**Aphra Behn’s “Oenone to Paris”, John Dryden, and the Ovidian Complaint in Restoration Literary Culture**

Aphra Behn’s “A Paraphrase on Oenone to Paris” has often, and rightly, been seen as a landmark publication within both Restoration literary culture and the *longue durée* of English-language complaint literature. John Kerrigan, reproducing “Oenone to Paris” in his influential anthology of female complaints, *Motives of Woe*, includes Behn among “the most formidably accomplished Ovidians of [the] period”, and describes the paraphrase itself as “a glittering and impassioned performance”.[[1]](#endnote-1) While Behn, as the present volume amply illustrates, was by no means the first Englishwoman to turn her hand to the Ovidian complaint, she was undoubtedly one of the first to achieve a high public profile for her work in this genre. John Dryden’s *Ovid’s Epistles, Translated by Several Hands* (1680), in which Behn’s “Oenone to Paris” was first printed, was one of the most successful poetic publications of the late seventeenth century, reissued in 1681, 1683, 1688, 1693 and in numerous further editions throughout the eighteenth century.[[2]](#endnote-2) Uniquely prominent within *Ovid’s Epistles* – the only epistle, other than his own, to which Dryden directly alludes in his preface to the collection – “Oenone to Paris” was later included by Behn herself in her *Poems upon Several Occasions* (1684), where, probably at her own behest, it is conspicuously placed at the end of the miscellaneous “Poems” section of the volume.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Katherine Smith has shown, “Oenone to Paris” seems likely to have proved inspirational for later women poets in the complaint tradition, notably Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.[[4]](#endnote-4) Its role in reclaiming this female-voiced genre for women’s literary history is beyond question.

Recent scholarly interest in both Ovidian complaint and early modern women’s writing has generated a substantial critical literature on Behn’s “Oenone to Paris”, including key studies by Carol Barash, Katherine Heavey and Sue Wiseman.[[5]](#endnote-5) Nonetheless, and despite the excellence of such existing work, much about this important poem remains unclear. In this essay, I place “Oenone to Paris” within Behn’s writing life, addressing such central issues as her treatment of source material, her construction of Oenone’s subjectivity and the political resonances of her linguistic choices. I begin, however, by reassessing the collection in which the poem first appeared, the pioneering collaborative translation, *Ovid’s Epistles*.

**John Dryden in *Ovid’s Epistles***

1680, the year of the first publication of *Ovid’s Epistles*, marks a key point of transition within Restoration literature.[[6]](#endnote-6) The death of the earl of Rochester in June 1680, followed by the publication of his *Poems on Several Occasions* a few months later, can be taken in retrospect to represent a significant shift in the long evolution from a predominantly manuscript- to a predominantly print-based literary culture in England; henceforward, to adapt Paul Davis’s useful formulation, no major English poet would see manuscript as his “natural medium of publication”.[[7]](#endnote-7) The Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis, which ran from c.1678 to c.1681, and which gave rise to a wide array of propagandistic poetry, also helped to consolidate the dominance of print in this era.[[8]](#endnote-8) *Ovid’s Epistles*, as a collaboration between several of the nation’s leading poets and playwrights and the entrepreneurial young bookseller Jacob Tonson, both contributed to and was facilitated by this contemporary consolidation of print-publication as the circulatory norm for literary works.

At a more personal level, the publication of *Ovid’s Epistles* also marked a key moment within the career of its editor and principal contributor, John Dryden. For over a decade, since the publication of *Annus Mirabilis* in 1667, Dryden’s creative energies had been mainly focused on plays and critical prose; his published poetry, by contrast, had been largely confined to theatrical paratexts such as prologues and epilogues for his own and other dramatists’ work.[[9]](#endnote-9) *Mac Flecknoe*, his one significant poem of the 1670s, was originally written for manuscript circulation and reached print only in a pirated edition in 1682. But while Dryden’s involvement in *Ovid’s Epistles* represented, on one level, a return to past habits, dormant since the 1660s, it also constituted a significant new venture, initiating several new creative practices that were to prove of immense importance in his later writing career. Such new practices included literary editing, as later manifest in *Sylvae* (1685), *Examen Poeticum* (1693) and *The Annual Miscellany* (1694). They also included Dryden’s first forays into the field of literary translation, a genre with which he was to remain associated throughout the 1680s and which would dominate his poetic output in the 1690s. Professionally, furthermore, *Ovid’s Epistles* contributed towards consolidating Dryden’s relationship with Tonson, with whom he had first worked on *Troilus and Cressida* (1679) and who was to remain his publisher, collaborator and advocate for the rest of his life. It is arguably the most important single publication in Dryden’s literary career.[[10]](#endnote-10)

*Ovid’s Epistles*, as Stuart Gillespie has shown, was an experimental publication, which effectively created collaborative translation as a literary genre.[[11]](#endnote-11) While Tonson’s interest in the volume is likely to have been chiefly commercial, Dryden, though far from indifferent to financial considerations, clearly also seized on, and relished, the opportunity to establish himself as both a practising translator and a theorist of translation. His own contributions to the collection included two of the most high-profile of the complaints – those of Helen to Paris (co-translated with the earl of Mulgrave) and Dido to Aeneas – while his taxonomy of translation methodologies in the preface to the volume (distinguishing between metaphrase, or word-for-word translation, and the looser styles of paraphrase and imitation) was to prove one of the most influential theoretical analyses of the period.[[12]](#endnote-12) His own concurrent involvement in the earl of Roscommon’s academy, which specialised in translation from classical literature, also speaks to his strong commitment to this literary form in the late 1670s and early 1680s.[[13]](#endnote-13)

But while Dryden’s enthusiasm for, and skill in, poetic translation are fully evident in *Ovid’s Epistles*, rather less apparent is why he – presumably in consultation with Tonson – should have chosen Ovid’s *Heroides* as the source-text for their first venture into collaborative translation. While the methodology of translation “by several hands” would have necessitated a divisible source-text, that this text should have been the *Heroides* would by no means have been a foregone conclusion. (Virgil’s eclogues, the object of a subsequent collaborative translation overseen by Dryden and Tonson, would have been a much more obvious option, given Virgil’s unrivalled prestige among classical poets.) No explanation for this choice is offered in the preface to the collection, which hints, indeed, that Dryden saw the subject-matter of the *Heroides* as in some ways risky: he dwells, with apparent anxiety, on Ovid’s reputation for “Lasciviousness” (albeit mainly in the elegies and the *Ars Amatoria*) and seems concerned that the epistles are, thematically, too uniform (“[t]here seems to be no great variety in the particular Subjects which he has chosen … many of the same thoughts come back upon us in divers Letters”).[[14]](#endnote-14) Later in the preface, Dryden was to argue that collaborative translation, given the inevitable differences between the practitioners’ poetic styles, would alleviate the risk of thematic monotony in Ovid’s original, providing the reader with “that variety in the *English*, which the Subject denyed to the Authour of the *Latine*”.[[15]](#endnote-15) The issue of sexuality, however, was to prove rather more troublesome, perhaps in part because of the poet’s own ambitions for the volume. As Gillespie has argued, Dryden seems to have aimed at “securing a wider audience than a classical translation was normally expected to achieve” – that is, through appealing to women, as well as the classically educated men who might usually be expected to comprise the principal readership for a translation from Latin.[[16]](#endnote-16) Dryden’s insistence that in the *Heroides* (if not in his other love poems), Ovid had taken a “most becoming care” of female modesty seems obviously intended to reassure women (or their guardians) that, despite the author’s scandalous reputation, reading *Ovid’s Epistles* would do nothing to imperil female virtue.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Yet Dryden’s reasons for choosing the complaint genre may have been still more complex, and indeed more topical, than they at first appear. It is often assumed that – unexpectedly, given both the period and his own record of political engagement – Dryden’s motives for taking part in the *Ovid’s Epistles* project were mainly (or even exclusively) literary. Katherine Heavey speaks for many when she argues that, even though “[t]he collection appeared at the height of the Exclusion Crisis … Dryden had concerns other than the political and religious state of the nation”.[[18]](#endnote-18) It is true that, as Heavey points out, Dryden’s preface to *Ovid’s Epistles* – the best evidence for his motives for participating in the volume – does not engage directly with politics. That said, the two issues which it does extensively address – translation and sexuality – both carried strong political associations at the time of publication. Roscommon’s academy, for instance, seems to have viewed translation as a force for political conservatism; Knightley Chetwood, Roscommon’s first biographer, compares its aims with those of the Académie française, founded by Cardinal Richelieu as a means “to amuse busy & turbulent wits & divert them from speculating into matters of State”.[[19]](#endnote-19) That Dryden’s understanding of translation in the preface to *Ovid’s Epistles* was similarly politicised is indicated not just by his contemporary association with Roscommon but by his own glosses on key terms, which, as Paul Davis has noted, have strikingly topical connotations; “Translation with Latitude”, his definition of paraphrase, recalls the moderate latitudinarian strand in the contemporary Church of England, while “this libertine way of rendring Authours”, his gloss on literary imitation, gestures towards the philosophical radicalism and sexual licentiousness associated with courtiers such as Rochester (though Dryden prudently attributes the expression to Abraham Cowley).[[20]](#endnote-20) Furthermore, while sexuality (as the comparison with Rochester suggests) was always politicised in the Restoration, it was subject to particularly intense scrutiny during the Exclusion Crisis, given the latter’s origins in Charles II’s failure to conceive an heir with his wife (and success in begetting the illegitimate James duke of Monmouth). In the febrile circumstances of 1680, the *Heroides*’ emphasis on sexuality’s often adverse consequences for the fate of the nation would have had inescapably political implications.

The planning and preparation of *Ovid’s Epistles* are likely to predate the onset of Exclusion; although the exact timetable for work on the volume is unknown, it was probably finished before December 1679, when Dryden suffered a vicious physical attack in London’s Rose Alley.[[21]](#endnote-21) But while Dryden’s choice of the Ovidian complaint for his first collaborative translation cannot be read as a response to Exclusion, rather different considerations apply to his preface to the volume, which must have been written shortly before publication and could have been subject to last-minute alterations. Yet far from disclaiming or mitigating the politically controversial implications of his material, Dryden’s preface seems deliberately to foreground the issue of transgressive sexuality, devoting several pages to evaluating both its significance in Ovid’s life and works and its possible role in occasioning the poet’s banishment from Rome. He even risks two gibes at the expense of Ovid’s monarch, the Emperor Augustus, whom he implicitly censures for “taking *Livia* to his Bed, when she was not only Married, but with Child by her Husband, then living”; he later rejects the hypothesis that the cause of Ovid’s exile might have been his witnessing “the Incest of the Emperor with his own Daughter” on grounds not of Augustus’s sexual virtue but of his propensity for savage retribution (he “was of a Nature too vindicative to have contented himself with so small a Revenge, or so unsafe to himself, as that of simple Banishment”).[[22]](#endnote-22) Though neither of these offences could have been attributed directly to Charles II, such overt criticisms of royal sexuality seem both pointed and surprising – all the more so for being wholly avoidable.

Given Dryden’s well-known and well-justified reputation as a Stuart apologist, especially in such post-Exclusion works as *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and *The Medal* (1682), the notion that *Ovid’s Epistles* might include an implied critique of royal sexuality may seem inherently unlikely. (His rambunctious defence, in *Absalom*, of Charles’s sexual excesses might seem to compound the improbability still further.)[[23]](#endnote-23) Yet despite the mature Dryden’s undoubted royalism, he was by no means always an uncritical commentator on his Stuart masters. Later, in *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), he would show himself willing to disagree, albeit allusively, with James II’s religious policies, despite his own recent conversion to James’s religion.[[24]](#endnote-24) Closer to the date of *Ovid’s Epistles*, his work on *Troilus and Cressida* – in many respects a companion piece to the *Heroides* project – manifests clear signs of unease with royal sexual self-indulgence, especially insofar as it might affect the welfare of the nation; witness his one substantial addition to the play (Act III scene ii), in which Hector (successfully) urges Troilus to give up Cressida for the good of Troy.[[25]](#endnote-25) Sexual conservatism can also be detected in Dryden’s other key departure from his Shakespearean source, namely revising the part of Cressida to make her faithful to (though misunderstood by) her lover; this change, unprecedented in any previous version of the Troilus story, smooths out the complex morals of the original, eliminating any troubling discrepancies between Cressida’s sexual integrity and her status as tragic protagonist. Within *Ovid’s Epistles*, a propensity to sexual conservatism can also be detected in such paratextual details as the argument to “Helen to Paris”, which ends with the uncompromising verdict “The whole Letter shewing the extream artifice of Woman-kind”.[[26]](#endnote-26) In the face of national crisis, Dryden’s first response – if not his second – was to reassert traditional sexual morals and gender norms.

But Dryden was not the only Restoration writer for whom *Ovid’s Epistles* represented both a significant career shift and an opportunity to comment on contemporary politics and sexuality. In the next section of this essay, I consider how the collection’s only female contributor, Aphra Behn, took advantage of this opportunity both to advance her own career and to provide a distinctively gendered perspective on the complaint genre.

**Aphra Behn in *Ovid’s Epistles***

Aphra Behn’s involvement in the *Ovid’s Epistles* volume is likely to have been due in large part to her recent success in the theatre. Most of the contributors to the collection, as Gillespie has shown, were either themselves dramatists or had “established dramatic associations”; many also had pre-existing professional links with Jacob Tonson.[[27]](#endnote-27) Behn had enjoyed her greatest theatrical success to date with *The Rover* in 1677, and had subsequently published *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678) with Richard and Jacob Tonson and *The Feign’d Curtizans* (1679) with Jacob alone.[[28]](#endnote-28) *Troilus and Cressida* – unusually, for Dryden, a Duke’s company play – might also have brought the poet laureate into professional contact with Behn, who habitually wrote for the Duke’s theatre.[[29]](#endnote-29) Among the contributors to *Ovid’s Epistles*, her writerly reputation was arguably second only to Dryden’s own.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Yet although Behn, by 1680, was well-established as a dramatist, her status as a poet was much less secure. Only a few of her poems had been published, and just one – her commendatory poem to Edward Howard’s *The Six Days Adventure* (1671) – had as yet appeared under her own name. The remainder had been included, without attribution, in miscellanies or songbooks, often connected with the theatre.[[31]](#endnote-31) Though Behn was evidently more active as a poet than this relatively slight publication record might suggest – the pirated inclusion of three of her poems in Rochester’s *Poems on Several Occasions* later in 1680 indicates as much – she had not yet begun to acquire a public reputation in this genre. Furthermore, all the poems that she is known to have written before 1680 are original works, most of them occasional in nature. An invitation to contribute to *Ovid’s Epistles* would have enabled her to expand her generic range, establishing her credentials in a field – literary translation – that was to become increasingly fashionable in the 1680s. As a playwright with a strong specialisation in comedy, she might also have relished the challenge of inhabiting and exploring a tragic female voice.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Whether Behn’s inclusion in *Ovid’s Epistles* did indeed enhance her contemporary reputation has been a matter of some controversy.[[33]](#endnote-33) Disagreement has focused, in particular, on how Dryden’s reference to her work in his preface to the collection should be interpreted. Having carefully delineated his tripartite taxonomy of translation (metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation), and declared his methodological preference for paraphrase, Dryden goes on to identify Behn’s “Oenone to Paris” as the only contribution to the volume to fall outside this favoured category:

That of *Oenone* to *Paris* is in Mr. *Cowleys* way of Imitation only. I was desir’d to say that the Authour who is of the Fair Sex, understood not *Latine*. But if she does not, I am afraid she has given us occasion to be ashamed who do.

Dryden, *Ovid’s Epistles*, sig. a4r

As critics have noted, Dryden’s apparent snub to Behn’s translational style is complicated by several factors: most obviously the gallantry of his wording (which may not have been entirely tokenistic) and the fact that the title assigned to her poem in *Ovid’s* *Epistles* is “A Paraphrase [not “An Imitation”] on Oenone to Paris”.[[34]](#endnote-34) What has been less frequently observed, however, is that Dryden’s comment on Behn’s methods conflates two potentially separable issues: her method of translation and her lack of Latin. This matters because, while it seems entirely plausible (to cite Dryden’s terms) that a translator who knew no Latin could not produce a word-for-word metaphrase of her Ovidian original, there is no obvious reason why she could not produce a paraphrase, providing a suitable intermediary translation was available. Dryden’s gallantry notwithstanding, opting for imitation (“taking only some general hints from the Original”) over paraphrase may have been more of a choice than a necessity for Aphra Behn.[[35]](#endnote-35)

One reason why Behn’s methods in “Oenone to Paris” have proved somewhat elusive is that, to date, no intermediary translation for her work has been conclusively identified. As Heavey notes, there had been three previous English translations of the *Heroides*, by George Turberville (1567), Wye Saltonstall (1636) and John Sherburne (1639).[[36]](#endnote-36) Saltonstall’s translation, which had been frequently reissued (most recently in 1677), was probably the most readily available, but all three, as Garth Tissol has shown, were drawn on by contributors to the 1680 collection.[[37]](#endnote-37) Janet Todd further suggests that Behn might have used a bespoke translation by a fellow-contributor to the volume such as Thomas Otway, Nahum Tate or James Wright, all of whom she is otherwise known to have worked with.[[38]](#endnote-38) The possibility that her knowledge of Latin was less limited than Dryden (rather ambiguously) claimed should also not be discounted.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Behn’s imitative style, which often sees her departing very substantially from the original Ovid, has made it difficult to determine which source-text (or texts) she may have worked with. Nonetheless, there are a few passages in “Oenone to Paris” where a specific source for her work can be identified. One such passage occurs early in the poem, as Oenone reflects on how her native grove still, painfully, reminds her of her past relationship with Paris. In Behn’s version of these lines, Oenone laments:

Each *Beach* my Name yet bears, carv’d out by thee,   
*Paris,* and his *Oenone* fill each Tree;   
And as they grow, the Letters larger spread,   
Grow still! a witness of my Wrongs when dead!

Close by a silent silver Brook there grows   
A Poplar …

Behn, “Oenone to Paris,” lines 86-91; *Ovid’s Epistles*, pp. 102-3[[40]](#endnote-40)

Neither Turberville’s nor Saltonstall’s version of this passage noticeably resembles Behn’s. In Turberville’s awkward common metre, it reads:

The boysteous Beech *Oenones* name   
 in outwarde barke dooth beare:   
And with thy caruing knife is cut   
 *Oenon* euery wheare.   
And as the trees in tyme doe waxe   
 so doth encrease my name:   
Go to, grow on, erect your selues,   
 helpe to aduaunce my fame.

There growes (I minde it verie well)   
 vpon a banck, a tree

Turberville, *Heroycall Epistles*,27r-v[[41]](#endnote-41)

Saltonstall’s version, though more fluent, is equally un-Behnlike:

My name on every Beech-tree I do find.  
Thou hadst engrav’d *Oenone* on their rind,   
And as the body of the tree doth, so   
The letters of my name do greater grow.   
Close by a River (I remember it)   
These lines are on an *Alder* fairly writ …

Saltonstall, *Ovid’s Heroicall Epistles*, 32[[42]](#endnote-42)

Rather closer to Behn’s text, however, is John Sherburne’s rendering of the same passage:

Each Beech my name carv’d out by thee doth beare;   
And thy *Oenone* is read every where.   
As they increase, so spreads my name along;   
Grow, grow, and rise a witnesse of my wrong.   
 Close by a purling silverie brooke, there growes   
A Poplar, which of me fresh record showes.

Sherburne, *Ovids Heroical Epistles*, 26

Obvious verbal similarities include the introductory “Each *Beach*”, the idiom “carv’d out by thee”, the injunction “Grow”, the phrase “a witness of my Wrongs” and the identification of the second tree as the poplar. Still clearer echoes of Sherburne’s translation can be found in a later couplet comparing the perfidious Paris to lightweight grains of wheat. In Behn, this couplet reads:

Less Weight, less Constancy, in thee is born   
Than in the slender mildew’d Ears of Corn.

Behn, “Oenone to Paris,” lines 286-7; *Ovid’s Epistles*, 114

The equivalent passages in Turberville and Saltonstall resemble Behn’s version only broadly, lacking specific verbal similarities: Turberville, for instance, refers to the cereal as “beard of wheate”, while for Saltonstall it is “waving corn”.[[43]](#endnote-43) The relevant couplet in Sherburne, however, differs by Behn’s text by just one word:

Lesse weight, lesse constancie in thee is borne,   
Than in the slender Sun-parcht eares of corne.

Sherburne, *Ovids Heroical Epistles*, 53

Such close and specific verbal echoes make it indisputable that, while Behn does not seem to have used either Turberville or Saltonstall when compiling her “Paraphrase on Oenone to Paris”, she did draw on Sherburne. Yet comparison between her version and his further shows both that her direct borrowings from his text were relatively few – no more than a handful in a poem of 314 lines – and also that, unsurprisingly, even the closest of her allusions were always adjusted and repurposed to her own ends.[[44]](#endnote-44) The single-word difference between her and Sherborne’s renderings of the ears of corn image, for instance, significantly alters its emotional resonance, Behn’s “mildew’d” adding implications of decay and disease not present in Sherburne’s relatively straightforward adjective “Sun-parch’t”. Perhaps even more revealing is her apparently deliberate rejection of Sherburne’s adjective “purling”, in favour of “silent”, when characterising Oenone’s brook. “Purling” is a frequent adjective in Behn’s verse, found in such poems as “The Golden Age”, “A Farewel to Celladon”, “To Mr. Creech”, and “A Voyage to the Isle of Love”. Overwhelmingly, however, in the Behn corpus, “purling” is associated with (at least superficially) happy or idealised circumstances; witness “The Golden Age”, which begins “Blest Age! when ev'ry Purling Stream / Ran undisturb'd and clear”.[[45]](#endnote-45) Given such connotations, Oenone’s brook self-evidently could not be “purling”. The substitution “silent”, by contrast, eloquently signifies the isolation and loss of comfort that have followed her abandonment by Paris. Through eliminating a rival source of noise, it also focuses the reader’s attention still more directly on the speaking voice of Oenone.   
 The most obvious single difference between Behn’s “Oenone to Paris” and all previous versions is its length. At 2543 words, her poem is nearly twice as long as Sherburne’s, which runs to 1298 words (and which follows Ovid’s Latin closely). Kerrigan’s introduction to his edition aptly summarises some of her key departures from the original:

The added material on rival wooers of Paris and Oenone (25-41), like the comparison between court and country life (in the tradition of vernacular complaint) at 233ff., socializes a relationship which, in Ovid, is private. Repeatedly she returns to gifts, tokens, charms (38-9, 209, 288-92). Behn is more concerned than Ovid with the physiological effects of love (40-51) and dread (113-20). Ostentatiously free in the last ninety or so lines, she sacrifices Cassandra’s prophecy of Paris’ infidelity, Oenone’s account of the swift satyrs who pursue her, and the description of her skill as a gatherer of herbs.

Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe*, 259[[46]](#endnote-46)

More recent scholarship has also suggested that Behn’s version of the poem may have been influenced by contemporary political events. Janet Todd notes that her depiction of Paris introduces references to monarchy not present in the original, while Heavey, who sees “Oenone to Paris” as one of the “most politically charged” inclusions in *Ovid’s Epistles*, reads her characterisation of the faithless Paris as alluding to the duke of Monmouth.[[47]](#endnote-47) Yet while some of Behn’s departures from her Ovidian original do seem likely to have been politically motivated, by no means all of these political allusions evince the strong royalism for which she is now well known.[[48]](#endnote-48) Her Oenone’s numerous references to perjury and vow-breaking – justified by, but not directly authorised by, Ovid’s original – do seem plausibly to evoke the disloyalty with which early 1680s Tories charged their political opponents in the wake of Exclusion, while her account of how “the wisely Grave, who Love despise” encourage Paris to “Change Crooks for Scepters! Garlands for a Crown!” (another addition to Ovid) may, as Heavey argues, recall contemporary accounts of how Monmouth was encouraged in his monarchical ambitions by unscrupulous advisers such as the earl of Shaftesbury.[[49]](#endnote-49) Rather less clearly royalist, however, is Oenone’s observation of how closely Paris’s betrayal of their love followed his discovery of his royal birth:

What Stars do rule the Great? no sooner you   
Became a Prince, but you were Perjur'd too.   
Are Crowns and Falshoods then consistant things?   
And must they all be faithless who are Kings?

Behn, “Oenone to Paris,” lines 241-4; *Ovid’s Epistles*, 112

This too is without direct parallel in Ovid’s original, and while Oenone’s circumstances do of course account for her anti-Paris fervour, her forthright identification of kingship with inconstancy and deception (“must they all be faithless who are Kings?”) does seem rather pointedly absolute, especially since Paris himself is not a king. Oenone’s diatribe takes as its object not just one particularly faithless member of the king’s family, but kingship itself. For the famously royalist Behn, this is unexpected.

If Behn’s treatment of kingship is more complicated than it at first appears, so too is her treatment of its central figure, Oenone. Kerrigan’s comment that Behn’s variations from Ovid “socialize[ ] a relationship which, in Ovid, is private” – effectively, by adding more characters to the poem – applies properly only to the earlier stages of this relationship, when the two met, wooed and became lovers. Where it stops applying is at the key moment of crisis in the poem, when Paris is revealed to be a prince of Troy and makes his fateful decision to leave Oenone. From this point onwards, Behn consistently strips away any forms of companionship that Ovid’s Oenone had experienced, leaving her protagonist still more isolated and defenceless. These omitted references include interactions with Paris’s sister, Cassandra (who in Ovid warns Oenone of her approaching fate) and the gods Faunus and Phoebus.[[50]](#endnote-50) A particularly telling example can be found in Behn’s omission of the “aged” advisers whom Ovid’s Oenone consults with after Paris tells her of his meeting with the three goddesses, and who warn her that “some ominous ill was nie”.[[51]](#endnote-51) In Behn’s complex adaptation of this passage, it is Oenone herself, more astute than in Ovid, who “presag'd some ominous Change was near!”; her loss of her “aged” advisers, meanwhile, has an ironic counterpart in Paris’s acquisition of the “wisely Grave” counsellors who encourage him to give up Mount Ida for Troy.[[52]](#endnote-52) By effectively transferring the advisers from Oenone to Paris, Behn leaves the former all the more isolated and unsupported as she is abandoned by her lover.

Behn’s variations from Ovid in “Oenone to Paris” are carefully plotted, sometimes involving complex processes of textual redeployment as well as more obvious additions and omissions. Common to many of these variations, however, is her evident commitment to inhabiting and exploring Oenone’s subjectivity. Behn’s willingness to think herself, imaginatively and in detail, into Oenone’s consciousness may form one – though not necessarily the only – explanation for the strongly-worded (and uncontradicted) diatribe against monarchy she attributes to her protagonist. It can also be detected in such large-scale additions as her Oenone’s emotionally charged recollection of her early relationship with Paris (Behn’s longest single digression from Ovid), as well as the many small-scale but shrewdly observed differences that pepper the text.[[53]](#endnote-53) The latter include her reimagined depiction of Paris’s physical relationship with Helen, reversing Ovid’s version in which Helen rests on Paris (“The lustfull dame did in thy bosome lye”) to have Paris rest on Helen (“fondly you were on her Bosome laid”); the effect is at once more abject for Paris and more galling for Oenone.[[54]](#endnote-54) Similar emotional sensitivity to Oenone’s plight can be glimpsed in her fine-detail adjustments to her borrowings from Sherburne: altering Paris’s inscription on the beech tree from “Oenone” to the more poignant “Paris and Oenone”; or, still more subtly, changing Oenone’s allusion to Paris’s departing ship from “thy flying vessell” to “the lessening Vessel”.[[55]](#endnote-55) Behn, unlike her male predecessors, is there on the beach with Oenone, watching with her as her lover sails into the distance.

In his preface to *Ovid’s Epistles*,Dryden defines literary imitation as “the liberty not only to vary from the words and sence, but to forsake them both as [the poet] sees occasion … taking only some general hints from the Original”.[[56]](#endnote-56) Behn, it emerges, took not only “general” but also, on occasion, very specific “hints” from her source-text, Sherburne’s translation of Ovid. Details that appealed to her poetic imagination, she used, but tweaked. Otherwise, she had the authority and self-confidence to go her own way.

**Conclusion**

In retrospect, Aphra Behn and John Dryden may seem like obvious allies, given both their shared commitment to the Stuart monarchy and the many similarities in their literary careers. Yet the latter – which, as the 1680s developed, were to include experiments in fabular satire, as well as poems on royal events such as the death of Charles II – may have made them rivals as much as allies, while their divergent approaches to translation in *Ovid’s Epistles* may betoken wider literary and political differences.[[57]](#endnote-57) The most telling clue as to how Dryden really felt about “Oenone to Paris” may, indeed, lie in the fact that he and Behn never worked together again during her lifetime. Behn is conspicuously absent from the miscellanies – including the collaborative translations – that Dryden was to edit during the later 1680s; and while it is conceivable that she was invited to take part but declined, her well-known need for money after the merger of the King’s and Duke’s theatre companies in 1682 makes this explanation unlikely.[[58]](#endnote-58) It is more probable that Dryden, having seen what Behn’s approach to translation was like, preferred not to risk appearing to endorse it again. His next public association with Behn – his provision of a prologue and epilogue for her play *The Widdow Ranter* – would not occur until 1690, by which time Behn had died, and the two writers’ common opposition to the 1689 Revolution may have rendered any earlier differences between them redundant. Dryden’s puns on rebellion, plots and William’s Irish wars in his *Widdow Ranter* paratexts suggest that he recognised their shared political affiliations, which may in turn explain his willingness to write on her behalf, albeit after she was safely dead.[[59]](#endnote-59)

The momentous political events of the 1680s exercise a strong gravitational pull within Restoration scholarship, rendering the perils of hindsight especially hard to avoid. Yet as Jessica Pirie has recently argued, to assume that the Behn of the 1670s necessarily held the same uncompromisingly royalist beliefs later evident in such 1680s works as *The Roundheads*, *The City-Heiress* and her royal panegyrics is methodologically unwise.[[60]](#endnote-60) As Pirie points out, some of Behn’s 1670s publications take a much more equivocal approach to royal power, particularly in contexts where that power is exercised at the expense of women.[[61]](#endnote-61) Behn’s record of dramatising conflicts between power and sexuality may provide a further explanation for her attraction to the Ovidian complaint, the *locus classicus* for exploring such conflicts, especially from a female perspective. “Oenone to Paris” – probably drafted in early 1679, before the constitutional challenge represented by Exclusion became fully clear – may represent the last time she felt able to publish such an interrogation of royal authority. Henceforward the risk of giving succour to her political enemies would be too great.

Much as Dryden may have disapproved of the imitative style of “Oenone to Paris”, Behn herself seems to have had no regrets. The version of the poem reproduced in her *Poems upon Several Occasions*, four years later, is only minimally different from the 1680 version; perhaps defiantly, given the opprobrium to which the term “paraphrase” had meanwhile been subject, she retained the title “A Paraphrase On *…* *Oenone* to *Paris*” (adding only the clarification “Ovid’s Epistle of”).[[62]](#endnote-62) Behn was to follow similar imitative methods in all her later forays into literary translation, including her two longest poems, “A Voyage to the Isle of Love” and her version of Abraham Cowley’s “Sylva”.[[63]](#endnote-63) That *Poems upon Several Occasions*, in which “Voyage” appeared, was published by Tonson, further indicates how much she had gained from contributing to *Ovid’s Epistles*; so too does the publication of her “Sylva” in a collaborative translation “made English by several Hands”. Others, if not Dryden, seem to have been impressed by “Oenone to Paris”. The Ovidian complaint had become Behn’s entrée to elite 1680s poetry.

1. I am grateful to Kathleen Taylor and Claire Bowditch for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

   John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and “Female Complaint”: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The last edition recorded by ESTC is *Ovid’s Epistles: Translated by Eminent Persons* (London, 1795). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Dryden, ed. and introd., *Ovid’s Epistles* (London, 1680), sig. a4r; Aphra Behn, *Poems upon Several Occasions* (London, 1684), sigs K1r-K8v. For evidence of Behn’s involvement in planning the shape of *Poems*, see Jordan Howell, “Aphra Behn, Editor,” *The Review of English Studies* 68, no. 285 (2017): 549-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Katherine Smith, “Ovidian Female-Voiced Complaint Poetry in Early Modern England” (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2016), 156-217. “Ovid to Julia”, another Ovidian poem often ascribed to Behn, is an insecure attribution and will not be discussed further in this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Carol Barash, *English Women’s Poetry, 1649-1714: Politics, Community, and Linguistic Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 114-18; Katherine Heavey, “Aphra Behn’s *Oenone to Paris*: Ovidian Paraphrase by Women Writers,” *Translation and Literature* 23 (2014): 303-20; Susan Wiseman, “‘Perfectly Ovidian’? Dryden’s *Epistles*, Behn’s ‘Oenone’, Yarico’s Island,” *Renaissance Studies* 22, no. 3 (2008): 417-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I explore this point at more length in the conclusion to *The Restoration Transposed: Poetry, Place and Literary History, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Paul Davis, “From script to print: marketing Rochester,” in *Lord Rochester in the Restoration World*, ed. Matthew C. Augustine and Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 40-57 (40). As Davis emphasises, this cultural shift, though perceptible, was by no means absolute – as attested by the continuing production of Rochester manuscripts after 1680. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On this phenomenon, see further Peter Hinds, *“The Horrid Popish Plot”: Roger L’Estrange and the Circulation of Political Discourse in Late Seventeenth-Century London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Dryden’s poetic publications between *Annus Mirabilis* and *Mac Flecknoe* are helpfully listed in John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden*, vol. I, ed. by Paul Hammond (London: Longman, 1995), v-vi. All but one – an epitaph on the Marquis of Winchester – are theatrical pieces. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. On the significance of *Ovid’s Epistles* in Dryden’s career, see further Stuart Gillespie, “The Early Years of the Dryden-Tonson Partnership: The Background to their Composite Translations and Miscellanies of the 1680s,” *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 12, no. 1 (1988): 10-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Gillespie, “Early Years,” 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On the significance of Dryden’s preface see, for example, Paul Davis, *Translation and the Poet’s Life: The Ethics of Translating in English Culture, 1646-1726* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 134-5, and Julie Candler Hayes, *Translation, Subjectivity and Culture in France and England, 1600-1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 92-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Greg Clingham, “Roscommon’s ‘Academy’, Chetwood’s Manuscript ‘Life of Roscommon’, and Dryden’s Translation Project,” *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 26, no. 1 (2002), 15-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. John Dryden, *Ovid’s Epistles* (1680), sigs A3v and A7v: roman for original italics (and vice versa) in this and subsequent quotations from Dryden’s preface. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Dryden, *Ovid’s Epistles*, sig. A8r. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Gillespie, “Early Years,” 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Dryden, *Ovid’s Epistles*, sig. A7v. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Heavey, “Aphra Behn’s *Oenone to Paris*,” 306. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. James Anderson Winn, *John Dryden and His World* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 387. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Davis, *Translation*, 134, citing *Ovid’s Epistles*, sigs A8r and a2r; compare Abraham Cowley, *Works* (London, 1668), sig. T3v. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Winn, *John Dryden*, 330. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Dryden, *Ovid’s Epistles*, sigs A3v and A4v (misnumbered R4 in original). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Another possibility is that the very rambunctiousness of *Absalom and Achitophel* represents a similarly anxious, though differently directed, response to royal sexuality. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Steven Zwicker, *Politics and Language in Dryden’s Poetry* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Winn, *John Dryden*, 318-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. *Ovid’s Epistles*, 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Gillespie, “Early Years,” 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Mary Ann O’Donnell, *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography*, second edition (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 39-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. On Dryden’s association with the rival King’s company, which lasted from 1668 to 1682, see Paul Hammond, ‘Dryden, John (1631–1700), poet, playwright, and critic’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and compare John Dryden, *Troilus and Cressida* (London, 1679), sig. A1r; on Behn’s work for the Duke’s, see Janet Todd, “Behn, Aphra [Aphara] (1640?–1689), writer”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Other contributors to the volume included Thomas Flatman, Thomas Rymer and Elkanah Settle. Three contributions were anonymous. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Such pre-1680 publications included *Covent Garden Drolery* (London, 1672), *A Collection of Poems … By several Persons* (London, 1673), and John Playford’s *Choice Ayres, Songs, & Dialogues*, second edition (London, 1675). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Only one of Behn’s plays – *Abdelazer* (London, 1676) – was a tragedy. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See for instance Heavey, “Aphra Behn’s *Oenone to Paris*,” 307, 314-5; Wiseman, “‘Perfectly Ovidian’?” 421-3; Smith, “Ovidian Female-Voiced Complaint Poetry,” 184-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Ovid’s Epistles*, 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Dryden, *Ovid’s Epistles*, sig. A8r. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Heavey, “Aphra Behn’s *Oenone to Paris*,” 307; George Turberville, *The Heroycall Epistles of … Publius Ouidius Naso* (London, 1567); *Ovid’s heroicall epistles. Englished by W. S.* (London, 1636); *Ovids Heroical Epistles, Englished by John Sherburne* (London, 1639). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Garth Tissol, “Ovid,” in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, Vol. 3: *1660–1790*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 204–17 (205-6). The deficiencies of the Saltonstall translation, as reissued in 1677, may have conceivably influenced Dryden’s and Tonson’s decision to produce their own version. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Janet Todd, *Aphra Behn: A Secret Life*, second edition (London: Fentum Press, 2017), 262. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Behn’s poem “To Mr. Creech” (*Poems*, sigs E1v-E5r) – which thanks Creech for making Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* accessible to non-classically-educated women such as herself – is often taken to signify that she knew no Latin. As Katherine Smith points out, while this reading may be correct, it is not secure (“Ovidian Female-Voiced Complaint Poetry,” 189-91). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Line references to “Oenone to Paris” derive from *The Works of Aphra Behn*, vol. 1, ed. Janet Todd (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992), 12-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Roman for black letter and italic for roman in Turberville’s original. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. The 1636 edition of Saltonstall’s translation is rare, surviving in only three known copies (according to ESTC) and not yet digitised on EEBO. I cite the 1671 edition, which is available on EEBO and may have been used by the contributors to *Ovid’s Epistles*. Texts in all accessible early editions are substantially similar. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Turberville, 30v; Saltonstall, 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Behn’s borrowings from Sherburne will be fully documented in my forthcoming edition of her poetry in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Aphra Behn*. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Behn, *Poems*, sig. B1r. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Kerrigan’s line references are applicable both to his own edition (*Motives of Woe*, 260-8) and Todd’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Todd, ed., *Works*, 1, 377-8; Heavey, “Aphra Behn’s *Oenone to Paris*,” 307, and *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Carol Barash also notes the ambiguity of Behn’s political allusions (*English Women’s Poetry*, 115-6), though her interpretation differs from mine. On Behn’s royalism, see for instance Todd, *ODNB*. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. References to perjury or vow-breaking occur, for instance, at lines 55-61, 150, 207 and 280-3. For the “wisely Grave,” see lines 152-7 and Heavey, “Aphra Behn’s *Oenone to Paris*”, 312. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Sherburne, *Ovids Heroical Epistles*,53 (misnumbered for 29) and 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Sherburne, *Ovids Heroical Epistles*, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Behn, “Oenone to Paris”, line 115; *Ovid’s Epistles*, 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. For Behn’s digression, see “Oenone to Paris,” lines 13-85 (*Ovid’s Epistles*, 98-102). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. For Helen and Paris, see Sherburne, *Ovids Heroical Epistles*, 52 (misnumbered for 28) and Behn, “Oenone to Paris,” line 206 (*Ovid’s Epistles*, 110). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Sherburne, *Ovids Heroical Epistles*, 27; Behn, “Oenone to Paris”, line 177, *Ovid’s Epistles*, 108. The full version of each line – respectively “I, whil’st I could, thy flying vessell view’d” and “And whilst I cou’d the lessening Vessel see” – clarifies the derivation. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Dryden, *Ovid’s Epistles*, sig. A8r. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. On the two poets’ use of fabular satire, see my “Fable and Allegory” in *The Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Satire*, ed. Paddy Bullard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Their poems on Charles are *A Pindarick on the Death of Our Late Sovereign* (Behn) and *Threnodia Augustalis* (Dryden), both published in 1685. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. On Behn’s finances, see Todd, *ODNB*. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. by Paul Hammond and David Hopkins, vol. III (London: Longman, 2000), 224 (prologue, lines 40-1; epilogue, line 1). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Jessica Pirie, “Princes, Power and Politics in the Early Plays of Aphra Behn” (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Philander’s and Alcippus’s rivalry over Erminia in *The Forc’d Marriage* and Prince Frederick’s treatment of Cloris in *The Amorous Prince* (both 1671) are obvious cases in point. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. For the variants between the 1680 and 1684 versions of “Oenone to Paris,” see Todd, ed., *Works*, 1, 463. On the paraphrase controversy, see Wiseman, “‘Perfectly Ovidian?’”, 423-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. For “Voyage,” see *Poems upon Several Occasions*, sigs 2B1r-2I8v; for “Sylva,” see Abraham Cowley, *The Third Part of the Works of Mr Abraham Cowley* (1689), 131-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)