

Or,

a play

by Liz Duffy Adams

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17 Factory Hollow
Greenfield, MA 01301
212-674-0420
lizduffyadams@gmail.com

Representative
Kate Navin at Gersh
knavin@gershny.com
41 Madison Avenue, 33rd Fl.
New York, NY 10010
212-634-8169

Or,

Place & Time

London, 1666-1670. The first scene is set in a private room of a debtors' prison. The rest of the play takes place in a rented parlor upstairs in a lodging house, with a door leading to an unseen inner bedroom, from evening to dawn of one night.

The play is set in the Restoration period, but plays off the echoes between the late 1660s, the late 1960s, and the present.

Characters

APHRA BEHN — woman, late 20s to late 30s

JAILER — man

CHARLES II — man, Aphra's age or up to 10 years older

WILLIAM SCOT — man, same age as Charles

NELL GWYNNE — woman, early to mid-20s

MARIA — female servant, older

LADY DAVENANT — female aristocrat, older

Notes

The play is designed for the male actor and second female to play all the parts except for Aphra. The man plays Charles and William. The woman plays Nell, Maria, and Lady Davenant. Either one may play the jailor. In the premiere production, the male actor played Lady Davenant as well, and that breakdown is an option, depending on casting considerations. Additional dialogue to cover a costume change in the cross-gender version is provided in Appendix One.

Maria is pronounced Ma-RYE-a, rather than Ma-REE-a.

“I will not purchase slavery
At such a dangerous rate
But glory in my liberty
And laugh at love and fate.”

—*Aphra Behn*

“Whore is scarce a more reproachful name
Than Poetess.”

—*John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*

“We are stardust, we are golden
And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.”

—*Joni Mitchell*

Prologue

(Spoken by the actor who plays Aphra, in street clothes, intimately to the audience.)

Or. Now that's a very little word
On which to hang an evening's worth of show
But I will now that little word enlarge
And show a vast unsettled world within
That open *o* and nosing thrust of *r*.
Our play will shortly ricochet between
A dense array of seeming opposites:
Spy or poetess, actress or whore
Male or female, straight or gay—or both
Wrong or righteous, treacherous or true
Lust or love, cheap hackney trash or art
Now or then, a distant fervent age
Or this our time of mingled hope and fear.
And yet despite all seeming differences
Those *ors* divide less than they subtly link
And what seem opposite and all at odds
Are in their deepest nature most the same.
We all embody opposites within
Or else we're frankly far too dull to live
And this our wilding world cannot be hemmed
Within a made-up symmetry of sense.
That being said, we'll open up the gate
Unhinge the *R* and step on through the *O*
To find our characters, from hist'ry fetched
Although they no doubt would not know themselves
If they were sudden brought into this room
To witness; O blame not our hapless scribe
For that; she pleads a playwright's hallowed right
To have her way with people and events
Too far long gone for most of you to know
Just as our heroine in her own time
Made free with truth where it might serve her will.
If Aphra could but be with us tonight
We hope she would forgive our trespasses,
While you we hope to solace and seduce
With all our most alluring stratagems.
[O! Fire exits! There and there, all right?
Are all your cell phones off? Yes? Very good.]¹
Compose yourselves for pleasure, if you will.
Cue the lights, let never time stand still.

¹ Optional lines within brackets

Or,

(Aphra in a prison cell writing a letter, well dressed in her own clothes.)

APHRA

And so I must, however I regret it
Now once more beg you, Sire, not to forget it
That here in debtor's prison I do lie
For lack of funds promised me as your spy.
To nag and scold my own adoréd king
Believe me, pains me more than anything.
But justice to myself demands no less
Than princely favor and full recompense.
And so—shit. Jailer! Jailer! Damn his eyes.

(Jailer enters)

Sweet kindly jailer mine, the ink's run dry.

JAILER

So? Ain't you writ enough?

APHRA

Not nearly, no

JAILER

And that to me is?

APHRA

Crucial, as you know.
For till I have an answer to my plea
I cannot pay my debts and be set free.
Nor can I, what's more to the point, you see
Reward you as I've promised faithfully.
So ink, tout suite, my greasy grasping friend
And soon I'll have another note to send.

JAILER

All right, all right, you'll get your fucking ink

APHRA

What charming words, into my soul they sink.

JAILER

See here, you, knock it off, I won't be rhymed.

APHRA

No no indeed, you're the prosaic kind.

JAILER

Damn right! I'll go and fetch your goddamned ink—

(Cutting her off with a look and a warning gesture before she can finish the couplet. He exits. Slight pause. She can't resist calling after him:)

APHRA

Oh very well, you needn't make a stink!

(to herself, referring to his smell)

Although in fact that's something he can't help
Though he stay silent yet his clothes will yelp.
Not to mention seethe with creatures creepin';
If I stay here o'er long I too'll be eaten.

(calling out to jailer:)

And if you would, send me my woman, too!

(She looks out of a barred window, downstage.)

Ah me, this is no very cheering view.

(A masked and cloaked black-haired man enters. Aphra speaks without turning, assuming it to be her servant.)

O, Maria, see what ruin's here.
See where grass grows in the empty street.
Rome's fall no more melancholy looked
When once barbaric hoards had gone their way
Than this our plagued and battered city shows
Unnat'ral in its hushed and barren waste.
At night low moans of beggars substitute
For barks and howls of dogs and cats now gone.
They killed them all to slow the spread of plague
Though some I guess were eaten, such the need.
The rav'nous fire, so recently put down
Still smokes and smolders, darkening the sky.
Even here in our thick walléd cell
The wind now shifts and brings a bitter scent.
Disease and fire have brought our city down
And war keeps it in poverty disguised.

APHRA *cont'd*

I hardly knew it when we disembarked.
All our time abroad, O, how I longed
To sail for London, our beloved town
The city of the world, the all admired,
The glittering and great phenomenon
The home of all that makes life bearable
Which I in my poor way fought to preserve
As here and there across the globe I flew.
But now that I at last have come to roost
What do I find but grandeur's sad decay
And my own state much like in disarray
Languishing unransomed and alone,
Abandoned by the great who late I served.
Maria, you've been faithful still, and true
And I do swear your service to reward
 Can you be patient till we both are free?

CHARLES

As patient as a saint, so you with me.

APHRA

O! Who is this?

CHARLES

One who owes you much and means you well.

APHRA

I thought you were my woman.

CHARLES

No, I am your man.

APHRA

What do you mean? I have none.

CHARLES

I mean I would be a man for your turn, however you care to employ me.

APHRA

I see. You are some idle foolish rake, come to ogle and annoy a female prisoner. Well, it's dull enough here, you may as well entertain me.

CHARLES

Happy to return the favor, as you've entertained me with your private counsel. A spy, are you?

APHRA

And you're a knave and a rogue if you take advantage of your eavesdropping.

CHARLES

A knave and a rogue?

APHRA

A goddamned knave and a treasonous rogue!

CHARLES

Peace, peace, this is no way to keep me secret. Is this the honeyed tongue of the wily widow Behn?

APHRA

Do you know me?

CHARLES

We've met.

APHRA

Well, come on. Why do you remain masked? Reveal yourself to me and let me know who I have had the pleasure of abusing.

CHARLES

To be railed at by one of your wit and beauty is pleasure indeed. I am in no great hurry to forfeit the opportunity.

APHRA

Should I not rail then, if I knew you?

CHARLES

Possibly not.

APHRA

Then I shall enjoy it just a while longer too. Keep your disguise, charming fool. I'm somewhat disguised myself, after all.

CHARLES

In drink?

APHRA

Hah! If only I could afford drink. I gave my very last coins to keep myself out of the open prison and in the relative splendor of this private cell. No, disguised by misfortune, as you see.

CHARLES

If all were as disguised as you in your misfortune, the world would be a glorious place, however desperate. For all your poverty, you shine as the silvery moon piercing the envious murk of night.

APHRA

Now it's my turn to cry peace! Does it amuse you to mock a prisoner with elaborate flattery?

CHARLES

I promise you, I neither mock nor flatter. I find myself blown quite off course by your unsuspected... *luminescence*, all the more startling by contrast with your present grim setting. Our meeting before was brief and businesslike, and I too distracted with pressing cares. Now I can't help but see you more clearly. You mistook me for your servant, and that was no mistake: you may command me.

APHRA

Even masked, it's clear you are a pretty, witty man, and one I am beginning to be moved by. Will you be moved to remove your visor now and let me see who it is I am invited to command?

CHARLES

I will. And yet, one moment more before my revelation. Will you allow me to salute you properly, while you know me only by my voice?

APHRA

O, very well. Come, take your liberty.

CHARLES

Only for my sake?

APHRA

No, for my own, I confess. Your flattery has had its effect, so come, have your reward of it, and then reveal.

(They kiss. He unmask.)

A good face, as I thought. With something familiar about it.... O, god, the king! O! And I called you knave!

CHARLES

You didn't know me.

APHRA

Goddamned knave!

CHARLES

Yes, that's all right.

APHRA

And rogue. Treasonous rogue!

CHARLES

Really, I forgive you.

APHRA

And fool!

CHARLES

Yes! I beg you, let all that go by.

APHRA

Well, good Christ, you've changed.

CHARLES

I see you've recovered from the awful shock.

APHRA

Well, your majesty, the manner of the reintroduction has somewhat mitigated awe.

CHARLES

Quite.

APHRA

You have changed since my last and only audience, which was I must say a good deal more formal. It's been two years but you've aged... five.

CHARLES

It's been a rough couple of years. You despite your travails have not aged a day since you came to give me your report on Surinam. I believe you advised us not to lose it to the Dutch.

APHRA

Have we?

CHARLES

Pretty much. We have got New York off them.

APHRA

New York?

CHARLES

They called it New Amsterdam. A very good little town. No fabled rivers of gold, but oysters the size of dinner plates, so they tell me.

APHRA

I don't think much of this modern mania for naming places "New" something. An inherent contradiction, don't you think? If it's new it's not York and if it's York it's not new.

CHARLES

O, quite. You may as well call it Exactly Not Where I Want To Be Land.

APHRA

Please Don't Make Me Live in This Horrible Place Burg.

CHARLES

God I wish I Were Home Ville.

APHRA

You know a lot about that, don't you, majesty? Homesickness I mean.

CHARLES

Call me Charles when we're alone.

And yes. I will confide to you, I was so many years longing for home that I hardly knew how to be glad once I was here; longing itself became such a habit of mind. I still sometimes wake up homesick, before I know where I am. You've been a rover, you know something about it too.

APHRA

I am desperately glad to be home again, except that I'm plainly desperate.

CHARLES

Yes, sorry about that. You must know, we haven't got nearly the money we need, what with one thing and another. You are far from the only spy left unpaid. But you are perhaps the most eloquent and persistent. Your debts have been paid. See, the door swings open. You are free.

APHRA

O, wonderful. Though perhaps the greatest wonder is that you came yourself.

CHARLES

I thought it would be fun. Look, I wasn't just toying with you before. You have drawn me onto a lee shore and wrecked me there, and I believe only you can draw me off again, to safety and sweet sailing, if you would.

APHRA

You do like your naval metaphors, don't you?

CHARLES

Yes, I do. I'd rather be on the sea than anywhere, except...

APHRA

Don't say it.

CHARLES

...your bed. Sorry. I hate a trailing off.

APHRA

This is very strange.

CHARLES

Not so strange.

APHRA

Not to you, I'm sure. You have a different woman for each day of the week, or so it's said.

CHARLES

An exaggeration, I assure you. I'm a one-woman man. At a time, and within reason.

APHRA

But I am not a professional mistress. I have greater ambitions.

CHARLES

I'm already married, you know.

APHRA

Yes, I know, god save her, and I mean greater even than to be queen. I will have an undying honor. I will know a godlike eternal fame. I will be a playwright.

CHARLES

A female poet? What, a new Sappho for the modern stage? Odd's fish, you're ambitious.

APHRA

Funny, I know. But I'm no kind of whore, the kind that marries or the other kind. I'll earn my own bread or go hungry. Thank you for paying what I was owed. Goodbye.

CHARLES

Wait, wait. Don't be so hasty.

APHRA

Well?

CHARLES

You still haven't called me by my name.

APHRA

Charles. Will that do?

CHARLES

Say it again.

APHRA

Charles. Charles. Beautiful Charles.

(They kiss again)

Very nice. But a kiss won't transform me into a mistress nor you into a theatrical contract.

CHARLES

And that's all you want?

APHRA

Yes... yes.

CHARLES

You know, for a woman of the world you aren't terribly worldly. My favor is worth something.

APHRA

I don't need your favor, I've got my own contacts. Anyway I can't afford the cost.

CHARLES

The cost?

APHRA

A royal bastard and an end to my career.

CHARLES

Some would consider that a gain. Well, leave that for now. If you walk out of here with nothing but your still quite pretty clothes, where will you go? The city is devastated, the theaters not yet reopened.

APHRA

But they will be?

CHARLES

They will be. In the meantime, before you embark on your glorious career, let me continue to repay you for your service, agent one-six-oh.

APHRA

O, you know my number?

CHARLES

And your pseudonym, Astrea.

APHRA

Say that again.

CHARLES

Astrea.

APHRA

A lovely sound, from those lips. And from mine...

(They kiss. Very sexy.)

O... O, dear.

CHARLES

So bad? I'm told I'm not incapable of giving pleasure.

APHRA

O, yes, you are very much capable of undermining all my determinations. As low as my state is now, you might bring me very much lower if you bring me to fall in love with you. I've survived storms at sea, the malice of counter-agents, the assassination plots of enemy spies, near-starvation, and the maddening stupidity of a brief and necessary marriage. I've skirted plague, fire, and war. But the greatest danger for a woman, let me tell you, plague and fire and war in one, is all-consuming love for a man. As a nation under a tyrant, so a woman in love: all freedom lost for the sake of a specious security that only lasts as long as a sunny day in England; that is, as long as a man loves or a tyrant pleases to be kind.

CHARLES

Well, there it is. I'm no tyrant and you're no whore. But let me keep you for a while, not in return for services you may do, but for service already rendered. Just until you're on your feet in the theater and earning your third-day profits.

APHRA

O, but I'm not content to write for a third day only—I crave glory as much as if I'd been born a hero.

(As Charles speaks she stops, hearing herself, picks up her pen to make a note.)

CHARLES

I daresay I can help you there as well. A poet associated with a king is naturally—I beg your pardon, am I in the way?

APHRA

Sorry, just need to—that sounded rather well, I think I can use it—born a hero—I’m with you again, where were we?

CHARLES

I was making you a useful offer.

APHRA

You were humoring me.

CHARLES

Not at all. I wouldn’t dare stand between you and anything you aspire to; I’m sure I’d be knocked aside like a bit of flotsam in a spring tide. Come, humor me. I believe it will be vastly amusing to harbor a playwright.

APHRA

I suppose it would only be fair. Did you see that Pindaric ode that’s been going around, “On His Majesty’s Heroism in the Great Fire”?

CHARLES

I’ve heard it quoted; modesty forbids my admitting to reading it myself. What, was that you?

APHRA

I can’t risk signing my name yet, even in private circulation. The last female to dare set up openly as a poet was savaged almost to ruin, and she had an independent income and a country estate to retreat to. A popular hit in the theatre will give me some protection but until then I must be careful, especially with political poetry.

CHARLES

Why risk it then? Stick to pastoral themes. Hymn the joys of cookery. Bit safer.

APHRA

All your years of exile I was here, growing up under the Roundheads. A brutal, coercive, repressive regime, the rule of the mob disguised as democracy.

CHARLES (*quoting Shakespeare*)

“The blunt monster with uncounted heads,”

APHRA

“The still-discordant wav’ring multitude.” Just so. I hated it for my country and I hated it for myself. I was a self-taught country girl longing for a wider world and the Puritans meant to keep me in a cage until I ate my heart out and died. The day of your Restoration it was dark and overcast, and then suddenly the sun broke through the clouds and made the crown on your dark head shine out like an answering sun—do you remember?

CHARLES

All the poets used it, it was custom-made for them.

APHRA

But that’s how it was. The sun came out and I knew my life had just become possible. Freedom, especially for a woman, is only possible under an enlightened monarch. You’re mine, and my pen, for what it’s worth, is at your service.

CHARLES

It’s a funny thing, bearing all that. Are you quite sure I’m enlightened enough to pull it off?

APHRA

You are. Enough to know that power needs poets, and poets need money.

CHARLES

Odd’s fish, that’s blunt enough. Well then, will you be my poet?

APHRA

And that’s all?

CHARLES

I think you can trust my self-restraint, for all your beauty.

APHRA

Yes, I didn’t mean to insult you or flatter myself. I meant, you won’t ask me to continue my intelligence work?

CHARLES

No, you’ve done enough.

APHRA

Have I, by the way? I don’t suppose you’ve read my reports yourself?

CHARLES

I’ve had summaries. But they tell me they were extremely well written.

APHRA

Did they tell you what I warned about the invasion? About burning our ships at anchor?

APHRA *cont’d*

They mean to sail up the Thames to the Medway—

CHARLES

Yes, yes, I'm not bothered about that. You must know we are quite safe from the sea.

APHRA

Surprise and treachery may bring the greatest down, as you have cause to know.

CHARLES

You are no longer Agent one-six-oh. Let us speak only of what really matters, of poetry, theater, and love.

APHRA

Ah, this would be that new life that I wanted.

CHARLES

May never by your old life you be haunted.

APHRA

Ah, this would be that new life I requested.

CHARLES

I take you at your word, let mine be tested.

APHRA

Ah, this would be that new life that I asked for.

CHARLES

And this the truest Aphra I unmasked for.

(The scene changes; Charles exits; Aphra is in her lodgings with Nell. Nell wears men's clothes, Aphra is writing. They're sharing a tobacco pipe.)

NELL

Good weed.

APHRA

Isn't it?

NELL

Damned good weed. Where do you get it? I haven't been able to afford it since they raised the tax.

APHRA

A friend is kind enough to get it for me.

NELL

A friend? Hmm, I wonder who is Aphra's friend. You're amazingly discreet, no one knows. All right, I know, I'm a nosy bitch.

APHRA

Not at all.

NELL

Not at all but mind your damned business, Nell. Never mind. I'm still so thrilled to meet you. I can't believe I had the nerve to come and bang on your door un-introduced like this. Everyone says you're the next big thing.

APHRA

Everyone?

NELL

That's the gossip. I swear, I thought I was climbing the stairs to fucking Olympus.

APHRA

Are you mad? I would have come to you weeks ago if I had dared, and thrown myself at the feet of the greatest actress of the new age! Your Florimell left me overcome with admiration.

NELL

Aw, don't be silly, I'm just an orange girl made good. You should have come backstage.

APHRA

Next time.

NELL

I'm not interrupting your work, am I?

APHRA

No, no, do forgive me the rudeness, but I've been promised an introduction to Lady Davenant of the Duke's Company and I need something new to show her; anyway I can write and chat at the same time.

NELL

That's a neat trick.

APHRA

O, I had to learn how. This is the first time in my life I've had a room of my own.

NELL

No family left, then?

APHRA

Finally managed to shrug them off; they're in the country.

NELL

Wasn't there a husband? A Dutchman?

APHRA

Plague.

NELL

Sorry.

APHRA

Don't be. What about you?

NELL

I'm on my own now; my last keeper had monstrous bad luck at gambling and had to retrench, but another one will come along soon. It's lucky that the aristos are all theater-mad, isn't it? I suppose yours is someone very grand indeed, to get such good tobacco.

APHRA

Not at all.

NELL

Not at all! Christ, you've got good manners, you must think I'm a wretched guttersnipe.

(Aphra stops writing and looks at her.)

APHRA

I think you're absolute heaven.

NELL

O. That's nice.

Are you writing a part for me? No, I know, I'm with King's Company and my son-of-a-bitch producer would never let me out of my contract to play with the rivals.

APHRA

It's a shame. I do have a part for you, you'd be perfect in it. A beautiful Amazon warrior who falls madly in love with her enemy and is utterly undone.

NELL

O, you're killing me, I'd die to play that! We own all the old revival rights you know, all I get to play are the goddamned classics, where Dukes gets all the new plays. It's so unfair. A breeches part, I suppose?

APHRA

Yes, until the end when she succumbs to love and changes to women's clothes.

NELL

Yeah, see? So right for me. They love me in the breeches parts, so they can look at my legs.

APHRA

I don't blame them.

NELL

Yes, they're nice, aren't they? On the way over here a man really took me for a rent boy; I had to run away! Wouldn't he have been disappointed!

APHRA

Not necessarily. Might have swung both ways.

NELL

Is that what your friend is like?

APHRA

I think that's what most people are like, if they only knew it.

NELL

I don't know. I grew up in a brothel and I can tell you, some people are astonishingly particular about what they like; only one very specific thing will rouse 'em and nothing else will do. We had one regular fella who would have his favorite girl take off her stockings and wriggle her big toe into his—but maybe I'd better wait until I know you better. Am I shocking you?

APHRA

I didn't grow up in a brothel, but I hope nothing in that realm can shock me. Nature endowed us with a glorious gift for pleasure and nothing is more natural than to take all honest advantage of it.

NELL

And by honest you mean?

APHRA

Willing. The only sensual sin is to take what isn't freely given. If I am lucky enough to attract the true affection of a lovely man or woman, and if together we can increase the sum total of happiness in the world for even an hour, I consider that an act of virtue, not vice.

NELL

You are persuasive. I can't think how to argue with that, even if I wanted to.

APHRA
But you don't want to?

NELL
I don't.

APHRA
Shall I read you a bit from the play?

NELL
Yes, please.

APHRA
“Even now I was in love with mere report, with words, with empty noise; and now that flame, like to the breath that blew it, is vanished into air, and in its room an object quite unknown, unfamed, unheard of, informs my soul; how easily 'tis conquered!”²

NELL
Did you just write that, while I was here? Am I the object that informs your soul?

APHRA
Mm hm.

(They kiss.)

NELL
This is strange.

APHRA
Not so strange, is it?

NELL
Well, no. Just sudden.

APHRA
Sudden love is truest, undisguised.

NELL
And she who sudden loves will take the prize.

APHRA
Nice.

NELL

² From “The Young King” by Aphra Behn

Thanks.

Sudden love steals sweet throughout my veins.

APHRA

And steals away what little wit remains.

NELL

Ha bloody ha. Your turn.

APHRA

By Cupid's sudden arrow I've been hit.

NELL

And suddenly your love is all I—shit.

APRHA

What?

NELL

Sorry, it wasn't going to rhyme!

APRHA

Idiot!

NELL

Critic!

(Another kiss)

Who kisses better, me or your keeper?

APHRA

You bring him up so much, are you already jealous?

NELL

O, never jealous. He's just a man, I suppose. Where would any of us be without men to pay the rent?

APHRA

We can earn our own, I suppose?

NELL

Are you joking? I have to spend all my earnings on clothes and carriages, just to keep my reputation up.

APHRA

You could marry?

NELL

The fatherless daughter of a whorehouse keeper? Who do you think I could find to marry?

APHRA

I shudder to think.

NELL

Anyway, what's the difference, except you're selling yourself to just one man. No way around it, to be a woman is to be a whore and if god doesn't like it why did he make it that way? Though come to think of it, men are whores too.

APHRA

What, the men too?

NELL

That's right, every one of them, flirting and pandering and cocksucking their way all the way up the ladder! Any man that isn't a cocksucking trimming whore is probably dead; no way else to survive these slippery times. You laugh, but it's true, you know it is. Name me a man or woman in the kingdom can't be named whore.

APHRA

Well, but what about the king? Is he a cocksucking whore?

NELL

No, worse, a teasing whore! With one hand he tickles the balls of the Parliament while with the other he keeps his cousin Louis well fluffed, all to keep the money coming in. He dirty-talks the Catholics until they're hard and hopeful, then turns around and jilts them when his ministers hold up a sack of cash. It's true! I don't blame him, I adore him—where would I be without him to reopen the theaters and set the fashion? But just between us, let's call a spade a goddamned shovel.

APHRA

O, my god, I love you, foul mouth and all.

NELL

Is it so foul?

APHRA

It's delicious... But I have to come to the king's defense. He wants to help the Catholics, he really believes in religious toleration—

NELL

But he needs money for the war, so his hands are tied, I know, I know. But don't let's talk about war and politics; it's such a bore and you must have had enough of all that in your previous career.

APHRA

My previous career?

NELL

Don't go all mumchance, everyone knows you were a spy.

APHRA

Everyone knows..?

NELL

There are no secrets in the theatre, it's much too small a world and all anyone does is gossip. Anyway, your mask is off with me now, isn't it?

APHRA

All right, it's true. And yes, I've had enough of it. It's a nasty little world of lies, subterfuge, backstabbing and betrayal.

NELL

Wait, are we talking about spying or the theater?

APHRA

A man I was fond of was killed, not long after he was seen with me in Antwerp.

NELL

Was he a spy too?

APHRA

A double agent.

NELL

And you blame yourself for his death? I doubt it was your fault.

APHRA

You don't know anything about it.

NELL

I have some idea of what the life of a double agent must be like. Doubles your chances of someone wanting to slit your throat. Sorry; O, sorry, I'm a tactless cow.

APHRA

No, you're right, but it's an ugly world, isn't it. Don't you wish we could go far far away,

APHRA *cont'd*

back to a simpler time?

NELL

Was there ever a simple time, since there were people in the world?

APHRA

There was, long ago.
Before the wars of ministers and kings
Before the need to struggle for our bread
Before all strivings base and harsh there was
A golden age of happiness sublime
Where lovely nymphs—like you with fewer clothes—
In fragrant groves lay hidden from the sun
Which dappled through the leaves to gild their days
While night time ‘neath the pearly moon there played
The gentle shepherdesses and their swains
Living all for music, poetry, love
Before the grim unnatural rule of law
Of gods and men, O sweet Arcadia!
 Unfettered, unrepressed, and unashamed
 A happier better time could not be named.

NELL

Sounds fucking fabulous. And guess what—it sounds like right now!

APHRA

What, now?

NELL

Well, or any minute. The Puritans have had their day, now it's our turn to make a new golden age.

APHRA

What about the war?

NELL

The war can't last forever.

APHRA

It feels as though it already has.

NELL

Come on, don't be such a nostalgia queen. Look around, it's already begun. We can love who we want, girls or boys; we can wear any clothes we want—

APHRA

Girl's or boy's—

NELL

Yeah! The world is changing. A woman can be an actress, a playwright, a poet, a libertine, a spy. A nobody like me is the It Girl everyone loves; you can shed your murky past to become the toast of the theater; every day and night is a party and a happening and a grand fucking festival of art and love. This is our utopia, and it's never going to end.

APHRA

How lovely it would be to believe that.

NELL

O, just choose to believe it, that's what I do. Just like this.

(Another kiss)

APHRA

You have a genius for living in the moment. I believe you could make the saddest man in the world smile.

NELL

I certainly could, and I would, if he could pay my landlord. I'll have to choose someone soon but I can't make up my mind; plenty of rich admirers and each one as dull as a rainy day. Money's not enough, I have to have wit, don't you?

APHRA

Nell, I think I'm having a brilliant idea.

NELL

Are you?

APHRA

If I can get this play produced I'm sure it will be a success.

NELL

I like your confidence.

APHRA

Well, to be honest I swing back and forth between confidence and knowing for a fact that it will be the biggest bomb the London theater has ever seen and I'll be hounded by the shame into my grave. But let's assume it's a hit.

NELL

Yes, let's.

APHRA

Then I'll be able to keep myself. And I think you'd love my friend.

NELL

Thanks very much, but I don't need anyone's castoffs.

APHRA

O, you'd want this one.

NELL

Would I?

APHRA

Trust me.

NELL

Well, but wouldn't it cost you a pang, to pass him on to me?

APHRA

I'm never jealous. I love freely and I don't allow anyone to own me; how could I justify keeping anyone I love in chains? I love you both; if you loved each other my happiness would be multiplied, not diminished. Only still love me too; don't leave me; then I would believe in your new golden age, and we would all live there together.

NELL

Now I see why you haven't remarried. You're far too romantic.

APHRA

Yes. Though to be honest it's not pure altruism on my part. I can't make him happy and he'll soon find someone else anyway.

NELL

Who is he that a goddess like you can't make him happy? Fuck 'im, he's too fussy for me.

APHRA

No, it's fair enough. I won't...I don't care to... Well, to be blunt, I don't let him fuck me. We exchange every other pleasure but that.

NELL

Why not?

APHRA

For one thing, I don't want to get knocked up.

NELL

O, if that's all, there are ways.

APHRA

I know, and none of them can be counted on. Anyway, if we're really letting our hair down, I've never really cared that much about that part; it's all the rest that does it for me.

NELL

I love it, I could do it for hours. Did you see my Cleopatra last season? "O happy horse, to bear the weight of Antony!" I love that line, I know just what she means.

(A knocking at the street door below.)

Expecting someone?

APHRA

No, but—*(Listens at the door.)* Maria's letting him in. Damn. Ah, Nell, darling, would you mind terribly withdrawing for a bit into my bedroom?

NELL

Love to, but not alone.

APHRA

Please, Nell.

NELL

Why hide me, I thought you were going to give me to him wrapped in a bow.

APHRA

O, yes, but, not yet. You don't understand; he's a very private man and I myself don't want it known who he is.

NELL

Christ, either you don't trust me to keep my mouth shut or you're deranged with love for him—either way I think I'm jealous after all.

APHRA

Don't be, I promise I'll tell you everything when the time is right, but right now if you love me for pity's sake get in there and don't eavesdrop.

(The door closes behind Nell, Aphra turns around and the same moment a masked dirty-haired man rushes in.)

APHRA

O!

WILLIAM

Astrea!

(He rushes straight across and embraces her.)

APHRA

Stop! Who are you?

WILLIAM

Don't you know me?

APHRA

You're masked!

WILLIAM

And will stay that way for now if you don't mind, I don't know if I was followed—
what's in there, are we alone?

APHRA

Just my woman below—and a cellar full of burly male servants. Tell me your name this
instant or I'll have you turned out.

WILLIAM

Does this remind you?

(He kisses her.)

APHRA

William? I thought you were dead!

WILLIAM

I will be if you don't help me—god, you feel good.

APHRA

You don't, you're filthy, get off me.

WILLIAM

Sorry sorry, just such a relief to get here alive, thought any number of times I'd been
recognized, look how my hands are shaking, nerves are fucking shot, excuse my
language, I'm a wreck as you see, nervous as a cat—you're doing well, look at you.

APHRA

Pull yourself together and tell me what's going on. I thought you'd been seen leaving our
last rendezvous, I was told you'd been killed.

WILLIAM

Who told you, that bugger Corney? Wishful thinking. But I had to lay low for a while.

APHRA

In a ditch?

WILLIAM

I know, I'm a mess, I know. Astrea, for the love of Christ what does a man have to do to get a goddamned drink?

APHRA

He has to tell me what he's doing in my rooms in London when he's in fear of his life and knows perfectly well he'll be hung for treason if he's discovered.

WILLIAM

Hung? Don't you think I rate the axe? My father did.

APHRA

Your father was a man of principle; you're an opportunistic coward.

WILLIAM

O. Not in love with me anymore, I take it? That's too bad.

APHRA

Don't worry; for the sake of the past at least I won't betray you. But stop trying to play me; I know you didn't risk your life for love.

WILLIAM

All right, yes, I've got information, and where else could I go? I had to get out of Holland, France is out of the question, and I loathe Scandinavia. You think England's bad, you've never spent a winter in Copenhagen.

APHRA

William.

WILLIAM

All right! But not a word of sense until you give me a drink.

APHRA

Sense first.

WILLIAM

Listen to you, lady ice queen; when did you become so cool? Last time I saw you, you were weeping hot tears while a fat Belgian landlord shook you down for the rent and look at you now.

APHRA

Bitch and stay thirsty or speak your piece.

WILLIAM

Right, all right, sorry, right. Well. In a nutshell. Here it is. I know of a plot to murder the king and put his Catholic brother on the throne. Now can I have a drink?

APHRA

O god. When?

WILLIAM

Tomorrow.

APHRA

Who?

WILLIAM

Who do you think, bastard Catholic terrorists—ah, ah, no names yet; if you don't mind, I'd like to hold a bit back.

APHRA

Until you're paid?

WILLIAM

All I want's a full pardon. And my father's lands back. A title would be nice. And that's my last word until you've slaked my thirst.

APHRA

Goddamn it, William. Fine, I'll fetch a bottle. Stay here. Right here! I'll be back in a moment and then you'll tell me everything you know if I have to beat it out of you.

WILLIAM

You and your cadre of burly manservants?

APHRA

Shut up. And don't move.

(She goes out. Instantly, Nell pops out of the other door.)

NELL

Hello, you must be—eek!

(William, startled, has grabbed her and pulled out a pistol.)

WILLIAM

What? Treachery? Who are you, boy?

NELL (*grabbing his hand and putting it on her breast*)
Not a boy, for starters, you fuckwit.

WILLIAM
O. No, you're not, are you? Who are you? Did you hear what we talked about?

NELL
I tried to but that door's a lot thicker than it looks. Why, what did I miss?

WILLIAM
Did you really hear nothing? Tell me the truth or I'll blow off your head.

NELL
I said I didn't. Put that away before it goes off; you're trembling like a virgin.

WILLIAM (*lowers pistol*)
Well, what were you doing, lurking and sneaking around like that? You scared me half into my grave.

NELL
I wasn't lurking and sneaking. I wanted to see what sort of man Aphra's friend was, and now it's clear he's a rude nasty strangely-high-strung raving lunatic. And not exactly a fanatic about bathing. I can't believe she loves you so madly, I wouldn't give rat's balls for three of you.

WILLIAM
How much did she give for *you*? I'm not fussy, I haven't had a girl *or* a boy in weeks.

NELL
You couldn't possibly afford me.

WILLIAM
I can if she can. Come on, how about some credit? I'm about to come into money.

(*Aphra enters.*)

O, you're back. Where's my bottle?

APHRA
Maria's decanting one. What's this?

NELL
I wanted to meet your friend and I'm sorry to say: unimpressed. Really, darling, I think you could do better.

APHRA

O, no, he's not—Christ, he's not—

WILLIAM

What am I not, sweetheart?

APHRA

Not—at his best. He's been ill. Very ill. Not fully recovered. May be contagious. So really, Nell, you'd better go.

NELL

But there's a bottle coming. And we're just getting to know each other. I'm learning more about you and your peculiar tastes every moment.

WILLIAM

Really, why be hasty, there's plenty of time for what we have to talk about. Your little hermaphrodite and I were just coming to terms.

(Knocking below again. William jumps.)

For Christ's sake, Astrea, what sort of a bear garden are you running?

NELL

Astrea?

APHRA

Shh. *(Listens at door,)* O god. Nell—

NELL

No, I won't hide again, are you ashamed of me?

APHRA

I'll explain everything later I swear please for me.

(In one swift movement Aphra kisses her, whirls her into the inner room, shuts the door and wheels back to William, who has drawn his pistol.)

WILLIAM

Who'd you tell I was here? *Lying bitch!

APHRA *(*overlapping)*

No one!

WILLIAM *(continuous)*

Just remember if I'm taken now the king will be killed—you're the only one in England who'd believe me.

APHRA

I didn't betray you, you idiot, it's—my lover! Quickly, hide!

WILLIAM

Is he so jealous?

APHRA

Wanted man?

WILLIAM

Right! All right.

(He heads for the inner room; Aphra pushes him into a cupboard.)

APHRA

Not with her! In there!

WILLIAM

Get rid of him quickly.

APHRA

Of course I will. Be silent!

(The instant he's hidden Maria enters, an outrageously ill-tempered servant.)

APHRA

O, Maria.

MARIA

Oof, those stinkin' stairs, my knees are popping like corks. Here's your stinkin' bottle.

APHRA

Didn't I hear the door?

MARIA

She's cleaning her boots, it's filthy muddy out.

APHRA

She? Who is it?

MARIA

Did you think it was himself? No, it's a lady. Where's the actress?

APHRA

She's—tired, she's lying down. What lady?

MARIA

I don't know, do I, Dave something. And the other one? Have you turned conjurer? It's like a disappearing act up here.

APHRA

He's—resting too.

MARIA

Wear 'em out, don't you?

APHRA

Dave?

MARIA

No, that's not it. Something to do with furniture.

APHRA

Maria, for pity's sake—

MARIA

Davenport! That's it.

APHRA

Davenport... Davenant?

MARIA

That's what I said.

APHRA

Lady Davenant is here?

MARIA

I said so didn't I, she'll be right up.

APHRA

Did she say why she's come?

MARIA

Maybe she heard it's a good spot for a nap.

APHRA

All right, never mind, Maria, you may go. (*Maria doesn't move.*) Please.

(Maria starts to go.)

MARIA

Some stinkin' manners, that's all I ask for. Didn't get dragged through stinkin' jungles and stinkin' vomitous sea voyages and stinkin' lousy Antwerp and how many stinkin' months of waiting to be paid—

(The cupboard door opens a crack and there's a pointed cough from William. Maria turns.)

What's that cough? You coming down with something?

APHRA

No, no, just, smoke. Ahem.

(Maria turns to go again. Behind her back Aphra hastily slips the bottle into William's hiding place.)

MARIA

—and on top of that thrown into stinkin' prison and sticking by her every step of the way without a grumble without a word of complaint only to be told “you may go” without a please or a thank you which is the very least I think I'm stinkin' entitled to—

(She turns back at the door.)

How many glasses — *(puzzled, where's the bottle?)* you want?

APHRA

Never mind, Maria, that's all right, thank you so so much, what would I do without you, off you go please thank you.

(Maria exits. William pops out.)

WILLIAM

Do you expect me to drink this ghastly plonk?

APHRA

Drink piss if you please, just get back in there!

WILLIAM

Temper!

APHRA

Didn't you hear?

WILLIAM

All I could hear were footsteps going away; this thing is surprisingly solid. Bit of a quickie, wasn't it?

APHRA

That was just my woman but Lady Davenant is here.

WILLIAM

Who the devil is Lady Davenport?

APHRA

Davenant! Lord Davenant's widow, manager of the Duke's Company and the woman who holds my future in the palm of her hand!

WILLIAM

What are you frivolling on about, what about the plot?

APHRA

Damn the plot, a production's at stake! No, I know, I know, but just please be quiet and give me five minutes; if I can save the king's life, get you a pardon *and* launch my career it'll be damned good day's work.

WILLIAM

Are you mad? Now just—

(Aphra slams the cupboard door on William. She whirls to face the door—but after a split second she can't resist rushing to her desk and dashing off a line or two standing—then she drops the pen and curtsies deeply as Lady Davenant sweeps in already talking. She speaks relentlessly, never pausing even when asking a question; Aphra may try but fail to get a word in, hastily nodding where required.)

LADY DAVENANT

Hello darling hello you must be Mrs. Behn, forgive me forgive me horribly ill-mannered I know I know my dear late Lord D used always to tell me but I thought I'd just pop in to say but O of course you must think I'm a madwoman I haven't introduced myself Lady Davenant, Duke's Company you know—I won't unmask, just swooping in on my way to see what King's has up and it won't do to have 'em see me in the house taking notes—well but I've heard all about you, setting up for a poet, love your nerve darling love your *guts*, sign of the new age isn't it, sign of the times, women kicking over the traces and damn the naysayers and why not, darling, why not, look at me, my dear late Lord D passes on and everyone expects me to sell the license but ho, I say, ho ho, why should I not carry on as before after all there's nothing much to it, choose the plays keep the players sober within reason and hollah, the money rolls in; after all Johnny does most of the work, Johnny Downes our prompter, he bullies 'em through their paces with his bell and whistle and what have I do to but count the gate? and I can count I assure you though I wasn't raised for it but who could be married all those years to my dear late Lord D without sharpening her wits, a lovely man but O as practical as a spring hare I assure you a mad *bunny* would have been more rational—you've no view here do you well what does a poet want with a view, inward views no doubt inward views—mind you why

LADY DAVENANT *cont'd*

should he be practical, a great man, a great trainer of actors, a great man of the theater, you know he was the natural son of the great man himself, O yes, not much of a secret so I don't mind telling you, the natural son of Mister Shakespeare himself so there it is, blood will tell, but genius is rarely sensible so I learned to count for sheer self-protection and I will tell you darling it is the most useful skill I could have mastered and I recommend it to you heartily if you haven't learned it so there it is I'm the queen of Dukes as the joke goes and I need a play; that scatterwit sotted dog Shadwell—I abuse him though I love him—promised me one and sugar-talked me into booking it and all and what does the fool do but get himself clapped by a Holborn drab, he's in the country sweating it out of himself and swears he cannot finish the play so there it is, can't leave the playhouse empty it's a hole in my pocket, rehearsals begin tomorrow, I can give you Lizzie Barry for a lead and you won't find better, say what you will of Nellie Gwynne, Lizzie is a honey and the wits adore her, give her the prologue and you won't be hissed off at the start and that's half-way there, I'll give you the usual third-day's profit and not a penny mislaid, I see to it myself, well? have you a play for me? is that it? nearly finished is it? finish it by morning? cutting it fine darling cutting it fine but there, I'm a soft touch, I'll take a flyer on you only don't be late, mustn't keep actors waiting around without the play they'll start to drink then it's quarrels and misbehaving behind the scenery and asking to go home early—utter utter chaos darling, never leave actors with nothing to do, remember that—get me the thing by let's say nine on the clock and if it's any good at all we'll have an agreement and O what sort of play is it, comi-tragedy, yes? that's good, beginning to go out of style but the people still love a comi-tragedy and if you'll take my advice you'll pad it out with a song or two, give everyone a chance to buy an orange and fondle their neighbor without fear of missing something important, you know the sort of thing (*goes right into singing without a pause, shockingly loud*)

HO! THE WORLD GOES ROUND AND ROUND!

HI! AROUND AND ROUND IT GOES!

HA! THE WORLD GOES ROUND AND ROUND!

HEY NINNY! NINNY! NINNY!

Well not *that* but you see what I mean, and O one other thing I won't have one of those “or” titles, you know what I mean, one of those greedy get-it-all-in titles, “the something something *OR* what you something,” I don't care if the great man did it, they take up half the poster and the typesetter charges by the word, make up your mind and pick one, thank you; now understand me darling this is a rare opportunity, a lucky chance, if you can't deliver me the thing in time I'll be horribly vexed and I don't know when I'll have another chance for you and you know King's don't need you, Duke's is your only hope; mind you they clamor me *Who is she What sort of education Jumped-up nobody from nowhere* and I say well who was Mister Shakespeare hah! and that lays 'em by the heels so remember that darling and don't let 'em fright you; I've seen your poetry, you've got the spark all right, don't let anyone tell you otherwise but it don't do anyone any good if you can't write “the end” and get on with it; there that's what I came for lovely chatting I feel we're friends already must fly remember you've only got till morning don't mind showing me out just write! Write! Write! Write! Write!

(Her last words are shouted off as she exits, her steps clomping back down the stairs. Aphra stands momentarily stunned, then rushes to her writing table, all

else forgotten, and begin writing furiously—but almost immediately Charles comes in, tossing aside a mask he's just taken off.)

CHARLES

Sorry to be unannounced, your woman was just letting someone out. (*Embracing her.*) Ah, that's more like it. It's been a bitch of a day, you've no idea.

APHRA

O good but.

CHARLES

Yes, I came masked, I know you don't want anyone to know. You're a perverse creature, do you know that? Many women would like to be thought my mistress without the bother of it, and you only want the bother. So to speak.

APHRA

O god that feels nice but.

CHARLES

Have you fallen in love with me yet, by the way?

APHRA

Not a bit.

CHARLES (*kissing her neck etc.*)

No?

APHRA

No...I don't love you...except as much as...as I should, O.

CHARLES

Why is the sound of you telling me you don't love me the nicest thing I've heard all day? People are always complaining about my spaniels, but their barks are music compared to the yelping and yapping and howling of the parliament, never mind the court. A damned pack of needy dogs baying day and night. But here's balm for my abused ears: the sweet voice of not-my-mistress.

APHRA

Charles, do let me go. I can't ask you to stay, I've got a play to finish.

CHARLES

That's unkind. May I see what you've written so far?

APHRA

No, it's too soon, it's not ready to be seen. You'll be the first, I promise you, just give me

APHRA *cont'd*

the night.

CHARLES

No, that's too hard. How can you throw me back to the dogs like that, just when I need some peace and comfort? Let's go within and lie together for a bit—no, you know I never ask you for the final favor, as they say, rather vulgarly, but all the rest of it...*(nuzzling her again)* Don't you want to?

APHRA

Yes, mmm, yes.

(They're heading toward the bedroom when she comes to her senses again.)

O, no, we can't. Sorry, I do want to, I really truly do, Christ I do, but I can't. Not just now. I've got to finish the play.

CHARLES

I suppose I should admire your work ethic. I don't, quite, but I should.

APHRA

So you'll go?

CHARLES

Yes, but not just yet. You're forcing me to be businesslike, so I'll admit I had another purpose in coming to see you just now. A far lesser purpose, of course, and I meant to leave it for later. But there it is. It's William Scot.

APHRA *(remembering for the first time since Lady D's visit, then covering.)*
O my god William! I mean, what? William Scot?

CHARLES

Your old contact. He was thought to be dead, but he's been seen. He's here in London.

APHRA

Here in London?

CHARLES

I'm sorry, this must be a shock.

APHRA

No, no. Well, yes, it is a bit.

CHARLES

Look, I told you I wouldn't ask you to spy for me anymore. Your name is off the list of agents, and I didn't want to drag you back into it, officially. But unofficially, I'm asking

CHARLES *cont'd*

you for a favor. He's bound to come to you. I want you to let me know.

APHRA

But, why? If he is alive, he's just a broken-down old spy. He never was any good, and he'd be utterly useless by now.

CHARLES

It seems he may be back in the game. We have information he's joined with the discontented Catholics in their latest assassination plot.

APHRA

What? No.

CHARLES

Does it surprise you? His father helped to kill my father; one regicide breeds another.

APHRA

But he doesn't care about all that. It was a disaster for his family.

CHARLES

Quite. (*Slight pause*) No, he's in it for the money. I imagine they've promised him his father's estate back, that's all his sort cares about. Well, it's what most people would care about.

APHRA

Are you sure? About Scot?

CHARLES

We aren't sure about anything.

APHRA

Perhaps he's still playing a double-game, for our side?

CHARLES

If he is, he hasn't told us. No, the man can't be trusted. We'll get him in the Tower and find out what he knows. Are you all right?

APHRA

Yes.

CHARLES

I know he was your lover too. Perhaps I'm asking too much of you, to betray him to me. Of course, I rather hoped you cared a bit for me, enough at least not to want me dead.

APHRA

Charles, don't. I'm as devoted a friend and subject as you've got. I'm just trying to think. If Scot is a traitor I'll turn him in without a second thought. But I know him, better than anyone does. If he has information, who better than me to find it out? I promise you, no torture the Tower can offer will expose his innermost thoughts more quickly and thoroughly than I can by gentler methods. Will you trust me? Will you give me a chance to find out the truth?

CHARLES

You're asking a great deal.

APHRA

I know. And please don't misunderstand me. I'm not asking it for his sake, but for yours.

(Pause)

CHARLES

Very well. I'll go, shall I? and leave the field clear.

(He starts to go toward her bedroom.)

APHRA

Where are you going?

CHARLES

To empty my bladder. No objections, I hope?

APHRA

Of course not, but—my bedroom's such a mess, I don't want you to see it like that, you'll think I'm such a lazy slattern. Would you mind using the downstairs closet?

(He looks suspicious, but goes. Aphra hesitates briefly between going back to her play and checking on William—maybe she writes a line—then goes to William's hiding place and reveals him dead asleep. Note: this may be a stand-in wearing William's coat with his face hidden. She picks up the bottle—empty.)

William? William!

(She hears Charles coming back and hides William again. Charles re-enters, picks up his mask.)

CHARLES

I don't think Maria thinks much of me.

APHRA

Why?

CHARLES

She just called me a stinkin' nuisance.

APHRA

She's rough around the edges. But you couldn't ask for a more loyal servant.

CHARLES

Loyalty is a virtue, to be sure. I wonder if you would do me a great favor.

APHRA

Anything.

CHARLES

I left a couple of cavaliers at the pub on the corner. It's part of a ruse I've been persuaded into, to go about with some like-dressed men, make me less of a target in case anyone penetrates my disguise. Great nonsense I suppose, but would you mind terribly fetching them for me? *(She hesitates.)* I'm sorry to put you out.

APHRA

No, not at all, of course it's no trouble at all. I'll be back in a moment.

CHARLES

Don't hurry, I'll be quite entertained on my own.

(She goes out, with some reluctance. He puts on his mask, goes to the inner door, opens it, and pulls Nell out.)

CHARLES

Hah!

NELL

Hey!

CHARLES

Who's this?

NELL

Who the hell is asking?

CHARLES

You're not Scot, at least, thank god. Too young.

NELL

Too young for what?

CHARLES

Not much, apparently. Tell me, boy, what did you hear?

NELL

Not a thing, what *is* that door made of?

CHARLES

Well. You're too well dressed for a servant and too confident; as insolent as a wilderness of monkeys.

NELL

Who are you to call me a monkey, you great ape! And where's Aphra?

CHARLES

She'll be back soon. Not very soon; my friends will insist on buying her a drink, if I know them. (*He relaxes, starts to see the funny side.*) Well, just when I thought I knew her. Keeping a boy.

NELL

Why shouldn't she?

CHARLES

Why indeed? I only wonder she didn't tell me. I hope I'm generous enough not to mind her using my coin to buy herself pleasure in my absence.

NELL

O. *You're* her keeper, not— Hmm. Well, come on, it's your turn to say who the hell are you. Interrogating each other will pass the time until she comes back.

CHARLES

Very amusing, but who the hell *are* you?

NELL

Who's asking? And who's your tailor?

CHARLES

Why do you ask about my tailor?

NELL

I just thought we might want to expand our repertoire. And it's a nice coat. Why don't you take it off, since we're chatting? (*She helps him off with it and tries it on herself; regarding the rest of his clothes.*) Those are nice too. Did you ever think of donating your castoffs to the theater? Costumes cost the earth.

CHARLES

Are you an actor? That would explain a lot.

NELL

What would it explain?

CHARLES

The insouciance, the wit, the being so much at home in other people's bedrooms—

NELL

Beast.

CHARLES

No, no, I love actors. They're so kind, generally speaking.

NELL

I know I am.

CHARLES

Are you?

NELL

Very, very kind.

CHARLES

Expensively so?

NELL

Damn, why does everyone think I'm a whore?

CHARLES

I didn't use the word, but aren't you?

NELL

Can you pay? (*He nods.*) Then give us a kiss.

(*They kiss.*)

CHARLES

You're not a boy.

NELL

You can tell by a kiss?

CHARLES

The kiss, no; boys and girls kiss just the same. I felt your breasts. Small but perfect.

NELL

Now who's insolent?

CHARLES

Do you mind?

NELL

Are you kidding? I fucking love it.

CHARLES

Odd's fish, I have it! You're Nell Gwynne.

NELL

How'd you know?

CHARLES

I saw your Florimell, of course. You're even more beautiful up close; how often can that be said?

(He begins to carry her into the bedroom.)

NELL

Wait. I'd better know who you are first.

CHARLES

Are you sure you want to know? It might be fun to keep the mask on.

NELL

Kinky. But yes, I need a name to cry out at the proper moment.

CHARLES

Very well.

(He removes his mask. Pause.)

NELL

O.

CHARLES

Yes.

NELL

You're just as beautiful up close too.

CHARLES

Thanks.

NELL

Charles the Second, good for Aphra. Well, I've already had two lovers called Charles, so you'll be my Charles the Third.

(He roars with laughter and carries her within. Happy shrieks off from Nell, then the door is slammed shut. Instantly it opens again and Nell comes back on.)

NELL

Wait a moment—

(She looks around, then picks up Charles' mask from where he tossed it.)

Ah, there it is.

(She goes back the bedroom door, opens it looking in, holds the mask up to her face and poses. Imitating Charles playfully:)

Odd's fish!

(Then she slips in, closing the door behind her. William staggers out of the cupboard.)

WILLIAM

The fuck'd everyone go?

(He opens the bedroom door. Looks for a moment. Closes the door.)

Well. Don't I feel left out.

(He hears a noise on the stairs, hides. Aphra enters, stops, confused not to see Charles. Heads toward inner door. William re-emerges.)

I wouldn't.

APHRA

William! Where's— I thought you were passed out.

WILLIAM *(indignant)*

I wasn't, I could drink twice that much and shoot the eye out of a trout at a hundred paces.

APHRA

Why a trout?

WILLIAM

I'm just bloody tired, haven't slept in a bed in weeks. Speaking of bed, did you know
WILLIAM *cont'd*

there are two people having at it in there as we speak?

APHRA

What? Who?

WILLIAM

I don't know, couldn't see their faces, I'm just glad one of them's not you. We do have business to discuss, if you can spare me a moment.

(Aphra is stricken, staring at the bedroom door.)

Astrea? *(pause)* Here, do you want to borrow my pistol, commit a crime of passion?

APHRA

What? No!

WILLIAM

Then tear yourself away from your messy personal life and pay attention to something far more important: me.

APHRA

You. Yes, you. What's the plot?

WILLIAM

Just like that?

APHRA

I don't have all night for this, I've got a deadline!

WILLIAM

Right! Well, it's simple enough. Charles goes for his usual morning constitutional with his dogs and the rest of his entourage in St James's Park—

APHRA

Tomorrow morning?

WILLIAM

—that's right, and their man shoots him.

APHRA

That simple?

WILLIAM

It's the simple plots that succeed.

APHRA

He'll never get away.

WILLIAM

No, they know that, it's a suicide mission. He's been promised the best room in heaven if he does the Pope's bidding on earth. And if he survives long enough to be questioned he can't tell anything—the men were masked who instructed him.

APHRA

Are you in on it?

WILLIAM

Am I—

APHRA

Are you one of the conspirators?

WILLIAM

Well, of course they think I am, otherwise I wouldn't know the plan.

APHRA

You're not a Catholic. What do they think is in it for you?

WILLIAM

That James will reward me with my father's lands back, once he's king.

APHRA

Do they think you're that stupid? James reward the men who kill his brother?

WILLIAM

Don't you think he'd love to be king?

APHRA

Of course he would, that doesn't mean he'd turn on Charles. All those years in exile together, they're as close as brothers can be, religious differences aside. No, this is a very stupid plot. It won't play.

WILLIAM

Stop thinking like a scribbler, Astrea; what does it matter if it's a stupid, simple plot, it's no less dangerous. Take it to your control, get me a guarantee, I'll give them the big names, take my reward and go. They can take their time after that getting the details out of them in the Tower.

APHRA

See, it's the Catholic part that I'm not quite buying.

WILLIAM

Not buying?

APHRA

It's too easy, it's too pat. There's so much anti-Catholic feeling now, rumors of Popish plots in every coffee house, all hideously exaggerated, but they make a very handy scapegoat when people are grumpy about the war dragging on and the economy going to shit. See what I mean? Too obvious.

WILLIAM

Don't believe me then, I'll be off, let the king be shot.

APHRA (*ignoring him*)

So if it's not actually the Catholics, who would it be? Not the French, they want Charles right where he is. The Dutch don't want a Catholic on the throne. Disgruntled old Cromwellians? They wouldn't trust you for a minute. It's a snarled-up Gordian Knot of questions and I don't have time to sort it out. O, that gives me an idea. May I see that pistol of yours?

WILLIAM

Here you are, why?

APHRA (*Pointing it at him*)

Tell me the truth or I'll kill you.

WILLIAM

What? No you won't.

APHRA

What do you mean, of course I will.

WILLIAM

Don't be ridiculous. You're an intelligence operative, not an assassin. Remember that time in Surinam when a rat got into the room? You wouldn't let me kill it, you made me catch the damned thing and let it go outside.

APHRA

It was a sweet rat. And it was so frightened. O, all right, here's your pistol back.

WILLIAM

That's better. Stop all this nonsense and believe what I'm telling you.

APHRA

I'd love to, William. I would love for you and me to save the king's life and for you to be rewarded and for everyone to live happily ever after. It would be a wonderful story and a wonderful happy ending. It just doesn't ring true. If I don't trust my instincts as a spy I

APHRA *cont'd*

have to trust them as a playwright. There's something wrong, and if you won't tell me the truth soon it'll be too late; they know you're in London so it's only a matter of time before they look for you here, no matter what I do.

WILLIAM

What? What was that last bit? I've been seen?

APHRA

Yes. I'm supposed to turn you in.

WILLIAM

That's bad news.

(The inner door begins to open. William starts violently and bolts into hiding, Aphra whirls around.)

CHARLES *(off, low)*

Aphra?

APHRA

Yes?

(Charles sticks his head out.)

CHARLES

Did I hear voices?

APHRA

No, no, I'm just working, acting out the parts as I write, you know.

CHARLES

O. Wait a moment.

(He disappears back inside. William pokes his head out of the cupboard.)

WILLIAM

Hsst, damn you, what are you playing at? Get rid of him or I'll shoot both your damned whores just to get your undivided attention.

(He vanishes again. Aphra picks up a page of her play and begins reading aloud, to cover her lie to Charles though she quickly becomes absorbed in creating. From The Young King; see Appendix 2 for context. Use just as much or as little of these lines below as is needed to cover the quick change.)

APHRA

(In male character voice:) Guard thee well, Thersander; for thou shalt die by the hand that brings thee this. *(Female character voice:)* Here's to thee, dear Clemanthis! *(Stage directions:)* She stabs him! He falls into Lysander's arms. *(Third voice:)* Help, treason, help! *(First male character voice:)* Ah, lovely youth, who taught thee so much cruelty? And why that language with that angry blow? *(Female character voice:)* Behold this face, and then inform thyself. *(Stage direction:)* She reveals herself. *(First male character voice:)* 'Tis Cleomena! Oh ye Gods, I thank ye! It is her hand that wounds me, and I'll receive my death with perfect joy, if I may be permitted but to kiss that blessed hand that sent it. *(Stage direction:)* Enter King!

(Charles comes out of the bedroom, perhaps holding a blanket around himself.)

CHARLES

I've, em, met your friend Nell.

APHRA

So I gathered.

CHARLES

Extraordinary girl. I was quite carried away.

APHRA

She has that effect.

CHARLES

But I've become distracted thinking of how I'm abusing your hospitality. Do I go too far? I wouldn't wound your feelings for the world, you do know that?

APHRA

I do and it's quite all right.

CHARLES

Is it?

APHRA *(hurriedly)*

My dear, believe me, all's well, I adore you but tonight I can think of nothing but the play, you have my blessing to be happy, honestly.

CHARLES

Very well. I can see it's a matter of indifference to you.

APHRA

Charles—

CHARLES

I won't disturb you further. Good luck with it.

APHRA

Charles...

(He's gone back within.)

Damn.

*(Turns, see the play, picks up her pen irresistibly and begins writing again.
William re-enters slowly.)*

WILLIAM

Charles?

APHRA *(absently)*

What?

WILLIAM

Charles.

APHRA *(all attention on him now)*

It's a common enough name.

WILLIAM

I knew you were an ambitious creature but pandering for the king? What, giving him an all-round evening, a tumble with a slut and the betrayal of an ex-lover into the bargain?

APHRA

It's not him!

(Nell pops out of the inner door, too suddenly for William to hide.)

WILLIAM *(starting violently)*

Christ!

NELL *(seeing William)*

O, still here? *(to Aphra)* Who is it, anyway?

APHRA

No one, a cousin, just visiting.

NELL *(for William's benefit)*

Let him out of Bedlam, did they? Not sure that's wise. *(To Aphra:)* Never mind, I only

NELL *cont'd*

came out to say, *thanks!* You're right, he's utter bliss. Don't laugh but I think I may be in love. And how convenient that it should be with him, the bloody king of bloody England!

APHRA
Nell—

NELL
I mean, jackpot!

APHRA
Nell—

NELL
I won't forget you when I'm a Duchess, I promise.

APHRA
Nell—

NELL (*kissing her and exiting*)
Must get back, we'll chat it all over later, so much to talk about, love you madly, bye.

(*She's gone. William shakily points his pistol at the bedroom door.*)

WILLIAM
To think that door is all that separates me from the man who ruined me and killed my father.

APHRA
After your father helped to kill his father.

WILLIAM
Strange thing to have in common, isn't it, both our fathers having had their heads chopped off with a big official axe, ought to give us a sense of kinship. Shall we see what he thinks?

APHRA
You're not after revenge, after all?

WILLIAM
No. Sod that. Just survival. If you think I'll trust mine to the king's mercy you don't know me at all.

APHRA
Put the pistol down. You aren't an assassin either.

WILLIAM
Are you sure?

APHRA

William, what good would it do you? This isn't why you came here. Come back to your senses. Let me help you. I swear, his being here is a coincidence. You're safe if you trust me.

(She has walked steadily up close to him. She puts her arms around his neck and kisses him. He slowly lowers the pistol.)

That's right. That's right. Believe me, I'll help you if I can.

WILLIAM

Why should you? You don't love me anymore, you said so.

APHRA

It's not quite that simple. I never did know how to stop loving, I only know how not to let it stop me. Look, you don't have much choice. Trust me or keep running, but I don't think you'll make it this time. Come on, my sweet frightened rat. Tell me. There isn't a plot, is there?

WILLIAM

Not that I know of.

APHRA

So what's the game?

WILLIAM

I can't stay in exile another day. I'll die of homesickness, if I don't starve or get my throat slit.

APHRA

So you thought you could cry up a Catholic plot and be believed.

WILLIAM

Most people would believe it. And you know a real plot is coming; those religious fanatics are out there, scheming away.

APHRA

But this plot isn't real. And you would have given real names.

WILLIAM

That's the genius of it. Many birds with one stone. Me with my pardon and lands, and several right bastards who've betrayed me in the past thrown into the Tower. They may not have been planning to have the king shot in the morning, but there's plenty of tar to

WILLIAM *cont'd*

stick to them, once anyone starts looking. It will work, Astrea. Help me and I'll cut you in. Don't look like that, it's brilliant. Back me up, be my witness and my guarantee. We'll

both have titles before it's over, you can stop staining those pretty hands with ink and live a life of ease.

APHRA

You would have innocent men sent to the Tower. Ruined, tortured, perhaps executed. For nothing more than your personal gain.

WILLIAM

Don't tell me you're shocked. It's the way of the world.

APHRA

It's the way of your world.

WILLIAM

I've been out there, Astrea. I've been out there for years. I've seen it. I was just in Terschelling when we burnt the town, the Great Bonfire, as the English papers so cheerfully called it.

APHRA

They evacuated it first.

WILLIAM

Of course that's what they say. I was there. I heard the screams of the old people burnt alive in their beds. I saw a girl gang-raped to death by soldiers. O, most people got out; as the sack of an enemy town goes it was a May fair. But tell that to all the people who came creeping back the next day to find their home a pile of smoldering rubble. I can still smell it. You have no idea.

APHRA

I have no idea? Where do you think I've been all these years? Remember Surinam? I watched a good man hung, cut down still conscious and cut apart piece by piece, all because he wanted simple freedom for himself and his family. We can trade horrors until the sun comes up. The difference is the horrors have gotten into you; I've chosen to leave all that.

WILLIAM

You've chosen to forget, you've chosen willful naivety for the sake of an easy life, you've left me out there doing the dirty work while you whore yourself and write fucking poetry!

APHRA

What's happened to you? You weren't always like this, were you, or did I just not see?

WILLIAM

You're the one who's changed; when you were a spy you were still a woman, you had a tender heart. Now you're a writer I don't know what you are; you've hardened, Astrea.

APHRA

Call me Aphra.

WILLIAM

Why don't I call you Miss Johnson?

APHRA

What do you mean? My married name is Behn.

WILLIAM

Your married name is crap. Hah, you didn't think I knew, did you? I thought it might come in handy one day, if you ever turned on me.

APHRA

What do you think you know?

WILLIAM

That Mister Behn never existed, that you were never married, that you made him up and killed him off just like the ruthless playwright you've become, that you wanted a widow's freedom and didn't want to earn it.

APHRA

My god, you've got an overheated imagination. Johan Behn was my husband, he died in the plague.

WILLIAM

You didn't waste time mourning him, did you?

APHRA

It wasn't a love match.

WILLIAM

O, knock it off. You're an outrage and a scandal, an unmarried woman carrying on over three continents, an infamous lying whore. Well, that's what they'll say. Even if I can't prove it, it doesn't take much mud to smear a woman past redemption. No theater will dare have anything to do with you, no man of quality will have you even for a mistress, you'll be lucky to stay out of prison. How long do you think you'll survive? Starve in the street or take refuge in the lowest cathouse till the pox takes you. In a year no one will recognize you. Your name will vanish as though you were never born.

APHRA (*very still*)

The frightened rat has teeth.

WILLIAM

He has. Help me and we'll both survive, and thrive. Betray me and I'll take you down with me. Pretty simple, isn't it?

APHRA

It is.

WILLIAM

Yes?

(She nods. He looks at her, not sure she means it. She takes a breath.)

APHRA

Yes. Yes, I do see. I don't have any choice, do I?

WILLIAM

Not much.

APHRA

Why should I fight it? Why should I betray who I truly am – who we are?

(She turns and embraces him, both arms around his neck.)

WILLIAM

You're still my Astrea?

APHRA

And you will always be my Celadon.

WILLIAM

Long time since I've heard that name.

APHRA

I gave you that name. You were my first love. Did you think I could ever truly forget?

(He studies her face, and believes her. They kiss.)

WILLIAM

All right. All right then. Thank god that's settled, I hate to quarrel. Shall we have a drink on it?

APHRA

Go down to Maria, tell her I said to give you a bottle. I'm all right, I just need a moment.

WILLIAM

That's right, take a breath, collect yourself. I'm sorry I had to play a bit rough. It'll all be
WILLIAM *cont'd*
for the best, you'll see.

APHRA

Yes.

WILLIAM

Right. Back in a moment with the drink and then we'll get into the details.

(He exits. She looks after him.)

APHRA

I'm sorry William, but you are right. It is perfectly simple.

(She starts toward the bedroom door. She gets right up to it, ready to knock. Then stops, and turns, takes a breath, steeling herself for the task. Her gaze falls on her manuscript. She hesitates, then she rushes over, picks up the pen and scribbles standing. Murmurs:)

Just a quick line or two, and then I'll turn him in, come what may.

(The sound of a muffled pistol shot from downstairs. What was that?!)

Maria?

(She hesitates for a second, torn—can't resist scribbling for another moment or two—then tears herself away and goes toward the door.)

Maria!

(Maria enters.)

MARIA

Yeah?

APHRA

What was that? It sounded like a pistol shot.

MARIA

That's right. I shot the stinkin' bastard.

APHRA

What? You shot William?

MARIA

Yeah. Well, except I missed.

APHRA

O.

MARIA

So I stuck him like a pig.

APHRA

You...

MARIA

Took the carving knife and *pht*, that's right.

APHRA

He's dead?

MARIA

Think he's going to get away with stinkin' blackmail? Not if I have anything to say about it.

APHRA

My god, Maria. You were listening?

MARIA

Good thing I was. We're all right now. Those two wastrels you left cooling their heels on the steps, they're lugging the body to the river. Let the fish have him, he'll do them more good than he ever did anyone on dry land. Speaking of which, the landlady's got a nice eel pie in. Shall I bring some up for you and your friends? Sun'll be up soon; you'll want breakfast.

APHRA

That... would be very nice.

MARIA (*exiting*)

All right, then.

APHRA

Maria.

MARIA

Don't thank me. I didn't follow you through stinkin' jungles and stinkin' ships and stinkin' Antwerp and stinkin' prison and stinkin' all to have some stinkin' bastard blackmailing son of a poxy whore ruin us just when we're on the brink of theatrical success. Write me one of those clever-servant parts and we're even.

APHRA

You want to act?

MARIA

Wouldn't be acting, I could do it in my sleep.

(Maria exits. Aphra stands, still stunned, absorbing Williams' death. Then she takes in the silence. She's alone for the first time all night. And there is her manuscript. She sits, picks up her pen... and is utterly absorbed in writing. After all the frantic action, it's a quiet, peaceful scene. Time passes. Perhaps a distant clock tolls. Perhaps there's music.)

The inner door opens, and Nell and Charles enter quietly, both in a lovely state of semi-undress. They stand for a moment and watch Aphra write. A glint of sun begins to climb through the windows, gilding them all. Aphra stops writing, puts her pen down. They come to either side of her, an intimate tableau of three.)

NELL

Have you been writing all this time?

APHRA

It's done.

CHARLES

Is it?

NELL

Are you pleased?

APHRA

I had to kill a character off. But on the whole, a happy ending.

CHARLES

Shall we read it now? We can take parts.

APHRA

Aren't you tired? Look, the sun's coming up.

CHARLES

I feel strangely wakeful. Perhaps I only don't wish to lose a moment sleeping when I may be talking with the two of you.

(Charles picks up the manuscript and moves a little away into the light to read.)

NELL

You sure it's all right?

APHRA

Surprisingly painful after all, for a moment. Tell me I've lost nothing.

NELL

Not an atom of my love, nor his.

CHARLES (*re manuscript*)

This is good.

APHRA

I know. I mean – no, I can't help it, it is. And in – what? – three hours – Lady Davenant will have it in her hands, and then the actors will have their parts, and then rehearsal will begin – and then – O Lord.

CHARLES (*still reading*)

This is very, very good. This will be the hit of the season.

APHRA

Will it?

CHARLES

The first of many. You'll have your glory. I prophesize.

NELL

Damn right.

APHRA (*to Nell*)

You haven't even read it yet.

NELL

Doesn't matter, I know it—you'll be one of fucking immortals! The name of Aphra Behn will never be forgotten.

APHRA

And nor will that of Nell Gwynne.

NELL (*re Charles*)

He's got on a lock on it, kings are always in the books.

CHARLES (*looking up from the manuscript*)

Not quite sure I see what you're doing at the end.

APHRA

Playing with ambiguity, I hope. After the madness and turmoil and loss: lost honor, lost love, lost lives. After the broken words and broken hearts. Do we dare hope?

Maybe the sun is coming out at last

CHARLES

And gilding all with its all-hopeful blast.
Or maybe it's a false dawn all too brief

NELL

That storm clouds soon will pocket like a thief.
Or maybe a new golden age we herald

APHRA

Where love and peace no longer are imperiled.
Or maybe we may work to make it so

NELL

And love each other whether yes or no.
A thousand years of peace this day begins

CHARLES

A vision that may vanish, for our sins.
But I'll embrace it, for this glitt'ring day

APHRA

And what will happen next, no one can say.
The world spins round and everything is new
For now I'll be content to spin with you.

(Brief pause.)

NELL

Back to bed?

CHARLES

Excellent thought.

APHRA

Love to.

(All three exit to the bedroom. Almost immediately Aphra runs back in, picks up the pen, crosses out a line and scribbles another. As she writes:)

Coming! I'll be just... a... moment....

END OF PLAY

APPENDIX ONE

*Additional dialogue **in bold** to cover the male actor's costume change, if he is playing Lady Davenant. Page 35.*

APHRA

Damn the plot, a production's at stake! No, I know, I know, but just please be quiet and give me five minutes; if I can save the king's life, get you a pardon *and* launch my career it'll be damned good day's work.

WILLIAM

Are you mad? Now just—

(Aphra slams the cupboard door on William. Instantly Nell pops her head out the bedroom door.)

NELL

Can't I come out yet?

APHRA *(whirling round to her)*

O, Nell, Lady Davenant!

NELL *(instantly getting it)*

What, here?

APHRA

Yes!

NELL

O my god!

APHRA

I know!

(They embrace passionately for an instant, then Aphra thrusts her back in and slams the door. She whirls to face the door—but after a split second she can't resist rushing to her desk and dashing off a line or two standing—great clomping steps are heard climbing the stairs—she writes faster, speaking lines aloud—the steps grow closer—then she drops the pen and curtsies deeply as Lady Davenant sweeps in already talking. She talks not necessarily super-fast but relentlessly, never pausing even when asking a question; Aphra may try to speak but fail to get a word in, hastily nodding where required.)

APPENDIX TWO

Excerpt from Behn's The Young King. Part of this text is used on page 49 to help cover the male actor's costume change from William to Charles-in-a-blanket, and other lines from it—including stage directions— may be used any time Aphra's writing becomes so active that she thinks aloud.

Thersander is a Sythian prince and Cleomena a princess of Dacia. Their countries are at war. They fell in love while he was in Dacia in disguise, under the name Clemanthis. She mistakenly believes he was killed in the war by the prince of Sythia. She's here in disguise to take revenge, and fails to recognize him.

LYSANDER (*Thersander's aide*): Sir, there's without a youth that desires admittance.

THERSANDER: From whom comes he?

LYSANDER: He would not tell me that, but has a letter, which he'll deliver only to your Highness.

THERSANDER: Bring him in, it may be from Amintas .

(Enter Cleomena dressed like a country shepherd; she gives him a note.)

THERSANDER (*reading*): Guard thee well, Thersander; for thou shalt die by the hand that brings thee this.

CLEOMENA: Here's to thee, dear Clemanthis!

(She stabs him; he falls into Lysander's arms.)

LYSANDER: Help, treason, help!

THERSANDER: Ah, lovely youth, who taught thee so much cruelty? And why that language with that angry blow?

CLEOMENA: Behold this face, and then inform thyself.

(She reveals herself.)

THERSANDER: 'Tis Cleomena ! Oh ye Gods, I thank ye! It is her hand that wounds me, and I'll receive my death with perfect joy, if I may be permitted but to kiss that blessed hand that sent it.

(Enter King and Guards.)