

Aphra Behn: A "Life dedicated to Pleasure and Poetry"



[1]

By John Riley (1646-1691) (<http://www.belchetz-swenson.com/AphraBehn.php> [2]) [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons

Young Woman

In 1640 Aphra Behn was born Eaffrey Johnson of Canterbury, the daughter of a barber. Behn was likely raised Catholic. She was a staunch Tory and Royalist, and may already have been working as a spy for Charles II when she visited Surinam, an English colony, in 1663. Behn stayed on the sugar plantation owned by Sir Robert Harley, and letters from the deputy governor of Surinam refer to her as "Astrea", her code name as an intelligence officer and later, her nom-de-plume as a writer. Her stay on the plantation inspired her to write *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave* [3], a novel that shows surprising sympathy for the plight of the plantation slave.

Spy

By 1664 Aphra married Johan Behn, a foreign merchant, but he died only a few years into their marriage. On her return to England from Surinam, Behn became embroiled in the court of Charles II, who recruited her to spy against the Dutch in the Second Anglo-Dutch War. "Astrea" was posted to Antwerp, likely acting as a honey trap since she established "intimacies" with William Scot to persuade him to act as a double-agent for Charles, spying on the king's enemies in Holland.

Writer

In the late 1660s Behn returned to England but her spying had not proved lucrative, and she was consigned to debtor's prison. When she was released in 1669, she began to live by her pen.

Behn became a prolific writer: In the 1670s at least 19 of Behn's plays were staged. Most were bawdy comedies, full of libertines, harlots, and foolish characters. Among the more famous and funniest are *The Forc'd Marriage* and *The Rover* [4]. She also wrote the sensational epistolary novel *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* [5]. It is very possible her lover John Hoyle inspired the rakes she depicted in her writing: Hoyle was a bisexual republican violent libertine lawyer.

Behn entered the circle of the Earl of Rochester, for whom she wrote *The Disappointment*, a mock epic about premature ejaculation. In the late 1670s Behn served as a propagandist for Charles II, lampooning his enemies in her sex comedy plays.

The winds changed to Behn's detriment in the late 1690s when public favour turned against bawdy plays, and against Behn. She defended her work eloquently in her preface to *The Lucky Chance*:

"[...] Read my Comedys and compare 'em with others of this Age, and if they find one Word that can offend the chaste Ear, I will submit to all their peevish Cavills [...] All I ask, is the Priviledge for my Masculine Part the Poet in me, (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv'd in, to take those Measures that both the Ancient and Modern Writers have set me [...] If I must not, because of my Sex, have this Freedom, but that you will usurp all to your selves; I lay down my quill [...] I value Fame as much as if I had been born a Hero; and if you rob me of that, I can retire from the ungrateful World, and scorn its fickle Favours."

Behn retired from the ungrateful world with her death on 16 April 1689. The inscription on her tombstone in Westminster Abbey reads, "Here lies Proof that Wit can never be/ Defense against Mortality."

Behn lived fast, died young, and wrote wildly. Perhaps Virginia Woolf said it best:

"All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds."

Want to learn more? Check out her writing, read J. Todd's *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (1997), or *A Memoir of Mrs. Behn* [6] by Montague Summers.

Want to know more about the rise of the woman writer? Read the essay on Frances Burney [7].

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