

APHRA BEHN

(1640-1689)

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

“All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn [...] in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she--shady and amorous as she was--who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits”

Controversial opinions

- “*Una semplice puttana, che danzava in mezzo alla sporcizia*” (Victorian historian)
- “*La Saffo inglese*” (a recent biographer)
- “È vero che la sua scandalosa reputazione non le ha impedito di essere seppellita nell'abbazia di Westminster, ma è un gran peccato che i suoi libri non stiano marcendo colà assieme alle sue ossa.” (late 19th century anon reviewer of the *Sunday Review*)

Why so?

- “Monstrous” genius (a woman so masculine to earn a living by her pen!)
- The first professional woman writer in English: a “prostitute poetess” – who sold her wit rather than her body
- She claimed she wrote “for bread” yet also for the glory, “*for my masculine part, the poet in me*”

- Strict rules and moral standards imposed on women writers dealing with love and sex
- Behn accused by some colleagues to disregard these rules
- Response in the Preface to her comedy *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678) :

"Ho stampato questo lavoro con tutta la fretta e l'impazienza che deve avere chi vuole giustificarsi di fronte alle sciocche e ingiuste calunnie che una donna può inventare per gettarle su un'altra e che mi sono state procurate solo dal mio essere donna. Hanno detto che questo lavoro è licenzioso - la manchevolezza minore e maggiormente scusabile negli scrittori maschi, ai cui lavori esse accorrono, come se ci andassero per nient'altro se non per udire ciò che condannano nel mio - e che provenendo da una donna ciò sarebbe innaturale"

A bizarre life

- **1640** – hazy information about her birth – possibly near Canterbury, possibly adopted and educated at Court
- **1663** – Family moves to Surinam. Her father dies during the voyage
- **1664** – Hypothetical invention of her marriage with a Behn to gain respectability
- **1666** – Spy in Belgium for Charles II under the code name “Astrea”

- **1668** – Full of debts, she is put in jail – no news where or how she comes out
- **1682** - *Like Father, Like son* at the Dorset Garden Theatre. Aphra arrested due to a "scandalous" and "vulgar" epilogue referring to the Duke of Monmouth (Dryden's Absalom)
- **1684** - epistolary novel, *Love letters between a nobleman and his sister*, on incest

- **1687** – Her ex lover, John Hoyle, a lawyer who wrote her epitaph, is accused of sodomy and arrested. He'll be stabbed 5 years later in a London tavern, just like Cristopher Marlowe

.....

A daring author

- Vs equivalence “woman/nature”
- “Nature” at the time: no longer benevolent mother with divine origins but something to control, vivisect, and exploit – developing mechanicism in cosmological conceptions
- Vs idea of a fixed feminine identity, of fixed feminine roles in society

- Ex, *The Rover*: staging of opposite female models to arouse a constant dialectics
 - romantic love, rigid morality (subdued Florinda) vs subversive femininity (Helena, rebellious nun)
 - General hint: no woman can be imprisoned in one single role – complex “nature”

- Main focus: study of desire – who wants what, what obstacles hinder it
- All kinds of desire – homo and heterosexual
- Cross-dressing and masking to stage the complexities of human relationships and destabilize fixed gender-based roles
- Autobiographical aspect: her “friendship” with Hortense Mancini (niece of Cardinal Mazarin, chief minister of France, and a mistress of Charles II), renowned for dressing like a man, her lesbian relationships, her passion for gambling and fencing

A versatile author – and a spy!

*“Variety is the soul of pleasure”
(The Rover, 1681)*

- Poet, novelist, playwright
- Translator of literary and scientific works (she could speak and write French, Italian and Spanish)
- After Dryden, the most prolific and popular author of Restoration literature

Theatre

- Like Shakespeare: rewriting and manipulation of pre-extant plots
- As for Susanna Centlivre, her forte was comedy, often revolving around a plot of "forced marriage" -- the title of her first produced play in 1670
- Mentor for actresses and actors – she put young actresses up in her own house when they couldn't afford lodgings

Most important plays

- *The Forced Marriage* (1670)
- *The Amorous Prince* (1671)
- *The Dutch Lover* (1673)
- *Abdelazer* (1676)
- *The Town Fop* (1676)
- *The Rover* (1677 -1681) -- Naples/ Carnival/ Masks/ politics and sex
- *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678)
- *The Feigned Courtesans* (1679)
- *The Young King* (1679)
- *The False Count* (1681)
- *The Roundheads* (1681)
- *The City Heiress* (1682)
- *Like Father, Like Son* (1682)
- *The Lucky Chance* (1686)
- *The Emperor of the Moon* (1687)
- **Posthumously performed**
- *The Widow Ranter* (1689)
- *The Younger Brother* (1696)

Poetry

- Arcadian, pastoral poetry – tinged with sense of humour and cheerful, at times direct, eroticism
- Ex: "The Disappointment" (1680)
- ✓ Lysander's fiery passion for Cloris, a beautiful virgin
- ✓ Woman's rejection her imprisonment
- ✓ Lysander's attempt to rape her – failure due to impotence: "*But oh what envying god conspires/ To snatch his power, yet leave him the desire!*".

Fiction - The female voice and the rise of the novel

- End of the seventeenth-beginning of the eighteenth century: women authors' important contributions to the development of the English novel
- Novel vs history
- Concern for and interest in domestic arrangements
- Protagonists: women as often as men
- Novelistic subject: story of the woman trapped in social constraints

- Daniel Defoe – the Father of the English Novel
 - Outsider from the literary establishment ruled by Alexander Pope and his cohorts
 - Writer of social criticism and satire but vs refined impulse of the Augustan tradition
 - *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) owe a lot to the anti-Augustan tradition of early prose narrative by women, particularly Behn, Mary Delariviere Manley and Jane Barker

- Elements of the modern novel attributed to Defoe -- e.g. the beginnings of psychological realism and a consistent narrative voice -- anticipated by women writers.
- In *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* (1724): first-person *female* characters faced with the difficulties of surviving in a world dominated by economic forces
- Defoe saw writing as “a considerable branch of the English commerce” (*Essay upon Literature*, 1726)

- The English novel = product of several literary traditions – e.g. the French romance, the Spanish picaresque tale and novella, and earlier prose models in English (John Lyly's *Euphues*, 1579, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, 1590, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, 1684)
- Yet: true pioneers of the novel form – women writers in opposition to the refined precepts of the Augustan writers

- Behn's travel narrative/memoir/biography *Oroonoko* (1688) and her erotic epistolary novel *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1683)
- Mary Delariviere Manley's political prose satires: exposés of high-society scandals written in the tradition Behn's erotic *roman à clef*
- Eliza Haywood's erotic tales with a political or high society background, and later realistic novels with a middle-class background

Fiction - The Beginnings of a Female Narrative Voice

Behn: forerunner in
English literary history

- the first professional woman writer
- an important innovator in the form of the novel

- Search for a prose form appropriate to stories with contemporary rather than purely heroic settings and themes
- Conversational everyday tone strewn with personal references – "I have already said...", "I forgot to ask how...", ⇒ ongoing conversation with her readers / a chatty narrative style
- ❖ Ex: *Oroonoko* – address and thus proximity to her readers + unusual wealth of detail

- Narrator as the interpreter of the story
- ❖ Behn vicariously enters the narrative
- ❖ The narrator frequently intervenes in the story
- ❖ Predecessor of the omniscient narrative voice such as that used by Henry Fielding, Jane Austen and George Eliot
- ❖ Yet: more intrusive; the narrating voice is emphasized

Oroonoko (1688)

- One of the first literary narratives of the “noble savage”
- Realistic novel: sort of autobiographical account; wealth of accurate details – landscape, ornaments ...
- Royal slave / narrative female voice: *outsider* status / “otherness” – woman writer and slave (vs any form of colonialism) – [questionable](#)
- First “abolitionist” novel (?)

- Narrator sympathetic to the plight of her hero.
- Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: considered an anti-slavery novella
- Yet: the novel cannot avoid participating in the discourse of racism (or of intrinsic social inequality)
- Story of the royal slave from the point of view of the middle-class colonial mistress: the black male protagonist can only speak through the white female narrator

- Simplistic nature of the women=colonized metaphor:
"[.] the woman=colonized, man=colonizer metaphor lacks any awareness of gender--or colonialism for that matter--as a contested field [...] Historical colonialism demonstrates the political as well as theoretical necessity of abandoning the idea of women's (and men's) gender identity as fixed and coherent. Instead ... it makes it impossible to ignore the contradictory social positioning of white, middle-class women as both colonized patriarchal objects and colonizing race-privileged subjects"
 (Laura Donaldson)

- Narrator's attitude toward slavery – ambiguous and paradoxical
- She never criticizes slavery directly, but sympathizes with the victimized hero
- She suggests she has authority in the colonial society of Surinam but is unable to save Oroonoko – participation in the racist-colonialist ideology

- Contradictory use of pronouns: they vs we – to talk about the abuse of the slaves or about the peaceful coexistence with the Indians (p. 2183)
- Her “we” mostly consists of women and children, who flee when the situation gets dangerous
- She is one of powerless members of society – eschewing responsibility for the brutality of the colonial leaders

- The narrator's failure to save him, her struggle against the social apparatus is a novelistic device alluding to the constraints of race and gender
- At times she even refers to "the Christians" as "they," implying that she does not belong in this category either (p. 2188)

- Oroonoko belongs to the soldier class of a society in which women are little better than property
- But within the framework of the novel – romance – it is a romantic hero turned into property, an aristocratic hero of epic proportions trapped in a capitalistic plot

- A novel replete with contradictions
 - perhaps true, perhaps not
 - perhaps travel account, perhaps novel from an author who uses a narrator who claims to be the author – a fictionalized author, who claims to have authority which she obviously doesn't
 - a narrative voice deeply disturbed by the events related, thus with divided loyalties
 - resisting facile racial categories while perpetuating categories it seems to reject