

Aphra Behn (1640-1689)*
by Janet Todd

Aphra Behn was England's first major professional woman writer. Living in the Restoration, she wrote at least nineteen plays, some good, some indifferent, but all fast paced and theatrical. She also authored one of the earliest English novels, *Love-letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684-1687), as well as short stories, several volumes of poems and two scientific translations from French. She knew and wrote for Nell Gwyn, John Dryden, the Earl of Rochester and the Duke of York and was both famous and notorious in her time. To some she was 'the Ingenious Mrs Behn' and to others 'a lewd harlot'. She was largely forgotten in later centuries, but when she was remembered, she evoked extreme responses.

Virginia Woolf wanted flowers to fall on her grave for having given women the right to speak their minds, while eminent Victorian ladies and gentlemen dismissed her as disgraceful and vile. Now, much sustained interest is brewing in her and her works, which are being reprinted in paperback. My biography, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (1996), has just appeared and her plays are being performed, including *The Second Part of the Rover*, staged this year in England for the first time since 1681. In the last decade, Behn has been canonized as the 'First Lady of Cultural Studies,' because of her overwhelming interest in race, gender and class. Although the Old Guard of English Literature grumbles at the phenomenon, believing that she is part of the debasement of the subject, she is, I suspect and hope, here to stay.

Despite her new status, attested to by the many editions of her works now on the market, Aphra Behn is an unlikely subject of veneration. Politically, she was a Tory royalist who believed the common people - or rabble as she usually termed them - should be controlled by a strong royal whip. Without it they would become anarchic and tyrannical - the tool of selfish hypocrites who wanted to use the law to stifle desire and legislate human behaviour. As her most famous short story, *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (1688) showed, she deplored slavery when practised on a noble nature (whether black, brown or white), but found it quite natural when enforced by such noble natures on the bestial multitude. A libertarian in conduct, believing that a person's morality, including sexual, was a private matter, Behn despised family values and refused to make a connection between a father as the head of a family and a king as the head of a kingdom. Believing that the single tie between a hereditary ruler and his subjects allowed all other freedoms between lesser people, she accepted that anything was permissible except treason.

If her views are clear, her private life is murky. Secretive about her past, Aphra Behn saw to it that little was available to the public. Biographers can make of her what they will: in the 1970s, Maureen Duffy created a portrait of a lower middle-class woman struggling to gain entry into more affluent and classier circles, while Angeline Goreau made her an altogether perkier, more dashing feminist. Biographers in the money-and-image-conscious 1990s are now writing of her as a needier writer who wrote above all for money; she fashionably (yet idiosyncratically) followed trends, while negotiating the tricky misogynist sexuality of the Restoration in a variety of witty ways.

Aphra Behn was probably born around 1640 in Canterbury during the uneasy years of the English Civil War. She was the daughter of a barber and a wet-nurse, though she undoubtedly revised her background when she began meeting dukes and earls. In the 1660s, after the Restoration, she made the extraordinary voyage to Surinam in South America, one of England's new sugar colonies, possibly with her father, and possibly on her own secret business. It is likely that she was on a secret endeavour, since we find her, a few years later during the Anglo-Dutch War, spying in Antwerp and liaising with a dangerous and double-dealing man she first encountered in Surinam. In between the two journeys, she became Mrs. Behn and probably the widow Behn; about Mr. Behn little is known - he was probably a minor merchant and slaver, with few financial resources since Aphra Behn seemed never to have private money. The miserable experience of mounting debt and disappointment suffered in Antwerp is chronicled in Behn's letters back to Whitehall. Those same experiences are also chronicled in the letters of other spies; sarcastically they commented on the poor 'shee-spy' who had managed to lodge herself in a house bristling with Dutch agents. Ship-wrecked back onto English soil, Behn faced prison for the debts incurred on her mission. She somehow surmounted the threat, and at that point determined to make her living on the stage, not as an actress, newly allowed into the Restoration theatre, but as something altogether more extraordinary - a playwright. Inevitably her aim put her before the public, and whatever per private life may have been, opened her to identification with women in the oldest profession. As a detractor noted,

.... Punk and Poetess agree so Pat
You cannot well be This and not be That.

Soon, play after play was appearing on the boards and Aphra Behn became part of the louche and raffish world of the theatre, an anteroom of the court that, under the libidinous Charles II, had grown decidedly corrupt. Courtiers were the most influential patrons of the theatre and it made financial sense to please them. They could be loud in displeasure and prevent a playwright from receiving his or her dues - the third night's profits. Broadly royalist already, Aphra Behn was not especially political in her early writing years, perhaps because of her experiences in Antwerp. However, as the country succumbed to the hysteria of the Popish Plot and she came to share a widespread fear of another Puritan takeover, she used more propaganda in her plays, loudly mocking the middle classes who wanted to enforce 'good' behaviour on others while slyly taking their own pleasures. In plays from *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678) to *The Luckey Chance* (1687), she satirized merchants who made individuals into a commodity and poured scorn on Whigs who preached a dangerous doctrine of selfish democratic rights, which destabilized a realm with petty egoisms. But it was not her political views that shocked the shockable; for, while she was growing more political, she was also growing more open in the area that had always been taboo for women and would soon be so again: the sexual. On the stage in *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678) and *The City-Heiress* (1687) Aphra Behn provided scenes in which men and women rose unconcernedly from adulterous beds, and a heroine copulated with impunity with her step-daughter's young man. Although always couched in decorous language, per poetry was similarly risqué. It discussed such topics as a woman's need for foreplay and more than once touched on the sensitive subject of

impotence, as in her famous translation, *The Disappointment* (1684) which describes the woman's disappointment at a failure to achieve orgasm and ends with the man railing at her for his own lack:

*He curs's his Birth, his Fate, his Stars;
But more than Shepherdess's Charms,
Whose soft bewitching Influence,
Had Damn'd him to the Hell of Impotence.*

The sexual openness, conventional for men in the frank circles in which Behn was moving, was associated by lampooners and critics with her most famous and only documented love affair, with John Hoyle. He was a learned, bullying man who would, a few years on, be tried for sodomy and killed after a tavern brawl. His masculine allure, alternating with taciturnity, tenderness and criticism, fascinated Behn, and his image no doubt entered a good number of her works, including the light and bustling *The Rover* (1677) and the dark tragedy *Abdelazer* (1677) which includes one of her most perfect lyrics of obsessive love, 'Love Armd.' Behn was probably kept by Hoyle for a short period when one of her plays flopped, but on the whole it was a relationship that tried for equality between man and woman. As such, it failed in the end as 'Love Armd' suggests it would, for Behn realized that, although the sexes were intellectually equal, they were far from culturally so. Perhaps, too, neither could satisfy the other, for Behn, like Hoyle, seems to have needed emotional ties, and possibly sexual, with her own sex. Gender for her was not fixed but fluid - almost a choice - like clothes to be put on at will. She was attracted to the various and the androgynous - to women dressed to become pretty boys, to men with the softness of girls, and even to indeterminate beings with signs of both sexes and an essential secrecy, as caught in a love song to 'the fair Clarinda' who is both 'lovely Maid' and 'Charming Youth.' Marriage could not be a final answer to the complicated game of sex, and her linked plays, *The Rover* and *The Second Part of the Rover* (1681), make the point clearly. Where one ends in reluctant marriage for the rake, the next begins with his relief at his new wife's death, and closes with a free relationship between a libertine and a whore that can never become marriage. The rake figure that so fascinated Behn in these two plays was a conventional cavalier character that flattered the watching courtiers, and took something from a man she much admired as court wit and poet, the Earl of Rochester, but to his insouciance, wit and verbal power, she added the comic qualities of drunkenness, dirt and ineptness. Even with modifications, however, she did not make the mistake of taming such a man, believing after her time with Jack Hoyle, that male temperament could not easily be changed by any woman.

In Behn's final years works poured from her pen - plays, poems, fictions, and translations. In them she investigated more fully the life of an independent, sexual woman making her way with her wits. In the long novel, *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1684-87), she asks a question, foreshadowed in many of her plays: is it possible to be a female rake, a woman libertine? Her answer is a qualified 'no.' A woman may pursue a free and hedonistic life inside or outside marriage but she will pay for it with social censure. At the end of this novel the two aristocratic characters

who had started out as illicit lovers are both roving libertines. The man, however, is in the centre of the Court; the woman has become a wandering whore.

Although she was fascinated throughout her last years by the perversities and difficulties of female sexuality, Behn's prime subject remained state politics. Ever since he had admired *The Rover*, Behn had become a firm supporter of the Duke of York and she continued her loyalty during his short reign as James II, when he managed to upset most of his natural allies with his favouring of Roman Catholics and his tolerance for a religion heartily disliked by the Protestant majority. Skeptical in religious matters, accused of atheism by some, Behn cannot much have cared for James's proselytizing efforts, but her affection for him remained and she looked on with horror as she saw him tottering on his throne, possibly heading towards the ghastly fate of his father, Charles I, executed in 1649. Although they look back to Behn's time in the American colonies and raise questions of slavery and indentured service, both *Oroonoko* and her (probably) last play *The Widdow Ranter* (1689) also clearly embody her fears for James II, a sincere man like the slave prince Oroonoko and the rebel Bacon caught in the deceit of base men and traitors. *Oroonoko* ends with the 'frightful Spectacles of a mangl'd King' in a colony about to fall to the Dutch. England too she feared, might mangle its king and fall to the Dutch.

Although ailing and writing with difficulty, Behn must have been working right up to her death in 1689, a few days after the coronation of the hated Dutchman William III, who, overthrowing his uncle James II, ended the Restoration which had been her subject and her world. She had hymned the men and women who made the court of Charles II an experiment in living without conventional Christian moralities, and she had taken part in the excitement of skepticism that fuelled the Royal Society on the one hand and challenged all religious sects and their coercive codes on the other. Yet, despite its surface glamour and glitter, most of Behn's life was spent in the drudgery of writing and keeping creditors at bay - almost all her extant letters concern money and her pressing need for it. Although she wrote of and to aristocrats, her own social lot was always a mixture of shame and fame. Her class and sex kept her an outsider from circles such as the court and some aristocratic coteries, which she dearly wanted to penetrate. As she came nearer to death, savoured her exclusion and experienced the failure of her political hopes, her desire for literary fame burned brighter. Once she had thought her sort of writing of no great importance, but towards the end of her life, she intensely desired immortality for 'her masculine Part the Poet,' as she put it in her defence of the last original play performed in her lifetime, *The Luckey Chance* (1686). Indeed in a late translation of Cowley she broke into the verse to make this personal plea to the nymph, transformed into a laurel, the emblem of poetic prowess:

*Let me with Sappho and Orinda be
Oh ever sacred Nymph, adorn'd by thee;
And give my Verses Immortality.*

She would have liked her plays to be performed again after a silence of three centuries. A pity she cannot receive the third night's fee.

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Bibliography

Plays (in order of date of first production)

The Forc'd Marriage, or the Jealous Bridegroom (1671)

The Amorous Prince (1671)

The Dutch Lover (1673)

Abdelazer (1676)

The Town Fopp (1676)

The Rover: or, The Banish'd Cavaliers (1677)

The Debauchee (1677)

Sir Patient Fancy (1678)

The Feign'd Curtizans (1679)

The Revenge (1680)

The Rover Part II (1681)

The False Count (1682)

The Roundheads (1682)

The City-Heiress: or, Sir Timothy Treat-all (1682)

The Young King (1683)

The Luckey Chance (1687)

The Emperor of the Moon: A Farce (1687)

Posthumous plays

The Widdow Ranter (1690)

The Younger Brother (1696)

Poetry (select)

Poems Upon Several Occasions: With a Voyage to the Island of Love (London: R. and J. Tonson, 1684)

To the Most Illustrious Prince Charles Duke of Albermarle (London: John Newton, 1687)

Lycidus: or the Lover in Fashion ... Together with a Miscellany of New Poems by Several Hands (London: Joseph Knight, 1688)

The Land of Love. A Poem (London: H. Meere and A. Bettesworth, 1717)

Prose

Love-Letters between a Noble-man and his Sister (London: Randall Taylor, 1684)