wife's reputation, Villenoys decides to throw the body in the river in a sack. Isabella, however, is afraid that her husband would despise and reproach her, and sews the sack to Villenoys' coat, resulting in her second husband's falling into the river together with the first one and drowning. Isabella's guilt is discovered and the "fair vow-breaker" is brought to justice. Before her public execution, she "made a speech of half an hour long, so eloquent, so admirable a warning to the vow-breakers," and, upon her death, she "was generally lamented and honourably buried" (Behn 190).

Southerne's treatment of the Behn material (especially in terms of its main heroine) has been repeatedly commented on, most substantially by Pearson and Hultquist. As Southerne himself admitted in the epistle dedicatory, his main interest was "*the Question, how far such a distress was to be carried, upon the misfortune of a Womans having innocently two Husbands, at the same time*" (2: 10). Behn's narrative, stretching from Isabella's birth up to her death at the age of twenty-seven, is limited to her second wedding and the events that immediately precede and follow it (Biron, Southerne's parallel to Henault, returns from captivity only a day, not years, after the ceremony), not giving Isabella any space to develop emotionally or struggle with her possible desires. The motif of the violations of sacred vows that, according to Behn, "receive the most severe and notorious revenges of God" (140), is sidelined and the play ultimately "emphasizes male tyranny rather than female guilt" (Pearson 236). While, in Hultquist's words, Behn's Isabella is "both pious and aggressive," her re-imagination by Southerne is "loving, devoted, suffering, and not prone to the kind of dissembling that define [sic] Behn's heroine" (492). In the finale of Southerne's play, Isabella does not murder either of her husbands that both meet in her house; instead, she loses her sanity and kills herself, bringing to mind another famous virtuous and passive Restoration heroine—Belvidera from Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682).[12] Isabella's first husband, Biron, is murdered by a group of ruffians hired by

12 In this context, an anecdote is noteworthy that was written down by Theophilus Cibber in "The Life of Mr. Thomas Southern" as part of *The Lives of the Poets of Great-Britain and Ireland*: "The night on which his Innocent Adultery was first acted, which is perhaps the most moving play in any language; a gentleman took occasion to ask Mr. Dryden, what was his opinion of Southern's genius? to which that great poet replied, 'That he thought him such another poet as Otway'" (329).

his younger brother, Carlos, while her second husband, Villeroy, "must live, grow Gray with lingring Grief, / To dye at last in telling this sad Tale" (2: 83 = 5.4.310–11).

The comical plot that complements the main story strand follows the feats of Fernando, an old stereotypical husband, who is pathologically jealous of his much younger and beautiful wife, Julia. Fernando has furthermore disinherited his libertine son, Fabian, and refuses to give his leave to his daughter, Victoria, to marry her love, Frederick. While Fabian pretends to have joined a convent to regain his father's favour and trust, Victoria elopes with Frederick at night in a man's clothes. At the wedding of Isabella and Villeroy (who is Fernando's relative), Fabian drugs his father and brings him to the monastery to be "cured" of his follies by being made to believe that he has died and found himself in purgatory, where he is beaten for his sins by devils (in fact monks). After some time, Fernando re-appears from a tomb with his family waiting for him, maintaining that they were fasting and praying for his release out of purgatory the whole time. Wholly reformed, Fernando renounces his former suspicions about the fidelity of his wife (who has, indeed, remained faithful to her husband, although she had a suitor, the treacherous Carlos from the main plot-line), settles half of his estate upon Fabian and bequeaths the other half to him when he dies, and gives blessing to Victoria and Frederick.

While critics usually name an episode from John Fletcher's (1579–1625) Jacobean comedy *The Night Walker* (c. 1611, revised by James Shirley [1596–1666] in 1633) as the immediate source of Southerne's sub-plot (Hamelius 356; Summers 154; Southerne 2: 7), Southerne's treatment of the purgatorial episode is in many details closer to a tale from Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (novella 3.8), where the name of the tricked husband is "Ferando" (in Fletcher, the parallel character is Justice Algripe), who is (unlike in Fletcher) indeed locked down and punished in a nearby abbey (Boccaccio 1: fols 103^{r}–107^{v}). The possibility of Southerne using Boccaccio as a direct source rather than some later rendition of the story is important here: firstly, tales and individual episodes or motifs from *The Decameron* were frequently employed by Restoration dramatists, including Aphra Behn (Wright 244–60, 318–30)—Southerne's familiarity with it would, therefore, have been no exception; secondly, another story from *The Decameron* (novella 4.8; 1: fols 167^{r}–170^{r}) obviously served as a (direct or indirect) source for *The History of the Nun*[13]—surprisingly, the ending of Boccacio's story being closer to *The Fatal Marriage* than to Behn's novella, indicating that Southerne might have found some inspiration in *Decameron* 4.8 even when composing the tragic plot of his play.[14] Linking two stories that go back to the

13 If Aphra Behn and Thomas Southerne indeed consulted *The Decameron*, it was probably the 1620 translation, attributed to John Florio (1552–1625), that had enjoyed its fifth edition by 1684 (alternatively, they could have come by the Italian original or one of the French translations that were available at the time). In 1702, a new English rendition, attributed to John Savage (1673–1747), was published in two volumes as *Il Decamerone: One Hundred Ingenious Novels* (3.8 is marked there as "Novel XXVII" and 4.8 as "Novel XXXVII").

14 In *Decameron* 4.8, Ieronimo, a former suitor and love of Silvestra, returns after two years of absence abroad to find Silvestra married. At night, he visits her in her house and, seeing that Silvestra no longer loves him, he dies of broken heart in her room. Silvestra's husband (unnamed here) removes the body, believing in his wife's innocence. When Ieronimo's corpse is found the next day and is brought to the

same ultimate source into one dramatic piece could thus seem more logical from the Restoration playwright's perspective than later dramatists and critics would have been willing to admit.[15] During Southerne's life, after all, the play seems to have been exceptionally well received. According to an anonymous letter from 22 March 1694, the *Fatal Marriage* was then "generally admired for one of the greatest ornaments of the stage, and the most entertaining play has appeared upon it these 7 years" (qtd. in Malone 141), suggesting that, in the eyes of late-Restoration audiences, the comic and tragic plots well complemented each other.

What is, however, more important than Southerne's sources per se is the way in which he treated them to convey a particular message. In both of his plots, Southerne emphasizes the issue of female suffering under patriarchal (here chiefly paternal) oppression. While, in Pearson's words, Behn in her novella "allows women the dignity of free will and of full moral parity with men" (236), the virtue of Southerne's heroine rests in her innocence (hence the play's subtitle) and passive suffering at the hands of others, which she is unable to end or escape by herself. The character of Henault's "cruel father" from Behn's novella (171), who refuses to give pardon to his son for eloping with Isabella and marrying her against his will, is expanded into Count Baldwin, whose stony-heartedness towards Isabella, who finds herself without any means of living, becomes the main source of her misery and, ultimately, the reason for her unintentional bigamy. Like his model from *The History of the Nun*, Count Baldwin, too, is dubbed "a cruel Father" (2: 27 = 1.3.196), "The Tyrant" (2: 29 = 1.3.264), "my old Tyrant Father" (2: 33 = 2.2.11) or one of the "wretched Fathers" who are "blind as fortune all" (2: 65 = 4.3.110). While Behn's Van Henault insists on his son's joining the French army to fight the Turks—news which "possessed her [Isabella] with so entire a grief that she miscarried" (173)—Southerne's Count Baldwin wants to deprive Isabella of her child (that is born and survives in *The Fatal Marriage*, further stressing the ideal femininity of the dramatic heroine) in an even crueller way: he is willing to "save him from the wrongs / That fall upon the Poor" (2: 29 = 1.3.257–58) only if Isabella gives up her son and agrees never to see him again. When she, horrified at the thought, refuses, the angry Count Baldwin sends her away, refusing any support for the two and telling her to "have your Child, and feed him with your Prayer" (2: 29 = 1.3.269). It is her desperate situation that makes Isabella agree to the second wedding, although she declares that she cannot give Villeroy her heart as she has remained emotionally faithful to her first husband (2: 38 = 2.3.119–22).

An even more obvious expansion upon the original novella is in this respect the character of Carlos, Biron's younger brother. To illustrate the cruelty of Van Henault, Behn mentions in passing that once he learned "that young Henault was fled with the

church to receive burial, Silvestra recalls her former love for him at seeing his face again in the church and expires over his body. Silvestra's grief-stricken husband survives and tells his wife's tale to the townspeople.

15 Both Boccaccio's novellas had, of course, enjoyed multiple iterations (including dramatic adaptations) across Europe even before Behn and Southerne (see Jones 19 and 22–23) that could in some manner have contributed to the final form of both Behn and Southerne's works. A clear, straightforward line between a single source and its adaptation is a rather naïve and simplistic concept, especially in the realm of theatre.

so-famed Isabella, a nun [. . .] he immediately settled his estate on his younger son" (170). While the figure of the unnamed brother in Behn's novella has no further significance for the story, his later dramatic iteration becomes one of the key vehicles of the development of the tragic plot. As it transpires, Carlos was aware the whole time that his older brother had survived the wars and had lived in captivity, but to secure his father's favour and the family inheritance for himself, he decided to keep this information from his father and help to wed his brother's wife "to root her out of our Family" (2: 20 = 1.1.189). When Biron unexpectedly returns, Carlos hires a group of rogues to murder him. Once his intrigues are revealed, however, Carlos on the one hand owns up to his guild but, on the other, emphasises that it was Count Baldwin's unfatherly treatment, similar to the Count's treatment of Isabella, that led him to his crimes:

> [Carlos.] *Biron* stood
> Between me, and your favour; while he liv'd,
> I had not that; hardly was thought a Son;
> And not at all a-kin to your Estate.
> I could not bear a younger Brothers lot,
> To live depending, upon curtesie.
> Had you provided for me like a Father,
> I had been still a Brother.
> (Southerne 2: 81 = 5.4.216–23)

In this last moving scene, Count Baldwin indeed admits that "I never lov'd thee, as I shou'd have done; / It was my Sin, and I am punish'd for't" (2: 81 = 5.4.224–25). This realisation, however, comes too late and the tragedy cannot be undone. It is interesting that, when Garrick was working on his adaptation of Southerne's play in the 1750s, he made Carlos even more ruthless and scheming, while showing the Count in a more favourable light "because he objected to the artificial change in characterization [*i.e.*, from a tyrannous father to a penitent man] which occurs in Southerne's V, iv" (Garrick 395). Nevertheless, as Hultquist points out, both Southerne and Garrick "make the patriarchs exceptionally evil" (492); and in both plays, it is ultimately the patriarch, Count Baldwin, who alone admits to his guilt for the deaths of Biron and Isabella, and unconditionally accepts their orphaned son as his own:

> [*Count Baldwin.*] My Flinty Heart,
> That Barren Rock, on which thy Father starv'd,
> Opens its springs of Nourishment to thee:
> [. . .]
> O had I pardon'd my poor *Birons* fault!
> His first, his only fault, this had not been.
> (Southerne 2: 83 = 5.4.316–21; cf. Garrick 58 = 5.3.354–59)

Needless to say, there is no parallel situation to this in *The History of the Nun*, where the responsibility for the tragic events falls solely on Isabella herself and neither Van Henault nor his younger son plays any direct role in them.

The theme of fatherly guilt for the children's misery is the leitmotif of the comic plot of *The Fatal Marriage* as well, perhaps even more markedly than in the tragic portion of the play. Even in the opening line, Fernando's son, Fabian, complains to Frederick about "Such an unlucky Accident! such a Misfortune!" (2: 15 = 1.1.1), referring to his father's decision to disinherit him, while also foreshadowing Isabella's first exchange with Villeroy two scenes later, in which she laments about her "Misfortunes" and calls herself "A Bankrupt every way" (2: 22 = 1.3.1–6). Fernando, who, just like Count Baldwin, is the sole cause of his family's distress, is sarcastically dubbed by his son "My liberal, conscientious, loving, well-dispos'd Father" (2: 15 = 1.1.10), while his wife informs him at one point that she "can live no longer under your Tyrannical Government" (2: 21 = 1.2.23). Carlos, who plays a fundamental part in the tragic plot, is a minor character in the comic one, a friend and confidant of Frederick's, who assists his companion in his scheme to marry Victoria and punish Fernando; as with Villeroy's wedding in the tragic plot, however, Carlos has his own ulterior motives to help his friend: when the business with Isabella is over and Fernando removed, he plans to "come in for a snack of *Fernando*'s Family," meaning to seduce his beautiful wife (2: 31 = 2.1.44).[16]

The main difference between the comic and the tragic plots is that, while in the tragic one, the cruel father reforms too late, his comedic parallel manages to come to his senses soon enough to allow for a happy resolution. While the male characters, their conduct and motives in the comic plot recognisably mirror their tragic counterparts, what distinguishes the two situations most is their respective female casts. Especially Victoria, Fernando's daughter, represents a different kind of femininity than Southerne's Isabella: she is bold, active, rebellious, ready to dissemble, and her man's clothes, in which she repeatedly appears on the stage, emphasize her "masculine" traits—not so much different from those of Behn's original Isabella. Pearson's observation that these subversive feminine qualities "are confined to the inverted world of comedy" (236–37) by Southerne is only partly true. The stock situation when a daughter is forced by a patriarchal authority to marry against her will (Fernando himself designs to "marry my Daughter very shortly to a Friend of my own that will deserve her"—2: 17 = 1.1.91–92) only to end up with her true love was a staple of Aphra Behn's comedies, for instance *The Forced Marriage* (1670; Erminia, in love with Philander), *The Amorous Prince* (1671; Laura, in love with Curtius), *The Dutch Lover* (1673; Euphemia, in love with Alonzo), *The Town Fop* (1676; here it is the male character of Bellmour, who is forced by his guardian to marry Diana, while in love with Celinda, whom her parents want to marry to the titular fop Sir Timothy Tawdrey), *The Feigned Courtesans* (1679; Marcella, in love with Sir Henry Fillamour, and Cornelia, bound for the convent), and *The Lucky Chance* (1686; Leticia, in love with Belmour).[17]

The closest "relative" to Victoria in this respect is, however, Hellena from *The Rover* (1677), another famous vow-breaker, who, although bound to become a nun, stands

16 Indeed, in *Decameron* 3.8, Ferando's wife is unfaithful to her husband during his absence with the local abbot, with whom she even conceives a son.

17 I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Elaine Hobby, who brought some of these works to my attention.

against paternal (and fraternal) authority and, together with her sister Florinda, joins the Naples carnival to find herself a husband—whose fidelity she also later tests dressed as a man (like Victoria tests Frederick in Act 2, Scene 5, when she pretends to be her own lover). It appears that for Behn herself the character of a young, witty, defiant woman naturally fitted the comic mode more than the tragic one (Behn authored a single tragedy, *Abdelazer*, that premiered a year before *The Rover* and did not contain any true romantic plot). Where, however, we can see a glimpse of Southerne's Isabella is in Angellica Bianca, the wronged courtesan who, in the final scene of *The Rover*, draws a pistol against her former lover Willmore, but is ultimately unable to shoot him. In a vaguely similar situation, Southerne's Isabella, at a point of utmost distress, draws a dagger against the sleeping Biron, whose unexpected arrival has turned her into a bigamist; ultimately, however, she fails to commit the crime. What both the tragic heroines share (the blank-verse-speaking Angellica Bianca indeed becomes a tragic heroine in many respects towards the end of *The Rover*) is the inability to translate their emotions into action—something that their comic counterparts have no issue with. While diverting in a way from the complexity of Behn's heroine, it appears that Southerne, in the delineation of his female characters, found further inspiration in Behn's dramatic oeuvre to juxtapose two dramatic treatments of a single theme—one with a happy resolution, the other ending up in a disaster. To achieve this, Southerne appears to have worked with distinctly "Behn-esque" themes and material in a more complex way than previous critics have assumed.

Besides systematically drawing from Boccaccio and Behn, Southerne also employs a number of Shakespearean echoes that are clearly discernible in both parts of *The Fatal Marriage*, further contributing to the dramatic unity of the play. Indeed, without going into much detail, Southerne's editors Robert Jordan and Harold Love have noted that

> in its [*The Fatal Marriage*'s] renunciation of the exotic trappings of the heroic play, the studied simplicity and colloquial ease of its language, and its centring of the dramatic interest on the sufferings of a sympathetic and vulnerable individual, Southerne, with help from Otway and Banks, is recapturing most of what was still assimilable by a dramatist of his time from Shakespeare. (Southerne 2: 8)

Borrowings from, or allusions to, Shakespeare are apparent, especially in the final act of the play. The aforementioned scene when Isabella approaches her husband, who is sleeping on a couch in her house, is clearly reminiscent of Othello standing over sleeping Desdemona with murderous intentions. In particular, since Isabella in Behn's novella *does* smother Henault in his sleep, the original audiences probably expected Southerne's Isabella to adopt Othello's action; Isabella's words "Pleasure grows again / With looking on him – Let me look my last – / But is a look enough for parting Love! / Sure I may take a Kiss – where am I going!" (2: 71 = 5.2.11–14) are clearly meant to be reminiscent of Othello's "O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade / Justice to break her sword! Once more, once more: / Be thus when thou art dead and I will kill thee

/ And love thee after. Once more, and that's the last" (*Othello* 5.2.16–19).[18] Isabella's remark at the beginning of the same soliloquy that "I never shall sleep more" (2: 71 = 5.2.2) furthermore reminds the audience of "Macbeth shall sleep no more!" which Macbeth hears upon stabbing King Duncan in his sleep (*Macbeth* 2.2.42). The distinct Macbethian echo is soon strengthened by "A knocking at the Gate" (2: 72 = 5.2.43) that Isabella hears before Biron wakes up—a reference to the knocking at the castle gate in Act 2, Scene 3 of *Macbeth*, just after the murder of Duncan.

The whole situation with Carlos, who mischievously wants to usurp his father's favour and estate at the expense of his older brother, is reminiscent of Edmund the bastard's machinations against his legitimate brother, Edgar, in *King Lear*. Carlos's remark in the last act that "Younger Brothers are / But lawful Bastards of another Name" (2: 72 = 5.3.3–4) is just a clear pronouncement of this motivic affiliation. In this context, Count Baldwin's desperate cry in the final scene "Grant me, sweet Heaven, thy patience, to go through / The torment of my cure" (2: 81 = 249–50) even deepens the association between Southerne's play and Shakespeare's story of a foolish patriarch, who recognises his only true child too late (see Lear's "You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!" – *King Lear* 2.2.463). Isabella's madness and suicide might, on the one hand, recall the unhappy fate of Otway's Belvidera mentioned above; in a scene replete with Shakespearean allusions, however, the link with Ophelia seems even more pertinent—especially if this reference links *The Fatal Marriage* to the last missing of Shakespeare's four great tragedies (*Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*) that are all intertextually present in Southerne's play. At the very end, the devastated Villeroy, over Isabella's dead body, thus assumes the role of Shakespeare's Horatio at the end of *Hamlet*, announcing that, since "Self-Murder is deny'd me [. . .] I must live, grow Gray with lingring Grief, / To dye at last in telling this sad Tale" (2: 83 = 308–11).

Whether dramaturgically effective or not, the Shakespearean references in the tragic plot of *The Fatal Marriage* testify to Southerne's high ambitions for his piece. In the mid-1690s, Shakespeare already had an elevated cultural status following his "re-discovery" during the Exclusion Crisis (1678–82; see Biagiotti); indeed, in the last couple of decades of the seventeenth century, the highest number of printed editions of Shakespeare's works had appeared since the Interregnum and his plays were prominent both on the public stages and at court (see Depledge 150–70). Including Shakespearean tropes and references at the time when *The Fatal Marriage* was first staged was thus not necessarily just a bow to an ancient classic, but an effective employment of the then-fashionable dramaturgy that enjoyed general popularity—not dissimilar, in this respect, to Aphra Behn's dramaturgy at the time.

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18 It is perhaps relevant to note here that in the "Cupid and Psyche" episode of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, which was the inspiration for the bedroom scene in *Othello*, it is the woman, Psyche, who, with a razor in her hand, approaches the sleeping victim, the male Cupid (see Carver 432–33). The strong tradition of this image explains why a number of classic depictions of the parallel scene from Shakespeare have Othello holding a dagger, although he smothers Desdemona rather than stabbing her to death. Unlike Othello, Southerne's Isabella indeed draws a dagger, but her crime is prevented by Biron's waking up (just as the oil from Psyche's lamp wakes Cupid, who manages to escape).

The traces of Shakespeare in the comic plot of *The Fatal Marriage* are more subtle, but still visible. Even the basic premise of the plot—a daughter running away from her father to marry her true love—comes back to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which Hermia's tyrannical father, Egeus, threatens to have his daughter executed (or sent to a nunnery, making Hermina another would-be nun) if she does not marry the man according to his choice. Victoria seems to come from the same lineage as Shakespeare's Hermia, Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet* or Jessica from *The Merchant of Venice*, who escapes her father's house at night with her beloved Lorenzo (a man whom Jessica's father, Shylock the Jew, despises and whom he would surely not approve of as a suitable husband for his daughter) in a boy's clothes to disappear in the crowd of masks. Southerne's play even has its own version of the window scene from Act 2, Scene 6 of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Victoria is supposed to climb down the ladder from the window in Fernando's house to join Frederick waiting for her below. Furthermore, the subsequent scene of Southerne's play, in which Victoria appears in front of Frederick in a man's clothes and tests his love for her by pretending to be her own secret lover, resembles the ending of Act 4, Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Portia, dressed as a male lawyer, demands a ring from her husband, Bassanio, which was in fact a gift from her that Bassanio promised never to part with. In both cases, the scenes follow the Renaissance convention of a cross-dressed female character not being recognised, even by their husbands or lovers.

While the later stage history of *The Fatal Marriage* showed that both of the plots of the play could very well exist independently and enjoy considerable success,[19] the conscious employment of the same sources and tropes in both of the story-strands shows that Southerne understood them as two parts of a whole, informing one another, rather than two separate stories. When, in the final scene of *The Fatal Marriage*, all the principal characters from the tragic plot gather on the stage to witness the catastrophe, among the characters present is, surprisingly, Frederick from the comedic plot. For the play's finale, his presence is not necessary, and he pronounces only a handful of short lines that could easily be ascribed to another character. His presence, however, is crucial thematically. While patriarchal tyranny, represented chiefly by Count Baldwin and by the unscrupulous Carlos, was not defeated in the tragic portion of the play, the oppressed characters from the comic part were able to set themselves free from it. The presence of Frederick on the stage reminds the audience of the light-hearted sub-plot that was abandoned almost two acts earlier and, further, indicates that both the comedy and the tragedy of the play present two possible outlooks on the same situation, offering two different solutions to it that lead to two different outcomes. The comic sub-plot thus becomes a kind of reversed *mise*

19 The comic sub-plot of *The Fatal Marriage* was adapted into a short farce already in 1716 by Benjamin Griffin, a Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre actor, who had previously played Fernando in *The Fatal Marriage*. In his piece, Griffin reprised the same role, which he expanded and renamed Don Lopez (see Krajník). Coincidentally, the comic sub-plot of Southerne's second adaptation of an Aphra Behn story, *Oroonoko*, which was also removed from the eighteenth-century adaptations of the play, appeared as a stand-alone piece as well, titled *The Sexes Mis-match'd* (printed 1742), combining the Southerne material with scenes from John Fletcher's Jacobean comedy *Monsieur Thomas* (see Southerne 2: 96–97).

en abyme, an image within an image pointing to the idea that the tragedy of the main plot could and, perhaps, should have been prevented.

Concluding Remarks

Contrary to the later opinion that Thomas Southerne, in his dramatic re-imagination of Aphra Behn's novella *The History of the Nun*, combined two incongruous and unrelated plots that did not do justice to Behn's original, the present article argued that the playwright, in fact, carefully designed his play to offer multiple perspectives on the issue of patriarchal oppression—a theme central to the Behn canon—that are confronted by means of the split-plot structure of the play. From the very beginning, Southerne parallels the same themes and characters in both plots, effectively employing the same sources in them—including the works of Behn, Boccaccio and Shakespeare, which were popular among audiences and fashionable at the time—to achieve their unity. Unlike Garrick's 1757 revision of Southerne's play, which closely follows the neo-classical decorum of genre by abandoning the comic plot entirely, Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage* offers a more complex and more ambiguous image of patriarchal oppression and the female response to it. It would, therefore, be unfair to criticise Southerne for making his Isabella a more straightforward and passive character than her namesake from Behn's novella. The complexity of Southerne's message does not rest in a single figure of the story; rather, it is conveyed through multiple plots and dramatic characters that, at the end of the day, do not offer a single easy solution.

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