

Image of Aphra Behn in English Literature

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Abstract

Aphra Behn was a playwright, poet and well-known translator lived in a world of men as a staunch Royalist in her ideals. She was the first woman in England to identify herself as a professional writer. She wrote to the occasion and also to make money. There has been a steady tendency to see Aphra Behn as an individual phenomenon, rather than as the author of a series of works that are appealing in their personal right. It is imperative to affirm at the start that even now we know more or less nothing for certain about Behn's life. She was expelled from the sorts of institutions from which historians usually assemble their records, such as Oxford and Cambridge, the Inns of Court, and the Middle Temple. If she'd been a noble, there might have been records existing at her country seat. If she'd been a sacred dissenter, she might have recorded her thoughts and ideas about her internal life in a religious journal as so many women did. Hence, the paper traces the image of Aphra Behn in Literary arena.

Keywords: Aphra Behn, Image, Literature

Preamble

In seeking Aphra Behn's life what we do know is that she was born in England, possibly to a barber and a wet-nurse living in Kent. In her youth she undertook spying missions for Charles II, in Antwerp, and probably visited the colony of Surinam. She returned to London in the late 1660s and began to make a living by writing plays for the Duke's Theatre. These plays became increasingly political in response to contemporary events, and in particular, the public hysteria over the Popish Plot. But as the public appetite for drama decreased in the early 1680s, Behn began to produce prose fiction, poetry and translations. At some point in these years she had relationships with two men called Will Scott and John Hoyle, who may or may not be represented in her fictional and poetic works. She died in 1689.

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Because of the lack of reliable bibliographical information and because of the fascination Behn holds as an individual rather than as the creator of a body of literary work, Behn has been co-opted into a range of political agendas in the past. There have been six biographies written since 1948, and the recent explosion of critical interest in Behn will surely bring more. Far from hindering biographers, the lack of available information about Aphra Behn's life has actually *enabled* them to construct her along their own lines.

Introducing Behn's Works

Behn has written a big list of literary genres that every English literature student did not notice of. She has a sound mind in her variety of writing and the below list proves her mastery over literature.

Plays

The Forc'd Marriage (1670)

The Amorous Prince, or, The Curious Husband (1671)

The Dutch Lover (1673)

Abdelazer (1676)

The Town Fop or, sir Timothy Tawdry (1676)

The Rover, Part 1(1677) and Part 2 (1681)

Sir Patient Fancy (1678)

The Feigned Courtesans (1679)

The Young King (1679)

The False Count (1681)

The Roundheads or, The Good Old Cause (1681)

The City Heiress (1682)

Like Father, Like Son (1682)

Prologue and Epilogue to Romulus and Hersilia. Or The Sabine War (November 1682)

The Luckey Chance, or an Alderman's Bargain (1686) with composer John Blow

The Emperor of the Moon (1687)

Plays Posthumously Published

The Widow Ranter, or, The History of Bacon in Virginia (1689)

The Younger Brother, or The Amorous Jilt (1696)

Novels

Agnes de Castro, or The Force of Generous Love (1688)

Love –Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister- 3 Parts (1682-87)

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Oroonoko (1688)

Short Stories/Novellas

The Fair Jilt (1688)

The History of the Nun: or, The Fair Vow-Breaker (1688)

The History of the Servant (Disputed)

Poetry Collections

Poems upon Several Occasions, with A Voyage to the Island of Love (1684)

Lycidas: or, The Lover in Fashion (1688)

Response to Her Death

When Aphra Behn died in April 1689, her literary reputation was considerable, despite the fact that she was politically out of favour with the new monarchs, William and Mary. She was buried in Westminster Abbey, which had recently become the resting place of honour for poets. Only a few days after her death the anonymous *An Elegy Upon the Death of Mrs A Behn, the Incomparable Astraea*. was published.

Behn is two things here: a champion of women, and a writer whose literary skill in describing the arts of love in her poetry and fiction is inextricably, and problematically, linked to her personal sexual experience. These two emphases are both rooted in a sense of Behn not as a constructor of imaginative fiction but as a model: an exemplar.

1696: Gildon and Behn as a Libertine

We can see the beginnings of the blurring of life and work with Behn's first biography, 'Memoirs on the Life of Mrs Behn. By a Gentlewoman of her Acquaintance', published in 1696 and probably written by the hack writer and literary forger Charles Gildon. The 'Memoirs' are a strange combination of biographical detail and fictional narrative: they are woven into a story which presents Mrs Behn as amorous adventuress, and they draw on a combination of bits of her fiction and fragments of her letters to concoct an account of her exploits in Antwerp and Surinam that ultimately encouraged readers to identify Behn with the heroines of her prose fiction.

The Memoirs were published as the preface to a collected edition of Behn's prose works, and in effect, they capitalized on the sexiness of the woman to sell her works. Behn's adult life had conveniently spanned precisely the reigns of Charles II and James II, and in presenting her as sexual libertine, her biographer inevitably linked her to the

glittering and heady world of the Restoration court but from the 1690s onwards attitudes towards the Restoration became more and more critical of its excess and libertinism.

Early 1900s: The Bloomsbury Group and Behn as a Woman

It was not until the early twentieth century that things began to change. The Bloomsbury members, Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf were the leading exponents in a revival of the Restoration writer. The prime emphasis in Woolf and Sackville-West's work was on Behn's status as the first professional woman writer. Her life continued to eclipse her work because of a critical eagerness to adopt her professionalism as a symbol of early feminism. Vita Sackville-West's short biography of Behn, called *Aphra Behn: The Incomparable Astraea*, appeared in 1927. For Sackville-West, Behn is a novelist who would have been greater had she abandoned the models of French romance that she copied from Madame de Scudery and attempted to use her homely idiom to produce fiction closer to the contemporary realism of Daniel Defoe. The emphasis in the account of her work is not so much what she *did* achieve, but what she *might* have done.

Woodcock - Behn as a Revolutionary

The first full-length biography of Behn to appear came in 1948, written by George Woodcock. It was entitled *The Incomparable Aphra*. Once again, it is what Behn represents as a figure, rather than the artistry of her writings, that provides the basis of her biographer's claims. Woodcock was an anarchist. Woodcock constructs Behn as an impassioned and committed modern revolutionary, an advocate for a social and moral freedom that he finds radical in her day and ours.

Behn's established Tory politics, even though they were based on a time-honoured allegiance to king and aristocracy and a disdain for populist politics, did not substantially trouble Woodcock's thesis. Behn's revolutionary tendencies could be seen in her work, if they were not immediately apparent in her life: Woodcock was one of a line of critics to read *Oroonoko* as an abolitionist work that fully established Behn's libertarian credentials, while he stressed that the poverty of her final years was a testament to her unwillingness to compromise her feminism: rather than using her feminine charms to tap her admirers for support, she chose to attempt to provide her own living.

Goreau- Behn as a Martyr

In Angeline Goreau's 1980 biography of Behn, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn*, Behn's biography symbolizes the lives of feminists in 1980, who, like Goreau, long to be free, and must suffer because of that desire. The minimal

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facts that are available about Behn's life need to be reconstructed to form a tale that projects the predicament of the modern feminist scholar onto earlier women writers. Both the bawdy and self-reliant Aphra Behn imagined by the Bloomsburies and the confident radical of Woodman's work have been replaced: Behn is depicted as a defensive woman, beset by critics, who must suffer for her art.

Todd- Behn as a Political Agent

A later biography of Behn Behn was Janet Todd's 1996 book, entitled *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*. By the mid-90s, feminist criticism had moved beyond the need to posit an absolute identification between the gender politics of early women writers, and those of the feminist scholars that were writing about them. Todd says in her introduction that her version of Behn may be too political for some. Here she means not political in terms of the libertarianism that Woodcock believed that he shared with Behn, or the gender wars with which Goreau identified, but political in terms of Behn's own involvement in contemporary politics. Todd places great emphasis on Behn's early spying activities, and on the networks of Tory intrigue to which Behn was connected.

So in the context of this division of emphasis in recent Anglo-American criticism, Todd's construction of the 'political' Behn is not an unpartisan contribution to current debate. In presenting Behn as a Tory polemicist who was much engaged with the specific power struggles of the 1670s and 80s, she offers a biographical justification for her own school of historical criticism on Behn.

Behn So Tempting to Try and Pin Down

It seems that analysis of Behn reveals more about her biographers than it does about the elusive writers, but this is perhaps because of Behn's writing choices. Through her manipulation of prose and personae and by playing with the extent of her self-identification with a narrator or character, Behn leads readers into positing exactly the kinds of equations between life and works that troubled her biographers.

At the very beginning of the account, the narrator describes the habits and costumes of the Native Americans, detailing in particular their use of exotic birds' feather to make headdresses. According to theatre historians, such a feathered headdress does indeed seem to have been used in the many heroic dramas set in the exotic New World. Behn wrote *Oroonoko* in 1688: her probable trip to Surinam, the location of *Oroonoko*, took place at the beginning of the 1660s. If she brought the feathers back with her in the late 1660s, the first readers of *Oroonoko* would probably have seen this feathered headdress in a range of theatrical productions over the 70s and 80s. So here the account

in *Oroonoko* dovetails with the readers' actual knowledge of Behn and her theatrical world. The reference to the headdress adds authenticity to the account, and affirms the narrator's status as one and the same as the public playwright Aphra Behn whose plays and headdress they had seen at the Duke's Theatre.

Finale

Behn plays with her readers, constructing her narrator so that she variously represents a fictional narrative device, the known public persona of Behn the playwright, a private autobiography, and form of authorial self-advertisement. Her juggling of this unsettling combination of display, revelation, and mask problematises the relationship between fact and fiction, life and works throughout her work, and explains the drive for biographers not just to state the facts about her works, but also to make judgments about her life.

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