

Introduction

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Aphra Behn has been constructed and quickly reconstructed, read and reread in a far shorter space of time than any other major writer – for Behn *is* a major writer, although her status has only recently become clear. That clarity has partly been due to the cultural movements of the present, just as the eclipse of her reputation depended on cultural shifts. Race has become the most topical issue in literary studies and it has necessarily brought into focus one of the few texts that deals, if trickily, with the subject of race: *Oroonoko or the Royal Slave*.

But if Behn was not much acknowledged before present preoccupations, she was none the less a considerable writer in her time. In the 1670s and 1680s she was second only to Dryden in dramatic output and she was courted as a political poet of some stature. In addition she had claim to writing the earliest, or one of the earliest, novels: *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*. Her works are topical and political, as fitted with the times in which she wrote, but they also allow the present age to apply to them criticism of great subtlety and complexity, for they are open to ironies and ambiguities now demanded of canonized literature.

Her extraordinary breadth and diversity could hardly be disputed. And yet between the Restoration and the twentieth century Aphra Behn was almost invariably denigrated: the concept of gendered literature held sway, and, with her conventional immodesty, she fell foul of the new taste. Where she had hobnobbed with Dryden, Rochester and Otway and been patronized by James II and the Duke of Norfolk, she was now vilified as unwomanly by Richardson, Fielding and Pope. The combination in her work of much condemned Restoration excess and femaleness ensured that she became a bye-word for lewdness and dissipation.

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As Behn lacked sexual modesty she also sinned against the standard of feminine intellectual modesty. A woman writer of the eighteenth century did not go before the public without proper apology and submission. Behn, with her ringing declaration that she was not writing only for a third night and that she wanted fame, just like the men, was hardly a suitable mother for an increasingly respectable tradition of women's writing. Later when Restoration naughtiness could no longer shock the sophisticated reader, another style of thinking was in fashion, demanding that literature transcend its moment and not grub in the dirt of state and gender politics. Curiously enough her male colleagues escaped censure on this score, and Rochester and Dryden were valued anew with no mention of the political setting of Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, for example, or the fact that he was a man.

The seeds of censure on account of her sex had of course been sewn in her time. It seemed not to matter when choosing and staging a play what sex the author displayed. But she herself was very much aware of it and made something of it when, like most other playwrights, she sold herself in prefaces and prologues as an interesting new or, later, an interesting experienced *woman* writer. But she had less control over how others commented on her sex. The Earl of Rochester, so much admired by Behn, could still write, 'That whore is scarce a more reproachful name / Then poetesse', and the satirist Robert Gould, thinking particularly of Behn, could declare that '*Punk* and *Poetesse* agree so pat. / You cannot well be *This* and not be *That*.' Wycherley could compare her getting of plays to the begetting of bastards, while after her death Pope in his *Epistle to Augustus* imagined, 'The stage how loosely does Astrea tread, / Who fairly puts all characters to bed!' Surely worse could have been said of Wycherley but he was always 'manly' Wycherley. Samuel Johnson, too, chose to attack Behn's style of eulogy in her dedication to Nell Gwyn, implying that it was worse even than that of the similarly eulogistic but by now canonized John Dryden.

These overtly sexist comments were all in many ways comic enough and she herself had a nasty line in abuse of her fellow poets and critics, as *To Poet Bavius*, the still disputed 'On Mr Dryden, Renegade', and the preface to *The Dutch Lover* testify. But the mixture of denunciation and

defamation that began with Richard Steele in the eighteenth century and was fanned by the poems and prose printed by Tom Brown in *The Muses Mercury* in 1707 and *Familiar Letters* in 1718, accompanied by dark hints that the verses had been ‘reduc’d to bring them within the Rules of Decency’, was more devastating. Not all female opinion followed this critical line: if the *Tatler* disapproved, the contemporary *Female Tatler*, written by the fictional Mrs Crackenthorpe (possibly in some part a creation of Delarivier Manley), did not and it classed Aphra Behn with the much admired and respectable Katherine Philips, ‘the Matchless Orinda’ and the translator and learned lady, Anne Dacier. But the overall cultural tendency to sully her reputation was clear.

Following the growing apprehension of woman as all feeling and authenticity, subject matter could not easily be separated from female experience, and the widow Behn, about whose sex life we know almost nothing for sure, was condemned as hopelessly sexy. The emphasis on the gendered pen made certain kinds of expression not only improper but almost impossible for a woman – the woman who *had* so expressed herself had forfeited her claim to membership of the ‘Fair Sex’ while she could not associate herself with the other. By the nineteenth century the attacks had intensified and there was no voice of man or woman that could easily be used to defend a woman who was now seen, not as a combination of manly strength and feminine grace as her contemporary eulogists described her, but as unfeminine and monstrous. The result was that apology prefaced the few presentations of her work. Only *Oroonoko*, rewritten, emptied of political comment and filled with humanitarian sentiment and sentimentality, existed in a special space – as some might argue it does today.

Why has the interest been so late? Partly no doubt because of Behn’s resistances and later aesthetic practices. Feminist criticism took time to embrace the concept of multiple voices, of playful positions and subversive rhetoric. Now it perhaps faces a danger in finding Behn too much to its taste. For Aphra Behn responds to the concept of the subject dispersed and plays with a masculinizing desire so well that she may seem to become too pliant to our theories. She may display too adroitly the fragmentary ideological conditions of her production and be too neat an exponent of

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the discursive crisis of construction of state, sex and nature. It is to this danger that several of the essays in this volume respond by foregrounding the very specific and raw historical texture of her writings and by refusing patterns that appear too orderly and too indulgent to contemporary taste and desire. The late seventeenth century was as complex as any other time and more so than we from the present can ever imagine.

The essays in the volume have been positioned according to the genre or subject they mainly concern, with the biographical ones coming at the end. There are many other divisions that could have been followed, one based on primary method of criticism for example, and, arguably, the 'life' essays could form part of the fiction section since Behn's life may be her biggest fiction. There is an apprehension that biographical studies of Behn have predominated until now. In fact the interest has again been primarily in *Oroonoko* and its putative relationship with its author's life. Archival historical studies of the kind Jane Jones and Mary Ann O'Donnell follow are in fact rather rare within Behn studies.

Aphra Behn is suitably commemorated in a collection or miscellany of essays. She herself was collaborative, especially in her plays and poetry, and a large portion of her output was arrangement and modification of other people's work. Her poems often give the appearance of being written within literary competitions or dashed off in the midst of conversation and dispute. According to the theatre critic Gerard Langbaine and some other of her contemporaries, her plays were plagiarized, but a kinder age sees them as adaptations and rewritings, and many were no doubt further modified by actors and managers in rehearsals. Behn is never a lone writer and even *Oroonoko* was, so it was alleged, written in a room full of talking people after many rehearsals as oral narrative.

Although modern Behn criticism has no long life, it has been long enough for various myths to grow up with the help of those who decontextualize one or two texts such as *Oroonoko* and *The Rover*. One of these myths according to Susan J. Owen in 'Sexual politics and party politics in Behn's drama, 1678–83' is that Behn was a Tory because she was a feminist and that Toryism offered a liberating space to women which was closed with the departure of the last Stuart king, James II. Owen shows the

specific party political nature of Behn's plays during the Exclusion Crisis and the Popish Plot and reveals how they change in their feminist components according to political needs as Behn's tone and slant respond to precise political pressure. *The Revenge* and *The Feign'd Curtizans*, staged early in the Crisis, have a large component of royalist satire of Whigs and their manic fear of popery; in them the satire coexists with Behn's brand of feminism which tends to destabilize male assumptions and stereotypes of women. In *The Young King*, however, where Behn is more engaged in the political subject of Exclusion, she appears to imply a rare criticism of the royal brothers, Charles and James, and of their stunted education in exile. Here feminism must give way to political aim, and sexuality and gender stereotypes be used to convey a clear and single message: that exclusion is inappropriate. Similar contrasts occur in *The Second Part of The Rover* placed beside *The Roundheads*, and *The City-Heiress*. All three plays appear to oppose exciting royalist rakes to hypocritical Puritans; none the less the first, probably staged at a moment of Whig ascendancy, allows a feminist questioning of the cavalier and courtly libertine ethos where the other two, more useful as strict Tory drama, either associate royalism firmly with virtue, as in *The Roundheads*, or with sympathetically depicted sexual freedom, as in *The City-Heiress*.

In the same mode as Owen, Alison Shell in 'Popish Plots: *The Feign'd Curtizans* in context' discusses religion, noting Behn's pro-Catholic stance in these years of turmoil and the difficulty of defining 'Catholic' in the seventeenth century since it covers so wide a range of options: from formal Roman Catholicism to crypto-Catholicism. The plots of Behn's plays and novels problematize representation and misrepresentation and they may comment on the nature of the state plot, the Popish Plot. Theatrical plots and state plots come together in the 'plotting Age' as Catholic women stage plots in *The Feign'd Curtizans* where Behn appears to champion Roman Catholicism which, unlike in many other loyalist plays of the time, she does not correct with Anglicanism. The Catholic women's plotting is analogous to the Popish Plot in which, in Behn's view, Catholics are as innocent as her heroines. The play trivializes the great state Plot by this analogy and at the same time highlights the horror of the deaths it caused. The implication for Behn may be that she had Catholic

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leanings or that, as a freethinker, she flirted with Catholicism as something outlawed and scandalous.

Following on from Shell's discussion, Ros Ballaster's 'Fiction feigning femininity: false counts and pageant kings in Aphra Behn's Popish Plot writings' takes 'The Court of the King of Bantam' and *The False Count* as examples of Behn's later response to the Popish Plot and its sham conspiracies. In both these works there are plots, and in both the central male character aspires to greatness and is fooled by other men while he involves himself with women. Ballaster describes the widespread association of plot with female sexuality, a connection made again in the case of the Meal Tub Plot involving the Roman Catholic midwife, Elizabeth Cellier, depicted as a Catholic seducer. Where Behn's dramatic plots remain comic, however, the Popish Plot, pushed too far – as her plots are not – is certainly tragedy.

If some criticism of Behn has suffered from lack of specific historical reference, even more so has her drama suffered from wholesale ignorance of the theatre for which she wrote. In her essay 'More for seeing than hearing: Behn and the use of theatre', Dawn Lewcock argues for the professionalism of Behn as a playwright who well understood the potential of the scenic stage, introduced into the public theatre at the Restoration. She was always a visual playwright, Lewcock asserts, but she does not in her earliest plays have her later consummate comprehension of all the possibilities of the scenic stage. More than any other dramatist of the time, Behn appreciates the visual effects of performance and uses them to affect the perceptions of the audience and, when necessary, change their understanding of her themes and plots. An important new Restoration device was the discovery or disclosure scene which Behn used in play after play, whether comedy or tragedy, to emphasize her overriding themes of political and sexual deception and dissimulation. The device allows her to make the audience misunderstand in anticipation of a later enlightenment. Like Owen, Shell and Ballaster, Lewcock stresses the analogy between the Popish Plot, in which Behn along with many at court did not believe, and the multiple plots of *The Feign'd Curtizans* including its ridiculous fake plots.

Jane Spencer in '*The Rover* and the eighteenth century' follows the

fate of Behn's most successful play through succeeding decades. Through the history of its adaptations and reception she reveals how Behn's work continued to entertain audiences at a time when the author's actual reputation had tumbled from what it had been in the Restoration and for some years after her death. The early eighteenth-century changes to *The Rover* reveal a worry over bawdy elements, especially in the treatment of the sexual threat of Blunt and in the bold speeches of the heroine Hellena. In later revisions Willmore becomes less of the mocked libertine and more of the heroic and reformed rake.

Paul Salzman's 'Aphra Behn: poetry and masquerade' opens the section mainly concerning Behn's poetry. He takes her foray into intelligence in the 1660s as a starting point for a study of her staging of her poetry, which he considers exists in a context of male work and misogynist forms. Using current theory on femininity and masquerade, he finds Behn unsettling the conventions of the Restoration lyric by writing counter poems designed wittily to overturn the misogynist attitudes of her fellow poets. Her unsettling culminates in her poems of female passion and unfixed sexual categories in which she negotiates an economy of desire by offering the image of woman as commodity back to the male negotiator. By excessive production of gendered positions, especially in such a poem as 'To the Fair Clarinda', she counteracts some of the force of the masculine economy.

In his essay Salzman notes the lack of discussion of Behn's political poetry. Virginia Crompton makes this body of work her main concern in her essay, "'For when the act is done and finish't cleane, / what should the poet doe, but shift the scene?": propaganda, professionalism and Aphra Behn'. In it she surveys Behn's use of political propaganda and then concentrates on two late poems which explore the nature of this genre: those to the most famous and opposing propagandists, Sir Roger L'Estrange and Gilbert Burnet. With L'Estrange Behn shared a theoretical and political perspective and his propaganda became true, where Burnet's remained pleasing and corrupting. But Burnet's propaganda recreates power, and in the poem to him Behn inevitably considers her own future as a professional writer and propagandist and holds open the possibility and perhaps necessity of compromise.

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In 'Aphra Behn: the politics of translation', Elizabeth Spearing discusses the translations, a body of work that has, except for 'The Disappointment', been as little studied as the political poetry. Spearing begins by looking at the translations in the context of the translation controversies of the seventeenth century, and then goes on to argue that Behn politicizes and eroticizes her sources, adding both satire and sensuality to her French translations. Concentrating on *The Voyage to the Island of Love* and *Lycidus*, she shows how frequently Behn makes the sexual into the political and how often she combines national politics and religion with the personal and the sexual. For example, advice to the presumptuous lover, found in her source, becomes also advice to the presumptuous politician, probably the Duke of Monmouth, so strong a presence in her propagandist writings. Beyond expressing her political position, Behn in her translations manages to convey to the reader her identity as a woman: she panders to the notion of the female writer in being consciously indecorous and, when writing as a man, gives the effect of being an actress in a breeches role.

In different mode from the essays on the drama, those on the fiction and poetry often tend less towards providing precise historical and political contexts than to revealing the subtleties of representation, along with the excitement of modern criticism. Since Behn's poetry and prose have become of such interest in recent years, critics can have the confidence to concern themselves solely with one or two of her works. In this tradition, Jessica Munns in "'But to the touch were soft": sex, property and the politics of the penis' sees Behn's two poems 'The Disappointment' and 'The Golden Age' as significant contributions to the Restoration discourse of masculinity. The concern over impotence, so famously presented in 'The Disappointment', was a manifestation of a general crisis over the representation of masculinity, as well as anxiety over the phallic order. One of many poems of 'imperfect enjoyment', 'The Disappointment' shifts the emphasis from the man, his penis, his fear of displaying sexual inadequacy, his sense of heterosexual desire and sexual intercourse itself as emasculating, to the failure of response and of any exchange of pleasure for pleasure. 'The Golden Age' offers a visionary solution to the nightmare, in which the soft penis does not represent anxiety and fear of failure but becomes an

object of beauty: a female paradise is created as an alternative to the capitalist and phallic world of 'The Disappointment'.

My own essay, 'Who is Silvia? What is she? Feminine identity in Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*', concerns Behn's single long novel and treats the creation of the identity of the heroine Silvia, based loosely on the historical figure of Lady Henrietta Berkeley. This creation is an achievement both of the novel and of the character herself. I argue that the instability of genre of a work that slides between epistolary and third-person narrative parallels the instability of personality; both the text and the various images of Silvia can always be interrogated. Through the three parts of the novel the heroine moves from being the virgin daughter through transgressing royalist to becoming an image of the capitalist entrepreneur who can even market herself; it is an image much denigrated by Behn when it is combined with Whiggism, but more ambiguous when associated with Tory marketing and acquisitiveness. Silvia is educated into the masquerade of femininity and finds her main identity in the theatre in which women act for money. Identity is destabilized in a moving world in which letters become metonyms for circulating selves. The greatest instability is enacted in relation to the text and the reader who comes, against the expressed ethics of the narrator, to appreciate flexible selves and gain sympathy for energy.

The issue of race so much on the agenda of modern criticism concerns the next three critics, Jacqueline Pearson, writing primarily on Behn's drama but also inevitably touching on her most famous work *Oroonoko*, and Catherine Gallagher and Joanna Lipking, both of whom treat only *Oroonoko*. In 'Slave princes and lady monsters: gender and ethnic difference in the work of Aphra Behn', Pearson investigates Behn's use of race and racial imagery, arguing that, although she sometimes seems close to using 'black' and 'white' as conventional racial opposites, she mostly destabilizes the terms. This is certainly so in *Oroonoko* where the prevailing effect is not of binary opposites of any sort but of multiple differences. Even in *Abdelazer*, apparently a vehicle for the display of Moorish wickedness, Behn manages to avoid complete polarization by eschewing the use of the term 'white' eulogistically, as happens in her source play, *Lusts Dominion*. In the short story, 'The Unfortunate Bride:

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or, *The Blind Lady a Beauty*' the horror of the black Moorea is subtly undercut by the similarity of this character to the author herself, since both in different ways are trying to control male texts.

Catherine Gallagher's essay, '*Oroonoko's* blackness', provides a richly speculative reading of *Oroonoko*, the starting point of which is the detail of Oroonoko's extreme blackness. This Gallagher connects with a print culture and the notion of the transcendental text celebrated by Behn as she moved from staging plays to publishing fiction and, singularly in *Oroonoko*, inserts herself as author into her own work. Gallagher then finds the blackness both of print and of the African Oroonoko as metonyms for commodification: the printed text and the black man are both heroic and both can be exchanged and sold. The commodification ratifies kingship, so salient a part of Oroonoko's depiction, since in absolutist thinking the king alone allows exchange because all property – as well as all proprietors – is held by royal gift.

A very different and equally illuminating approach to *Oroonoko* is taken by Joanna Lipking in her historical study, '*Confusing matters: searching the backgrounds of Oroonoko*'. She argues persuasively that *Oroonoko* resists penetrating readings and notes that there seems no clear guides for the construction of a tale which appears sometimes arbitrary and formula-ridden. Instead of providing a totalizing reading, she tries to illuminate the text by contemporary writings, the 'commonplaces' of which are no doubt closer to Behn's than our own can possibly be. So she places *Oroonoko* by the heroic romances of La Calprenède, the accounts of slavery in the works of French and English travellers and traders to the West Indies, descriptions of the old customs of the Fantis in the Gold Coast, and also records of how slaves were viewed and managed in the colonies. Thereby she sees a richer tale than was seen before, a curious narrative that confronts slavery in a variety of complex and perplexing ways.

The final section consists of biographical and bibliographical essays by Mary O'Donnell and Jane Jones, each dependent on archival work and each revealing the shakiness of the basis of so much criticism that assumes an identity of the author, Aphra Behn. In '*Private jottings, public utterances: Aphra Behn's published writings and her commonplace book*', Mary Ann O'Donnell has taken up the questions of biography through an