Re-Matriating Cockacoeske: Indigenous Resistance, Bacon's Rebellion, and Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter*

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Abstract

This article traces how Restoration playwright Aphra Behn dramatized a Pamunkey matriarch, Cockacoeske, into a nascent example of the "Indian princess" archetype in her posthumous play *The Widow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia* (1690), entangling the character with a burgeoning logic of imperial feminism and helping to solidify the popular character on English stages in Europe and North America for centuries to come. Behn's play, a dramatization of Nathaniel Bacon's Rebellion of 1676–77 in the English colony of Virginia, reimagines Bacon as a classical hero and Cockacoeske, called Semernia in the play, as his tragic paramour. By recentring Cockacoeske and Indigenous peoples in the events of the Rebellion, this article seeks to re-matriate Cockacoeske's voice from Behn's play and to highlight the way English theatrical tropes, particularly the Indian princess, concealed the profound anti-colonial resistance of Indigenous women.

Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia* (1690) is one of the first English plays set in the empire's American colonies.[1] Like much of Behn's prolific oeuvre, the play depicts the challenges faced by English women within a patriarchal society, featuring two cross-dressed heroines. In this play, however,

1 Janet Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 412. This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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racial and class hierarchies within the colony add further tension to Behn's standard gender politics. While the play was not a success in its day, this article builds on Heidi Hutner's claim that *The Widow Ranter* represents a "crucial point of analysis for race and gender studies of the Restoration and early eighteenth century."[2] In the play, Behn's nascent feminist theatrical techniques are complicated by the presence of an Indigenous female protagonist, Semernia, who plays the tragic heroine. Adding to this complexity is the fact that Behn based her character Semernia on a real Pamunkey matriarch, Cockacoeske (Coke-a-cow-ski), who resisted Nathanial Bacon's colonial uprising of 1676–77, known as Bacon's Rebellion, upon which the play is based.[3] An Indigenous feminist analysis of the play, one that acknowledges patriarchy and colonialism as intrinsically linked and recognizes that gendered violence against Indigenous women is a form of colonial control, reveals how the theatrical tropes deployed by Behn in *The Widow Ranter* and repeated on stages for centuries to come advanced the status of white settler women in North America while obfuscating the colonial resistance and matriarchal leadership of Indigenous women. This article seeks to not only re-matriate Cockacoeske's voice from Behn's play—a theory and praxis of restoring Indigenous women to their ancestral land and traditional roles as community leaders, free from the violence of patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy—but also untangle the representational white imperial feminist logic underpinning Behn's creation of an "Indian princess" character inspired by a real Indigenous woman.[4]

Referred to by the English as the Queen of the Pamunkey (a title indicating an English misunderstanding of Indigenous governance structures), Cockacoeske resisted the genocidal rampage of English settler Nathanial Bacon, known as Bacon's Rebellion, in 1676 and consequently negotiated and signed a treaty with Charles II in 1677

2 Heidi Hutner, *Colonial Women: Race and Culture in Stuart Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 89.

3 Wilber Henry Ward first made the connection between Behn's Semernia and the so-called Queen of the Pamunkey, Cockacoeske, as written about in the 1677 report submitted to the Crown titled "A True Narration of the Rise, Progresse, and Cessation of the Late Rebellion in Virginia." See Wilber Henry Ward, "Mrs. Behn's 'The Widow Ranter': Historical Sources," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 41, no. 4 (1976): 96, https://doi.org/10.2307/3198959.

4 Jennifer Brant and D. Memee Lavell-Harvard, introduction to *Rematriating Justice: Honouring the Lives of Our Sisters in Spirit* (Coe Hill, ON: Demeter Press, 2024), 20.

that established Pamunkey sovereignty as a tributary Nation and protected her people from slavery. As Hutner has argued, Behn was a voracious reader of the London press and would have read about Cockacoeske when the printed Treaty of 1677 was circulated in London and would have known about the details of the Rebellion from various printed pamphlets sharing news from the colony.[5] Consequently, Behn's heavily fictionalized representation of the Rebellion and the so-called Indian Queen in *The Widow Ranter*, posthumously published approximately twelve years after the collapse of the Rebellion and the signing of the Treaty, was informed by what Behn had read in the papers as well as her knowledge of theatrical tropes and trends in the late seventeenth century.

The Widow Ranter debuted on November 20, 1689, six months after Behn's death on April 16, 1689, and was published the following year. Perhaps because of its uncomfortable political allusions relating to the succession crisis following Charles II's death, or, as one contemporary critic noted, because the production was mismanaged and badly cast, it was not well received, and the performance was not repeated.[6] Indeed, most of the existing scholarship on *The Widow Ranter* has focused on Behn's commentary on the Exclusion Crisis and other political matters, which she explores through a play about a crisis of leadership in the colonies.[7] This article, how-

5 The treaty signed by Cockacoeske and other Indigenous leaders was printed in London as *Articles of Peace Between the Most Serene and Mighty Prince, Charles II. … And Several Indian Kings and Queens* (London: Printers to the Kings Most Excellent Majesty, 1677). Other printed materials related to Bacon's Rebellion that Behn likely read include the newspaper pamphlet *Strange News from Virginia: Being a Full and True Account of the Life and Death of Nathaniel Bacon* (London: William Harris, 1677) and its sequel, *More News from Virginia, Being a True and Full Relation of all Occurrences in that Country, since the Death of Nathaniel Bacon* (London: W. Harris, 1677).

6 Janet Todd argues that the political allusions of the play were discomfiting to English audiences amidst the succession crisis. See Janet Todd, *Aphra Behn: Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 1992), 412.

7 Much of the scholarship on *The Widow Ranter* focuses on the play's concerns with the early 1680s' Exclusion Crisis in England. For examples, see Aspasia Velissariou, "'Tis Pity That When Laws Are Faulty They Should Not Be Mended or Abolisht': Authority, Legitimation, and Honor in Aphra Behn's *The Widdow Ranter*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 38, no. 2 (2002): 137–66; and Jenny Hale Pulsipher, "*The Widow Ranter* and Royalist Culture in Colonial Virginia," *Early American Literature* 39, no. 1 (2004): 41–66, https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2004.0016.

ever, deviates from previous studies and is primarily interested in how Behn's feminist techniques are complicated by the presence of an Indigenous female protagonist. As one of a few English plays to depict Indigenous–settler relations in the seventeenth century, it is, as Adrienne L. Eastwood describes in her recent edition of the play, "a fascinating addition to the existing body of transatlantic texts" of the period.[8]

In this article, I argue that Behn's ideologies as a nascent feminist woman writer *and* a colonial woman conflate in the play as she presents the languishing Indian princess as a means of leveraging the success of the white Englishwoman, the titular Widow Ranter. Employing Restoration theatrical trends, colonial accounts of the Rebellion, and her own feminist signature, Behn transforms Cockacoeske into the Indian Queen Semernia. Portrayed as a nobly born woman in a loveless marriage to the Indian King Cavarnio, Semernia falls in love with and is later accidentally killed by Bacon. Behn's transformation of an Indigenous matriarch into the Indian princess archetype—a romanticized and exoticized female character who falls in love with a white male colonizer and welcomes her own assimilation and, often, eventual death—not only functioned to soften Bacon's genocidal violence in the English, and later American, imaginary but also contributed to a long theatrical legacy of disappearing Indigenous women characters on stage (and, later, on screens) with real-life consequences for the very women such plays purport to portray.

As Métis feminist scholar Kim Anderson writes,

> Indian princess imagery construct[s] Indigenous women as the virgin frontier, the pure border waiting to be crossed. The enormous popularity of the princess lay within her erotic appeal to the covetous European male wishing to lay claim to the "new" territory.[9]

Although Behn's Indian princess play was never popular, by the nineteenth century, theatricalizations of the Indian princess abounded. In 1808, James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage*

8 Adrienne L. Eastwood, introduction to *The Widow Ranter*, by Aphra Behn (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2022), 11. Following Eastwood and other contemporary scholars' lead, I use the modernized spelling of *Widow* rather than the original *Widdow*.

9 Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2016), 81.

became the first play to depict Cockacoeske's relative, Pocahontas. It directly influenced the creation of more than forty Indian princess plays in the nineteenth century, and the genre remained popular into the twentieth century, assisted by the invention of film.[10] Disney's 1995 animated film *Pocahontas*, with its brave and beautiful heroine, marked a contemporary revival of the Indian princess archetype. As the late Métis/Anishinabek scholar Janice Acoose reminds us, the Indian princess archetype continues to justify real-world violence against Indigenous women and lands to this day.[11] This article, then, seeks to deepen our understanding of the implications of Behn's colonial works—which, as dozens of scholars have argued over many decades, pandered to English public sensibilities while also being critical of sexism, colonialism, and the slave trade—and help clear the way for Cockacoeske's voice to be heard over four hundred years of applause.

Setting the Stage: Indigenous Resistance in Virginia

Cockacoeske was the leader of the Pamunkey Nation from 1656 until her death in 1686.[12] She was instrumental in resisting Bacon's violent attack and, following his death, negotiating a treaty relationship with Charles II that protected Pamunkey sovereignty for centuries to come. Born around 1640, Cockacoeske was a descendent of paramount Chief Powhatan, leader of an alliance of Algonquian-speaking Nations of Tsenacommacah, coastal Virginia, where English settlers first landed in 1607.[13] The Anglo-Powhatan Wars of the first half of the century had resulted in a treaty made in 1646, in which the

10 Paul H. Musser, *James Nelson Barker 1784–1858, with a Reprint of his Comedy "Tears and Smiles"* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1929), 23.

11 Janice Acoose, *Iskwewak—Kah' Ki Yaw Ni Wahkohmakanak: Neither Indian Princesses nor Easy Squaws, Second Edition* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2016), 32.

12 Within the Powhatan Confederacy, Cockacoeske was *weroansqua* (*weroance* when referring to a man), the title for a leader under the paramount Chief. See Helen Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 16.

13 For further details about Cockacoeske's ancestors, biographical details, and the governance structure of the Powhatan Confederacy, see Martha W. McCartney, "Cockacoeske, Queen of Pamunkey: Diplomat and Suzeraine," in *Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, ed. Peter H. Wood, Gregory A. Waselkov, and M. Thomas Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 243–66; and Helen Rountree, *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 101–03.

Nations of the Confederacy became tributaries to the Virginia governor and were strictly limited to reservation lands. When Cockacoeske took leadership of the Pamunkey in 1656 following the death of her husband, Totopotomi, in the Battle of Bloody Run, her Nation and others were scattered and struggling to survive as English colonizers continued to encroach on their designated lands. For the first twenty years of her leadership, Cockacoeske managed an uneasy peace with the Virginia settlers. By all accounts, she was a wise leader, an astute diplomat, and a skilled politician. But her and her people's lives were upended by Bacon's Rebellion of 1676.

Bacon was an English settler who arrived in Virginia in 1674 at the age of 24 and was quickly appointed as a councillor.[14] He purchased two plantations and enslaved both Black and Indigenous peoples. However, he and other settlers were angered by Governor William Berkeley's diplomatic and trade relationships with various Indigenous Nations, including the Pamunkey, Chickahominy, Mattiponi, and Nottoway, that limited their enslavement and violence against Indigenous allies. Beginning in 1676, Bacon raised an army to destroy the local Indigenous peoples, writing in his manifesto that his campaign sought to "ruin and extirpate all Indians in general."[15] He named Cockacoeske specifically in his treatise, arguing that "the inherent barbarity of Indigenous people provided a logical path to cast Indigenous women such as Cockacoeske out of the community of sovereign nations and into slavery."[16] In defiance of the governor's orders, throughout the summer of 1676, Bacon and his party of approximately sixty other colonists sought to kill Indigenous peoples of the area indiscriminately. In August, they raided a Pamunkey village, massacring and taking dozens captive, and stealing all they could.[17] They also kidnapped settler women and children of the colony and burned down the settlement of Jamestown on September 19, 1676. The Rebellion may have continued to flourish if not for Bacon's untimely

14 All biographical details about Bacon are taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. See Britannica Editors, "Nathaniel Bacon," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 14, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nathaniel-Bacon.

15 Nathanial Bacon, "Manifesto Concerning the Present Troubles in Virginia (1676)," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 1 (1894): 55–58.

16 Hayley Negrin, "Cockacoeske's Rebellion: Nathaniel Bacon, Indigenous Slavery, and Sovereignty in Early Virginia," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2023): 50, https://doi.org/10.1353/wmq.2023.0013.

17 McCartney, 248.

death by illness not long after the razing of Jamestown on October 26, 1676. Troops sent by Charles II arrived from England in January 1677, by which point the Rebellion had long ended, Berkeley had reasserted his control, and negotiations on a new treaty could begin.[18]

From a settler perspective, Bacon's Rebellion is sometimes remembered as a precursor to the overthrow of British oppression in the American Revolution (1775–1783), and Bacon himself is framed as a nascent American hero. However, this interpretation masks the explicit motivation behind Bacon's mission: genocide.[19] The resistance mounted by Indigenous peoples against Bacon's Rebellion has likewise been pushed to the margins of both historical and contemporary accounts, including the remarkable role of Cockacoeske, who was instrumental in shaping the Pamunkey treaty relationship with Virginia.[20] When Bacon attacked the Pamunkey, Cockacoeske ordered her people to flee, saving herself and many of her kin's lives. Cockacoeske herself went into hiding for several weeks and survived Bacon's efforts to assassinate her.

During the Rebellion, Governor Berkeley called on Cockacoeske to attend and address his council, hoping the Pamunkey would provide military assistance to fight the Rebellion. According to an English account of the council meeting, she attended in full regalia and brought her son.[21] She would only speak in her native language, though the colonists understood her to be fluent in English, and insisted on having an interpreter present. By declining to speak in English, Cockacoeske engaged in a powerful act of refusal, rejecting the colonial logic that recognized the English language as superior to her own, and the political assumption that the English men in the room were more important than she.[22] Cockacoeske was

18 Hutner, 96.

19 James D. Rice, "Bacon's Rebellion in Indian Country," *The Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (2024): 726.

20 Rice, 729.

21 An account of Cockacoeske's address to Berkeley's council, attended by her son who was purported to be the son of settler John West, can be found in Peter Force, *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America*, vol. 1, book 8 (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963), 14–15.

22 Numerous critical Indigenous studies scholars have theorized Indigenous refusal as a means of disrupting settler-colonial forces. See Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "The Place Where

understandably reluctant to provide support for Berkeley, pointing out that her husband and many of their warriors had died in his service years earlier, and no reparations had been provided. According to an eyewitness account, she gave an impassioned speech railing against the colony's impact on her people.[23]

Following Bacon's death and the collapse of the Rebellion in October 1676, Cockacoeske was instrumental in negotiating a new treaty with the English, known variously as the Articles of Peace, the Treaty of 1677, or the Treaty of Middle Plantation, which she signed on May 29, 1677. Over a month-long period of deliberation and negotiation, she skillfully used her knowledge of English political and legal structures to create a treaty that would protect her people. She and the other signatories negotiated the establishment of greater reserved lands, banned English enslavement of Indigenous peoples, banned the English from settling within three miles of Indigenous lands, and preserved Indigenous rights to hunt, fish, and gather plants off their reserved lands. Article 12 of the Treaty features Cockacoeske specifically. The Treaty states:

> That each Indian King and Queen have equal Power to Govern their own People, and none to have greater Power than other, Except the Queen of Pamunkey, to whom several scattered Nations do now again own their ancient Subjection, and are agreed to come in and Plant themselves under her Power and Government; Who with her, are also hereby included into this present League and Treaty of Peace, and are to keep and observe the same towards the said Queen in all things, as her Subjects, as well as towards the English.[24]

Here, Cockacoeske draws on her hereditary connection to the Powhatan Paramountcy to stake a claim for the leadership of a network of Nations. She strategically sought to re-create the strength that the Paramountcy held by creating alliances amongst Indigenous Peoples. Although Cockacoeske was ultimately unable to restore the

We All Live and Work Together," in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Stephanie N. Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015); and Stephanie Teves, *Defiant Indigeneity: The Politics of Hawaiian Performance* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

23 The author of this account, Englishman Thomas Mathew, was an eyewitness to events. See Force, 14–15.

24 "Treaty of Middle Plantation," in *Samuel Wiseman's Book of Record*, ed. Michael Leroy Oberg (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 134–41.

Paramountcy, she continued to govern for another decade. When she died in 1686, her niece, known as Betty, succeeded her as leader of the Pamunkey, maintaining the Nation's matrilineal governance structure.

Modern scholars have argued that the treaty Cockacoeske and other Indigenous leaders signed in 1677 (see figure 1) established "the legal backbone of the present-day relationship between the Pamunkey and Mattaponi tribes and the Virginia government."[25] Kristalyn Marie Shefveland writes that the Treaty "has been a cornerstone for Pamunkey and other Native American rights in Virginia over the last three centuries."[26] Haley Negrin points out that the Treaty was "part of the application that many Powhatan groups (including the Pamunkeys) used to gain federal recognition in 2015," referring to the long-fought efforts of the Pamunkey to be officially designated as a federally recognized tribe by the US government.[27] While the history of treaty-making is complex—signatories were often under undue pressure to sign treaties they could not read or were purposefully misled—Ojibwe/Dakota scholar Scott Richard Lyons warns against interpreting historical treaties as Indigenous concessions to colonial powers. Instead, he argues that treaties must also be seen as historical records of Indigenous agency, authorship, and ceremony.[28] The Treaty of 1677, then, is not only an early record of an Indigenous woman's writing in English, but it also offers an important counternarrative to the popular understanding that historical Indigenous women were absent from governance and politics, and further challenges colonial accounts of Indigenous women from the period as subservient colonial mediators, the very stereotypes Behn relies on in *The Widow Ranter*.

Behn's Theatricalization of Bacon's Rebellion

Many decades before her dramatization of Bacon's Rebellion, in the early 1660s, Behn lived in the English colony of Surinam in South

25 Ethan A. Schmidt, "Cockacoeske, Weroansqua of the Pamunkeys, and Indian Resistance in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *American Indian Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2012): 289.

26 Kristalyn Marie Shefveland, "Queen of the Pamunkeys," *Colonial Williamsburg*, 12 October 2012, https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/trend-tradition-magazine/trend-tradition-spring-2019/queen-of-the-pamunkeys/.

27 Negrin, 54–55.

28 Scott Richard Lyons, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 127.

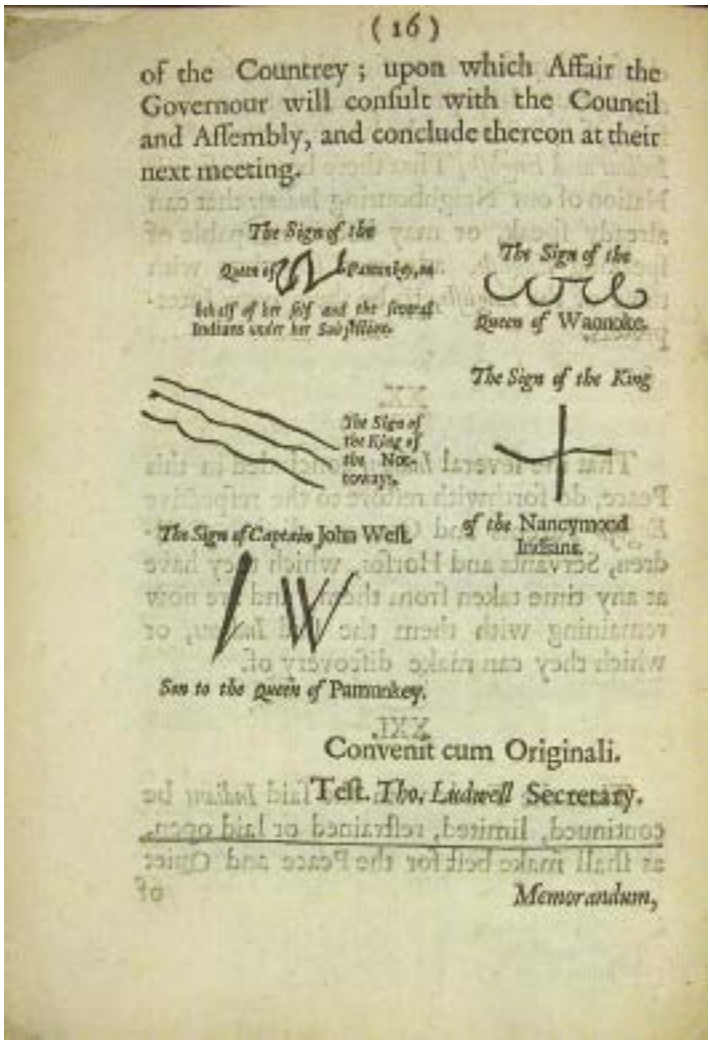

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Figure 1. Cockacoeske's mark. *Articles of Peace between the Most Serene and Mighty Prince Charles II. ... and Several Indian Kings and Queens*, &c. (London: John Bill, Christopher Barker, Thomas Newcomb, and Henry Hills, 1677), Special Collections Research Center, William & Mary Libraries. Reproduced by permission.

America.[29] The details of Behn's early life are notoriously mysterious, and it is unknown what exactly led to her travels to this part of the empire.

29 Todd, *Secret Life*, 35.

However, her experiences as a colonial woman are reflected in her best-known prose work, written late in her life, *Oroonoko* (1688), which features a semi-autobiographical English female narrator living in Surinam. Similarly, *The Widow Ranter*, written around the same time as *Oroonoko*, is also set in the "New World," in the English colony of Virginia. Behn's authoritative biographer Janet Todd has pointed out that Behn likely passed through Virginia during her journey in the Americas, which was connected to Suriname via a shipping route.[30]

In both *Oroonoko* and *The Widow Ranter,* the autobiographical female protagonists present striking first-hand accounts of life in the colonies from Behn's perspective. In *Oroonoko*, Behn appears to take the position of the female narrator of the tale. In *The Widow Ranter*, the titular character, like Behn herself, is a widow, financially independent, and has a reputation for being unchaste. Behn clearly drew on her personal experience as a professional woman writer in London and as an explorer in the Americas in writing these texts, providing modern scholars with rare insight into an Englishwoman's perspectives on the rapidly expanding British Empire, the transatlantic slave trade, and the colonialization of Indigenous peoples and lands. Behn's writing on these topics is noteworthy as there are relatively few first-hand accounts of English women living in the colonies in the seventeenth century, and because Behn demonstrates a surprising skepticism, sometimes even overt criticism, of England's imperial project. In analysing *The Widow Ranter*, it is clear that Behn's identity as an infamous woman writer and a colonial woman are inseparable. *The Widow Ranter* advances Behn's feminist vision for England through the utilization of racial and colonial hierarchies. She is critical of the violence perpetuated by English male colonists, sympathetic (if resigned) to Indigenous suffering at the hands of colonists, and ultimately hopeful for a future in the colonies in which English women hold more power than they do at home.

Behn's portrait of Bacon's Rebellion is heavily fictionalized as she weaves together comic and tragic plotlines and reimagines Bacon as a tragic hero. In the play, in an exact inverse of actual events, Bacon is portrayed as a friend to the Indigenous locals. He respects the Indian

30 Todd, *Secret Life*, 36.

King Cavarnio and is reluctant to engage in any violence against him, saying:

> BACON. ... War, sir, is not my business nor my pleasure: Nor was I bred in arms. My country's good has forced me to assume a soldier's life. And 'tis with much regret that I employ the first effects of it against my friends. Yet whilst I may—whilst this cessation lasts, I beg we may exchange those friendships, sir, we have so often paid in happier peace.
> KING. For your part, sir, you've been so noble that I repent the fatal difference that makes us meet in arms. Yet though I'm young, I'm sensible of injuries, and oft have heard my grandsire say that we were monarchs once of all this spacious world, till you—an unknown people landing here—distressed and ruined by destructive storms, abusing all our charitable hospitality, usurped our right and made your friends slaves.
> BACON. I will not justify the Ingratitude of my forefathers, but finding here my inheritance, I am resolved still to maintain it so.[31]

Behn's portrayal of Bacon as a diplomat interested in sharing the land in peace is a far cry from the man who sought to destroy the local Indigenous populations. Behn reframes Bacon's Rebellion as an honourable conflict between two gentlemen with legitimate claims to the same land. Additionally, Behn's Bacon is reluctant to harm Cavarnio because of his forbidden love for Cavarnio's beautiful wife, Semernia.

Behn's dramatization of the Indian Queen Semernia, whose title is unmistakably similar to Cockacoeske's in the English press—the Indian Queen of the Pamunkey—is mediated through European notions of genteel femininity. Unlike the fierce and forceful woman who appeared in front of Governor Berkeley's council in 1677 and decried colonial violence in front of a group of powerful men, Semernia is portrayed as passive, submissive, and as "timorous as a Dove by nature framed."[32] Hutner argues that in theatricalizing the Pamunkey matriarch, Behn "conflates the Pocahontas tale with the story of Cockacoeske."[33] In *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles* (1624) and in other writings, English Captain John

31 Aphra Behn, *The Widow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia*, ed. Adrienne L. Eastwood (1690; Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2022), 2.1.3–18. References are to this edition.

32 Behn, 2.1.122–23.

33 Hutner, 99.

Smith framed Pocahontas as the ideal Christian convert who rejected the savagery of her father and embraced English culture and identity. In reality, the young Mattaponi and Pamunkey woman had been used since girlhood as a political pawn by the first English settlers of Jamestown, including Smith. Numerous scholars have pointed out the many inaccuracies of Smith's account.[34] Yet, his narrative became widely popular for centuries to come. Like Smith's Pocahontas character, Behn's Semernia is depicted as an intermediary between the colonists and her tribe. She states, "I first desired this truce, myself proposing to be mediator."[35] Also like Pocahontas, Semernia's diplomatic position is linked to her romantic love for the white male colonizer. Semernia's impossible love for Bacon, the Englishman who seeks to take her people's land, causes her immense suffering, as she tells the audience:

> The more I gaze upon this English stranger, the more confusion struggles in my soul. Oft I have heard of love, and oft this gallant man (when peace had made him pay his idle visits) has told a thousand tales of dying maids. And ever when he spoke, my panting heart, with a prophetic fear in sighs replied, I shall fall such a victim to his eyes.[36]

As Behn redeems Bacon, she casts Semernia as a tragic heroine in the English theatrical tradition. In a show of femininity, virtue, and honour, she identifies her love for Bacon as a heart-wrenching impossibility because she is already married to the Indian King. Consequently, she predicts her own death at the hands of Bacon—a victim both to his love and, later in the play, to his violence. Semernia, then, becomes part of the mythology of the Indigenous woman as acquiescent to colonization, a myth that softens the violent truth *and* legitimizes a colonial future.

In the final acts of the play, Bacon is finally forced to attack Cavarnio and his men, when news arrives from a soldier that "the truce being ended, sir, the Indians grow so insolent as to attack us even in our camp, and have killed several of our men."[37] Bacon and Cavarnio

34 For an assessment of how Smith's account of Pocahontas differs from colonial documentation and tribal knowledge of Pocahontas, see Rountree, *Pocahontas's People*, 42–45.

35 Behn, 2.1.25–26.

36 Behn, 2.1.43–48.

37 Behn, 3.2.257–58.

fight and Bacon fatally wounds Cavarnio. Bacon calls for a doctor but, realizing Cavarnio has died, states that "like Ceasar I could weep over the hero I myself destroyed."[38] In another historically inaccurate detail loosely inspired by actual events, Semernia, like the real Cockacoeske, flees to the woods to hide during the uprising. Behn's Bacon then seeks out Semernia to save her, not to assassinate her; ironically, this fictional Bacon achieves the historical Bacon's aim when he mistakes Semernia for a warrior and kills her. In a theatrical act of Roman suicide, Bacon falls on his own sword, and a soldier states, "So fell the Roman Cassius by mistake—."[39] In this version of the Rebellion, Bacon is painted as a classical hero, and the colonists triumphantly defeat the Indigenous locals. By theatricalizing Bacon's life and death as a heroic tragedy—not unlike Jaffier's self-inflicted fate in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (1682) or Antony's suicide in John Dryden's *All for Love* (1677)—Behn rehabilitates Bacon's story and softens the terror and violence that his Rebellion caused. In turn, the Indigenous characters simply and conveniently vanish in a colonial fantasy of "displacement and replacement."[40] Thus, for Behn, depicting the reparations and treaty-making process that the living Cockacoeske negotiated following the Rebellion is unnecessary. In the play, there is no Indigenous Queen, or Indigenous characters at all, left to negotiate with. In the following section, I more closely examine the play's female protagonists, Semernia and her counterpart, the Widow Ranter, as a key site of Behn's conflation of feminist and colonial ideologies.

The Indian Queen and the English Widow

In contrast to the timid Semernia, Behn provides a more active and powerful female character in her comic plotline through the Widow Ranter, the white Englishwoman for whom the play is named. Ranter is an independent woman, unrefined and unapologetic; her name alludes to a Christian religious sect of the mid-seventeenth century

38 Behn, 4.2.64–65.

39 Behn, 5.4.37.

40 Sarah Eaton, "'A Well-Born Race': Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia* and the Place of Proximity," in *Indography: Writing the "Indian" in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 236. Eaton is applying Allan Lawson's theory of settlement.

that had a reputation for being debauched.[41] She rides in on a horse in Act 1 to visit her friend Chrisante and immediately requests a pipe and a drink, stating: "You know my humour, madam, I must smoke and drink in a morning, or I am mawkish all day."[42] We learn that Ranter was brought to Virginia as an indentured servant—a common practice to meet the labour needs of the colony at the time—and later married her employer, the elderly Colonel Ranter. The Englishman Friendly explains: "She served him half a year, and then he married her, and dying in a year more, left her worth fifty thousand pounds sterling, besides plate and jewels."[43] The rich widowed Ranter does not appear to begrudge her late husband, telling her friend, he "died in good time too and left me young enough to spend this fifty thousand pound in better company. Rest his soul for that too."[44] These reminders of Ranter's past servitude and lack of autonomy clearly shape her characterization as a non-conforming woman.

Like many of Behn's comic heroines, questions of female consent, desire, and liberation encircle Ranter. In Behn's most popular play, *The Rover*, for example, Helena, like Ranter, seeks love, sex, and adventure at a local masquerade. Importantly, she also seeks her substantial inheritance, which her brother, Don Pedro, hopes to keep by sending her to a nunnery where she cannot marry. Helena is equally concerned for the fate of her sister, Florinda, who loves the English Colonel Belville, but is promised to the old Don Vincentio, who made his fortune, like Colonel Ranter, in the slave trade. Criticizing the sexual violence within arranged marriages, Helena exclaims: "this man you must kiss, nay you must kiss none but him too — and nuzzle thro' his Beard to find his Lips — and this you must submit

41 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a Ranter was "a member of a group of religious radicals of the early 1650s, who argued for complete reliance on the inspiration of God's spirit, rejecting religious authority and formal worship, denied the reality of sin and the physical existence of heaven and hell, and gained a reputation for ostentatiously promiscuous, drunken, or blasphemous behavior." *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "ranter (n.)," March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5751468546.

42 Behn, 1.3.34–35.

43 Behn, 1.1.88–91.

44 Behn, 1.3.51–53.

to for threescore Years."[45] While Florinda escapes being married to the old Don Vincentio and Helena finds a man to love and to secure her inheritance, in *The Widow Ranter* Behn imagines the alternative. Ranter does not have the means or status to refuse her master's proposal of marriage, and her statement that she now spends her time in better company suggests that this was no love match when he was alive. While the marriage leaves Ranter with a fortune, the shadow of her past motivates her desire for a more egalitarian match with a man who meets her emotional and sexual needs, the dashing Lieutenant Daring—although, in an inversion of traditional courtship and a conventional spin for Behn, *she* seeks to woo *him*.

Comparing Ranter and Semernia as both parallels *and* foils for one another is possible. Semernia is a local Indigenous woman, while Ranter is an English colonial woman; Semernia is noble, while Ranter is working class; Semernia's plotline is tragic, while Ranter's is comical. The contrasting nature of Semernia and Ranter is made most explicit in the final two acts of the play, when both characters cross-dress as men, a common technique on the Restoration stage and a favourite of Behn's. Ranter and her maid, Jenny, dress up as a gentleman and his servant as part of a rescue mission to save Chrisante, who has been taken by a group of rebels, including Ranter's beloved Lieutenant Daring:

RANTER. ... Now I'll tell thee—my damned mad fellow Daring, who has my heart and soul—loves Chrisante, has stolen her, and carried her away to his tents. She hates him, while I am dying for him.
JENNY. Dying, madam! I never saw you melancholy.
RANTER. Pox on't, no; why should I sigh and whine, and make myself an Ass, and him conceited, no, instead of snivelling I'm resolved—
JENNY. What, madam?
RANTER. Gad, to beat the rascal and bring off Chrisante.
JENNY. Beat him, madam? What, a woman beat a lieutenant general?
RANTER. Hang 'em. ... I'll take care to make it as comical a duel as the best of them. As much in love as I am, I do not intend to die its Martyr.[46]

In this passage, Ranter is directly contrasted with Semernia as she refuses to pine for her beloved's affection as Semernia pines for

45 Aphra Behn, "The Rover, or The Banished Cavaliers," in *The Rover and Other Plays*, ed. Jane Spencer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.1.120–22.
46 Behn, *Widow Ranter*, 4.2.169–89.

Bacon. She is also explicit that she will not die for love, foreshadowing and contrasting Semernia's death by Bacon's sword in the following scene.

When Semernia next appears, she, like Ranter, is dressed as a man "*with a bow in her hand, and quiver at her back.*"[47] Unlike Ranter, however, she is not seeking to fight, defend, or protect but to flee Bacon, saying, "Ah, whither shall I fly? I have no Amazonian fire about me—all my artillery is sighs and tears."[48] She both loves Bacon and fears him, saying, "Alas, 'tis better we should perish here, than stay to expect the violence of his passion, to which, my heart's too sensibly inclined"—disturbingly suggesting that she both resists and invites his sexual violence.[49] Anaria, her companion, agrees that "what he cannot gain by soft submission, force will at last o'ercome."[50] In this reference to sexual violence, Behn avoids creating a complete binary between Semernia and Ranter, connecting their situations in terms of gender oppression. Both women have been in loveless marriages, Ranter to the old Colonel, and Semernia to Cavarnio; both of their lives have been upended by male violence; both are now widowed and without the protection of a husband; and both are exposed to the risk of sexual violence. By blending the tragic and comic plotlines of these two characters, Behn resists the expected depiction of the English female protagonist as admirable and the Indigenous female protagonist as promiscuous. Indeed, as a tragic heroine of the time, Semernia is the more sympathetic character. She is honourable, feminine, and demure. Ranter, by comparison, is morally degenerate, luxuriating in the spoils of colonial life: rum and tobacco. Yet, within her comic narrative, Ranter is also immensely charming. She is a model of Behn's preferred female character: she has her own money, does what she likes, and loves whom she chooses. The fact that neither woman is free from English male violence provides a clear indictment of women's experiences under patriarchy that are familiar to Behn's works while also emphasizing Behn's contradictory treatment of colonialism.

Despite Behn's inconsistencies, in the end, Semernia's loss is Ranter's gain, and the play ends in Ranter's favour. When Semernia dies

47 Behn, 5.3.1–2.
48 Behn, 5.3.35–36.
49 Behn, 5.3.9–11.
50 Behn, 5.3.15–16.

by Bacon's sword, she frames her death as a welcome event, saying, "Thou'st saved my honour and hast given me death," adding, "Now I may love you without infamy and please my dying heart by gazing on you."[51] Her death thus marks a dual fantasy of the Indian princess. Not only does she love the male colonizer, but she welcomes his destruction of her and her people.[52] In turn, Ranter succeeds in securing Daring, solidifying her upward mobility and social standing in the colony. The flourishing and success of the white woman is only possible because of the death of the Indigenous woman. As Ula Lukszo Klein argues of Semernia's and Ranter's cross-dressing,

> the play posits a new kind of royal subject in the British colonies: that of the transgender citizen, who embodies masculine strength and courage with the feminine ability to reproduce once the local Powhatan Indigenous community—represented in the play as a racial double—is eliminated.[53]

Indeed, the coupling of four sets of English characters—Ranter and Daring, Friendly and Chrisante, Hazard and Madam Surelove, and Parson Dunce and Mrs. Flirt—points to a flourishing future for the colonists. The rebels who fought for Bacon are quickly absolved by the Deputy Governor Wellman when Daring says, "Can you forgive us, sir, our disobedience?" and Wellman responds: "Your offering peace while yet you might command it has made such kind impressions on us, that now you may command your propositions. Your pardons are all sealed and new commissions."[54]

In line with Behn's imperial feminist politics, the ending of the play highlights the importance of English women as active participants in the future of the colony. At the beginning of the play, Behn presented a colony mismanaged by men; by the end, she proposes an alternative in which the colony can thrive because of the increased participation of strong, opinionated women like Ranter. This vision

51 Behn, 5.3.56–57, 59–60.

52 Acoose, 34.

53 Ula Lukszo Klein, "Transgender Citizenship and Settler Colonialism in Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter*," in *Unsettling Sexuality: Queer Horizons in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Jeremy Chow and Shelby Johnson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2025), 21.

54 Behn, 5.5.18–21.

of an English colonial future is made possible only through the disappearance of Semernia and other Indigenous characters.

The Legacy of the Indian Princess on Stage

Although *The Widow Ranter* was not a commercial success, it is a nascent example of the Indian princess archetype that became immensely popular over the following centuries on English stages in Europe and North America. Beginning in the early seventeenth century and coinciding with England's imperial growth, theatre-makers became interested in displaying English encounters with Indigenous lands and peoples. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, performed in 1611, shortly after the 1607 establishment of the English colony of Jamestown, Virginia is perhaps the most famous example.[55] During the Restoration, John Dryden and William Davenant adapted *The Tempest* as *The Enchanted Castle*, solidifying the play's popularity for the following century and entertaining audiences with performances of colonial–Indigenous encounters. Dryden's popular plays *The Indian Queen* (1664), written in collaboration with Sir Robert Howard, and *The Indian Emperour* (1665), set in Peru and Mexico during the early years of Spanish invasion, further helped popularize the New World genre, including noble savage and Indian princess characters.

Behn contributed to Dryden's productions of the New World by bringing Indigenous belongings back from her travels in Surinam to be used in stage productions, writing in *Oroonoko*:

> We [the colonists] trade for feathers, which they [the Indigenous Peoples] order into all shapes, make themselves little short habits of 'em, and glorious wreaths for their heads, necks, arms and legs, whose tinctures are unconceivable. I had a set of these presented to me, and I gave 'em to the King's Theatre, and it was the dress of the Indian Queen, infinitely admir'd by persons of quality; and was unimitable.[56]

Margaret Ferguson suggests that Behn included this passage in *Oroonoko* as a means of advertising her own forthcoming "Indian Queen"

55 Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 40.

56 Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, ed. Tiffany Potter (1688; Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2020), 9.

Figure 2. W. Vincent, *The Indian Queen*, 1690. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Reproduced by permission.

play, *The Widow Ranter*.[57] The feathers are also displayed in the following engraving of celebrity actress Anne Bracegirdle in the role of Semernia (see figure 2).

57 Margaret Ferguson, "Feathers and Flies: Aphra Behn and the Seventeenth-Century Trade in Exotica," in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margareta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 255.

In this illustration, the white celebrity actress Bracegirdle has appropriated the costume of the Indian Queen in an echo of Ranter's usurpation of Semernia in the play. Black cherubs hold the train of Semernia's dress in a reminder of the colony's rapidly shifting racial, class, and gender hierarchies, including the expansion of enslaved labour in the colony. Bracegirdle's feathers signal the "Indian" of the New World, and the feathers were no doubt used for the same purpose in numerous productions. Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor explains that the "Indian" is a "colonial enactment" through which "dominance is sustained," and Yankton Dakota scholar Philip Deloria has established that "playing Indian" is a powerful mode of colonial performance: "the donning of Indian clothes moved ideas from brains to bodies."[58] Building on these ideas, Choctaw scholar Bethany Hughes argues that while blackface performance—which we see in the depiction of the cherubs holding Bracegirdle's skirt—exists to "perpetuate the oppression and subservience" of Black people, redface "perpetuate[s] the disappearance" of Indigenous peoples.[59] Behn's feathers, repurposed as a prop to depict the Stage Indian, is indicative of the kind of colonial role the English theatre would play over the coming centuries, stripping Indigenous peoples and lands of cultural specificity and sovereignty, and performing them, as Joesph Roach describes, as "exotic tokens of otherness."[60] The consequences of such performances continue to have a devastating impact on Indigenous life in North America.

Although generally not recognized as a canonical contribution to the theatre of the New World, *The Widow Ranter* contributed to the development of the Indian princess character that would be performed over the following centuries in hundreds of productions. Behn's appropriation of Cockacoeske's story—and the erasure of her resistance to English colonialism—helped leverage a vision of white settler women's liberation on foreign shores. Over the centuries, white American women continued to appropriate Indigenous

58 Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 184; Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 11.

59 Bethany Hughes, *Redface: Race, Performance, and Indigeneity* (New York: New York University Press, 2024), 6.

60 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 125.

women's stories for their own imperial feminist project. As Jawad Syed and Faiza Ali explain, in various historical colonial contexts, "by taking on the mission of relieving the patriarchal plight of women in the colonies, white women acted as enlightened agents to assert their own political rights and agency."[61]

Today, dozens of professional Indigenous playwrights, performers, and directors are refuting the Indian princess archetype, re-matriating their ancestors' stories, and using their own voices on stages and screens. These artists present a different take on the Indian princess, one which acknowledges the character as a fundamental feature of English theatre history and colonialism in North America that must be exposed and excised in order for Indigenous women's truth, stories, and healing to thrive. Recovering Cockacoeske from *The Widow Ranter*, and other Indigenous women's stories from the annals of English theatre history, is an important step toward dismantling the Indian princess and making space on the stage for Indigenous theatre artists today.

61 Jawad Syed and Faiza Ali, "The White Woman's Burden: From Colonial Civilization to Third World Development," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2011): 352, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.560473.