

Aphra Behn and the Restoration Theatre

This essay is the second of four distilled from a lecture series on Aphra Behn given by Dr. Abigail Williams of the University of Oxford and adapted for the Great Writers Inspire project by Kate O'Connor. [Click here](#) to see the first, or [here](#) to see a brief bibliography of Aphra Behn.

Aphra Behn and Restoration theatre

This next installment on the series about Aphra Behn will examine Behn as a dramatist.

What was the restoration theatre like? How is Aphra Behn's work shaped by the culture of the Restoration playhouse?

[1]Aphra Behn painted by Mary Beale[Public Domain], via Wikimedia CommonsA Brief History of the Restoration Theatre

In 1642 Parliament gave its first ruling against stage plays, which effectively suspended theatrical activity in England during the Civil war and Interregnum. Although there were companies who continued to play before the exiled cavalier court at Oxford, and at popular fairs in London, this was not a period in which new plays were written. Many actors went abroad to look for work, and what drama was performed was on the whole occasional and illicit, and not an integral part of London life.

This squashing of the theatres was dramatically reversed at the accession of Charles II. He landed at Dover in May 1660, and by August he had granted a monopoly to run two London theatres to William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew.

These patents did not restore the same sort of theatre that had existed in London before the Civil War. Where before there had been a number of theatres, now there were only two, the King's Company, run by Killigrew, and the Duke's Company, run by Davenant. They both set up shop in converted tennis courts, which provided a good space for theatre since they were enclosed spaces with galleries and boxes for spectators. Custom-built theatres later replaced the makeshift spaces: the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane for the King's Company, and the Dorset Garden Theatre, on The Thames, for the Duke's Company, which is where most of Behn's plays were performed.

The small, new theatres were built in reputable areas, probably because they anticipated a small, aristocratic audience that would prefer intimacy. In 1667 Killigrew boasted:

'The stage is now by his pains a thousand times better, and more glorious than ever heretofore. Now, wax-candles, and many of them; then, not above 3lb of tallow. Now, all things civil, no rudeness anywhere; then, as in a bear-garden. Then, two or three fiddlers, now nine or ten of the best'.

This suggests the importance of visual spectacle, that the lighting effects and music and their splendour were as important to the dramatic experience as the plays itself. It also suggests a level of cultural superiority: the

rejection of a tradition of public theatre, related to bear gardens, in favour of a private theatre that was civil and without rudeness.

Restoration drama isn't just about wordplay and intrigue; it's about spectacle, about formal visual set pieces, about cultural prestige offered by a theatre that could create these effects. These theatrical effects were destined to make the most of the opportunities offered by the new theatres established by Davenant and Killigrew after the Restoration.

[2]This 1808 engraving depicting the interior of Drury Lane gives a sense of the structure of Restoration theatres[Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Restoration theatres had a proscenium arch, with entrance doors for the players, and the part of the stage on which most of the acting took place stuck out into the auditorium. Above there was a balcony, good for scenes of coquetry and eavesdropping. The stage also extended back behind the arch, and could be divided by sliding doors to allow for sliding scenery, and the revelation of 'discovery scenes' behind the main action.

The main effect of this structure was that it allowed for a combination of very different modes of representation: the front protrusion of the stage enabled actors to create a sense of involvement with the audience, and a world of intimacy and complicity, while the spaces at the back enabled the company to achieve visual spectacles aimed at inspiring awe and wonder. In *The Luckey Chance*, act three, scene four, when Gayman is led into an apartment at Lady Fulbank's house to find a scene of dancers and shepherds, this discovery would appear from one of the sliding discovery scenes at the back of the stage. In this way the sudden sense of wonder would have been palpable to both character and audience.

The seating in the theatre was made up of boxes, galleries and the pit, which was not, as it had been in the Renaissance theatre, the place for the rabble, but was now a very fashionable and desirable place to be, and be seen. The audience capacity was about 650, and prices of plays varied a bit, but were mainly fairly high.

Surviving anecdotes suggest that people came to the theatre to socialize as much as to see plays. Prologues and epilogues of the time refer to members of the audience chatting or making assignations throughout the play, and those watching would often shout out witticisms or even climb onto the stage.

[3]1662 Frontispiece to the play 'The Wits'showing theatrical drolls (characters taken from different Jacobean plays), in Restoration Theatre in England[Public Domain], via Wikimedia CommonsA new play would never be staged for more than six days at a time, so people went to the theatre frequently, often once a week. They became familiar with the players in the company, both in that they expected them to play particular roles, and in that they were aware of their known reputations offstage. There's a famous story told by Colley Cibber, about an actor called Samuel Sandford, who was renowned for acting villains. Cibber describes a performance he attended in the 1690s, when the audience sat patiently through three of four acts, waiting for him to be revealed as a villain. But when it turned out at the end of the play that Sandford was really an honest man, they 'Fairly damn'd it, as if the Author had impos'd upon them the most frontless or incredible Absurdity'.

Behn and the New Theatre

Greater knowledge of the workings of the restoration stage helps to debunk one of the common criticisms of Aphra Behn: that is, the accusation that she could not be taken seriously as a writer because a perceived link between prostitution and professional writing. The criticism is based on the assumption that Behn's career was spent labouring under the bigoted preconceptions of her male contemporaries, and that her work represents a continual struggle to break out of this model.

But Behn was a canny woman and a skilled dramatist. She rose to fame through her numerous and successful comedies by responding to the changed nature of the theatres after 1660. Rather than ignore the

perceived connection between acting and prostitution, Behn exploited the erotic and commercial potential of the actress/whore onstage.

Behn drew on the established reputations of famous stars as she wrote her plays. A good example of this is the way in which she developed roles for Elizabeth Barry, one of the most famous actresses of the Restoration stage. In the 1670s Barry was known for her portrayal of tragic women, who were marked by their sexual passion, either in the form of the lustful villainess, or as a heroine torn between sexual desire and duty.

In the 1680s Behn wrote a series of heroines, prostitutes, and mistresses for Barry, all of who are passionate, seduced, and ultimately doomed to unhappiness. Barry's talents, and her ability to capture the attention and sympathy of her audiences in this role meant that Behn was able to present the plight of the prostitute mistress as more complex and problematic than it had been previously.

For example, Behn adapted John Marston's tragedy *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605) into a comic drama called *The Revenge* in 1680. In *The Revenge*, Behn took the grim story of the fiendish courtesan Francheschina, found in Marston's play, and transformed it into the story of Corinia (Barry's role). Drawing on Barry's specialism in 'whore with a heart of gold', Francheschina, the hardened and cynical prostitute of Marston's play was transformed in Behn's frail victim of libertine desire, a loving mistress, rather than a prostitute.

Women on the Restoration Stage

Of course, Barry's phenomenal stage career wouldn't have been possible before 1660. The re-opening of the playhouses after the Restoration brought with it one hugely significant innovation in staging – the introduction of women on stage. It certainly marked a big change from earlier English dramatic tradition. Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences had seen female parts played by young boys, but audience of the 1660s could see those same parts played by grown women.

So why did it happen? One reason is that the 18-year-lapse in theatrical tradition during the civil war period had created a shortage of trained young boy actors to play the female parts. Stuck with a series of roles for young women, Davenant, Killigrew and others were forced to allow women on stage.

The introduction of actresses was also dependent on the Stuart Court. The type of drama found on the Restoration stage was expressly designed to appeal to the court and its followers. Both the king and many of his courtiers had seen women onstage in their exile in Paris, and had come to expect that women be played by women.

Moreover, there was already a Stuart tradition of female performance: in the masque tradition of the pre-civil war period, in which actors performed within the closed arena of a court or noble household, it had been deemed acceptable for women and girls to perform female parts. Charles II's mother, Henrietta Maria, had famously acted in court masques, much to the disgust of many Puritans. Charles II adopted a whole series of the most famous actresses of the period, like Nell Gwynne, as his mistresses.

The royal grant of 1662 that stipulated that female roles should be performed by women said that the replacement of boys by women would both produce 'harmless delight' and be 'useful and instructive', a way of reforming some of the abuses of the contemporary stage. But far from reforming the stage, the effect of the introduction of the first actresses was to create a highly sexualised and voyeuristic drama.

Dramatists exploited the sensational impact of the female body on stage in no uncertain terms. Acting was not deemed a job for any respectable woman. Society, on the whole, assumed that any woman who displayed herself on the public stage was probably a whore. Like a prostitute, the actress's job involved displaying her body. She was paid to feign desire for designated men, and by playing a number of roles, she was in effect, selling whichever version of her self most pleased her punters. We can see this identification

between the actress and the prostitute very clearly in the prologue introducing the first woman to act on the stage. The playwright Thomas Jordan writes:

'Do you not twitter Gentlemen? I know
You will be censuring, do't fairly though;
'Tis possible a vertuous woman may
Abhor all sorts of looseness, and yet play;
Play on the Stage, where all eyes are upon her,
Shall we count that a crime France calls an honour?'

While Jordan's ostensible argument is that an actress need not necessarily be a whore ('tis possible'), the whole force of the comment is to corroborate his audience's suspicions of the 'virtue' of the actresses.

The assumption that the word 'actress' stood for 'prostitute' rapidly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. An unprotected woman would have been constantly open to sexual advances while working in the theatre. Men were able to go in and out of their changing rooms as they pleased, watching them dress. Those few actresses that were considered respectable were usually those who were married to fellow actors. The rest, regardless of how well established they were in their profession, were seen as kept women. The companies exploited the literal availability of their women as a way of attracting audiences, as the epilogue to Thomas Shadwell's *The Libertine* [4] suggests:

'Item, you shall appear behind our Scenes,
And there make love with the sweet chink of Guinnies
The unresisted Eloquence of Ninnies.
Some of our Women will be kind to you,
And promise free ingress and egress too'.

In a theatrical culture in which all women who performed on stage were necessarily seen as prostitutes, it was an easy step to see a female playwright like Behn as a woman for sale. Not only did the female playwright belong to a world in which so many women were seen as whores, but for many contemporaries, the fact of a woman's simply making public her writing, or her mind, was again tantamount to selling her self. As Lady Carey wrote in 1613, 'in a wife it is no worse to find/A common body, than a common mind'.

In many ways, Behn takes the image of the writer-whore and tries to use it as an enabling form of self-advertisement. She explores the potential of role-playing and multiple identities, so central to both the prostitute's and the actress's work. One very famous way in which she seems to both invite and resist authorial identification is through her character of Angelica Bianca, the whore with a heart of gold in *The Rover* [5]

In the play, Angelica Bianca hangs a picture of herself outside her house to advertise her trade. In the postscript to the play, Behn makes the connection between her own position and that of Angelica explicit, referring to the way in which she hangs out her own 'Sign of Angelica' to advertise her work. Yet just as the sign of Angelica is not the same as the real Angelica, so the fictional Angelica is not the same as Aphra Behn. Behn teases us with the possibility of authorial identity, but ultimately resists that identification by revealing that what we thought might be her is only one of a number of masks or personae.

At one level the uses of actresses on stage could be exploited for comic potential: in the context of a theatre in which the actresses were usually seen as fallen women, there was much comedy to be made of the actress who plays a virtuous woman who turns out in fact to be unchaste. But the very fact of having 'unchaste' women on stage pretending to be virtuous raises the question of the nature of female virtue and honour, whether or not they can be faked, and how to identify the real thing. So we get a comedy that is obsessed with female reputation, and with the distinction between true and feigned virtue.

Perhaps the most significant way in which the presence of women on the stage altered the nature of the drama was the way in which it created the need to exploit the woman's body on stage. While many of Behn's plays undoubtedly question the economic foundations of marriage arrangements, or the question of a woman's choice of a husband, the construction and performance of her drama maximizes the visual impact of the female body. This meant, literally, creating characters and scenarios that allow the maximum amount of titillating exposure of women in various states of undress.

For example, in *The Luckey Chance*, a play that revolves around the intrigues arising from unhappy marriages, we see a number of scenes in which the female characters appear either in bed, or preparing to go to bed. Dramaturgical analysis of Behn's plays has revealed that she made particular use of the discovery scenes to create either spectacles of women's bodies, such as Angelica or La Nuche upstairs in their chambers, or to provide spaces in which characters could watch one another, like Bellmour watching Sir Feeble's childish foreplay with Leticia in front of the mirror, creating layers of voyeurism within the drama.

In many of the heroic tragedies written by her contemporaries, one well-established way of creating the sexualized spectacle was through the rape scene. Rape scenes were popular because they enabled a dramatist to maintain an idealised sense of the woman as virtuous and chaste, while at the same time exploiting their sexuality. While they stopped short of actually simulating a rape, they attempted to excite their audiences with spectacles of ripped clothes and bared breasts, and the imaginative anticipation of further violence. These scenes were not just included into new plays ? they would be added to adaptations of old plays by Fletcher or Shakespeare.

One of the most problematic scenes in *The Rover* [5] concerns the trivialisation of Willmore's attempted rape of Florinda; the scene has longed created difficulties for critics attempting to argue the case for Behn's proto-feminism. Janet Todd said that we should read this scene of 'comic' sexual violence, as a critique of the social and legal institutions that represented the woman as the property of a man. By trivialising rape, the enforced possession of a woman's body by a man, Behn can be seen as undermining the sacrosanct notion of the woman's body as something that can be possessed by a man. But looking at the rape scene through the lens of Restoration stage practice and its widespread fascination with the rape scene, we can also read the Wilmore rape as a sign of Behn's complicity with, and manipulation of, contemporary dramatic fashions, which used rape as a form of visual titillation guaranteed to pull in the audiences.

Various other dramatic conventions grew up around the need to exploit the visual potential of the actress. In an age of full-length dresses, décolletage assumed a special importance, and so the Restoration stage invented the device of 'the bosom as letterbox'. The business of concealing a letter in one's bodice recurs in several plays, with the main virtue of drawing attention to the cleavage. In *The Rover* [5] the courtesans at the masquerade in act one pin inviting messages 'on their breasts' for anyone to read them at closer view.

Another popular way in which dramatists got their money's worth from their actresses on stage was through the introduction of 'breeches scenes', that is, scenes in which the plot demanded that young women dressed up in men's clothes in order to escape detection (such as in Behn's *The Rover* [5] I and II, *The Debauchee*, and *The Widow Ranter*).

By wearing the stockings and very short breeches that men wore, actresses exposed legs and ankles otherwise covered by long skirts. Again, the crossover between acting and prostitution was made clear: in an epilogue to a play in which she had been disguised as a man, the notorious Restoration actress Elizabeth Boutell declared:

'Tis worth Money that such Legs appear,
These are not to be seen so cheap elsewhere.'

In addition, the breeches part often culminated in a baring of flesh at the moment of revelation. In order to

demonstrate their true sex, actresses' breasts would be felt or exposed at a moment of dramatic climax.

The focus on intrigue, adultery and conflict that we find dominating so many of the plays of the time was clearly partly a result of the need to create situations, in bedchambers and balconies, with women in a state of undress. But one of the interesting ironies of these Restoration plays is that the drama that emerged out of these visual demands frequently ended up interrogating, albeit in a very conservative way, the rigid hierarchies of gender that they were based on. So the demand for the breeches part presented confident young women at loose in the world of men, often exposing the double standard of sexual morality, while the interest in marital disharmony and the cuckolding of the elderly husband threw into doubt the right of a father to determine his daughter's choice of husband.

One of the things that it is easy to forget when thinking about Aphra Behn's work in the Restoration theatre is that comedy wasn't just a question of providing clever peep shows for an exclusively male audience, not least because there were large numbers of women in the audience. There were ladies, their companions and maidservants, female relatives of MPs, professional men and merchants, royal mistresses, duchesses and wives of the aristocracy, and prostitutes. The presence, and influence of these women, especially upper-middle class women, is discernible in constant references in epilogues and prologues to the 'ladies' in the house. In *Trick for Trick*, Thomas D'Urfey declares:

'The poet now the ladies help does crave,
That with a smile or frown can damn or save.'

As far as these female spectators were concerned, Restoration theatre enacted a deeply ambivalent view of female sexuality. On one hand the drama encouraged subjectivity: female spectators could identify with the choices and dilemmas of female characters on stage. Yet on the other they were witnessing the objectification of women on stage, through the visual exploitation of the actress.

See also:

[Who is Aphra Behn? \[6\]](#) - by Abigail Williams (ed. Kate O'Connor)

[Aphra Behn and Political Culture \[7\]](#) - by Abigail Williams (ed. Kate O'Connor)

[Aphra Behn and Poetic Culture \[8\]](#) - by Abigail Williams (ed. Kate O'Connor)

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