

Aphra Behn and Poetic Culture

This essay is the last 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.

Behn and Poetic Culture



[1]

Portrait of Laurence Hyde, 1st Earl of Rochester, by William Wissing [Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons

While Aphra Behn initially became known for her numerous and popular plays, the comedy of sexual intrigue that she came to specialise in was not a high-cultural form. To gain real literary fame, rather than notoriety, she had to look to other genres. Thus she began, in the 1670s and 1680s, to produce poems and translations.

During the Restoration poems circulated in a variety of forms, from copied manuscript to printed anthology. This meant that a single poem might exist in a number of different versions, and that poems could often be misattributed (listen to Dr. Williams' talk on the poetic miscellany [here](#) [2]). There is still some doubt over which poems are by Behn, and which are by her contemporaries. Her poem 'The Disappointment' first appeared in a pirated volume of poems by the Earl of Rochester, and was for some while believed to be by him.

There is only one poem, 'On the death of Edmund Waller Esq', that we still have as a manuscript copy of in

Behn's handwriting.

The rest come from a variety of sources, mainly:

- 1684 *Poems on Several Occasions: With a Voyage to the Island of Love*
- 1685 *Miscellany, Being a Collection of Poems by Several Hands* (included some of her poems, some poems about her, and her translation of Rochefoucauld *Seneca UnMasqu'd*)
- 1688 *Lycidus? Together with a Miscellany of New Poems By Several Hands*

Behn wrote Pindaric panegyrics on state occasions, lowbrow political satires and ballads, bawdy libertine verses, and pastorals celebrating an idealized Golden Age. The range of Behn's poetic output over all these publications suggests something of the necessary diversity of Restoration poetry. This was a period before Romanticism, and before poetry was viewed as a medium for the expression of personal feelings. We can't look for the same sort of internal consistency in Behn's poetry that we might find in the works of a later poet.

Behn in the Male and Female Poetic Traditions

If it's hard to find coherence in the generic diversity of Behn's poetic oeuvre, it's also hard to find any consistent self-identification of herself as a poet. Did she see herself as participating in a tradition of women writers, or did she see her verse as part of a more public sphere, epitomized by male writers?

In her translation of Abraham Cowley's Latin poem *Of Plants*, which she published in 1689, Behn added an important aside on the nature of the poet. Addressing the laurel tree, which was traditionally associated with the poetry, she asserts that:

'I by a double right thy bounties claim,
Both from my sex, and in Apollo's name:
Let me with Sappho and Orinda be
O ever sacred nymph adorned by thee;
and give my verses immortality'.

Here she identifies herself as a writer with the two most significant models of writing women available to her: Sappho, the first woman poet, and Katherine Philips, known as 'Orinda', whose poetry had first been published, without her consent, in 1664.

Sappho, the Greek lyric poet from Lesbos, was primarily known for her simple and expressive poetry about the love between women. Philips had often been likened to Sappho, because her friendship poems between Orinda and Lucasia were seen as comparable with Sappho's writing on love between women. Katherine Philips was a problematic role model for Behn. Philips was born a decade before Behn, to the family of a London Puritan merchant. At sixteen Philips married a man much older than her, and spent the rest of her life at home in Cardigan in Wales writing royalist poetry and ardent poems about friendship.

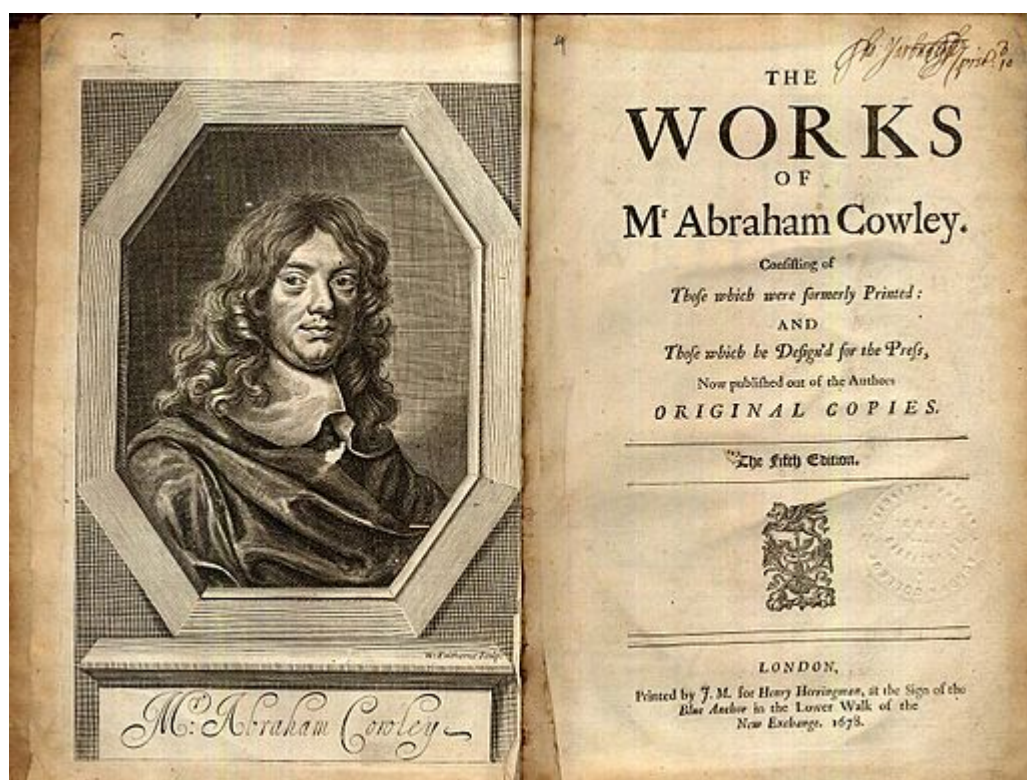
Philips' refined and modest poetry transformed the notion of the woman poet into one of a sensitive lady. Philips modestly claimed that she had never written a single line with the intention of having it printed: she was not a self-defined professional writer like Behn.

In some ways those differences between Behn and Philips polarised the image of the woman writer in the late seventeenth century. Behn's combination of sexual openness and literary professionalism guaranteed that she would remain notorious; she was 'the loose Astraea', while Philips was 'the chaste Orinda'. Their writings were very different: Philips is preoccupied with the idea of spiritual transcendence, Behn with the disruptions and chaos of the material world.

Philips idealizes a simply expressive prophetic language, whereas Behn suggests that language confuses rather than clarifies meanings. Philips' poetic narratives are built around internal codes such as Honour and Friendship, and Behn's narratives are constantly engaging with wider political events.

In her translation of *Of Plants*, Behn identifies herself as a part of the female poetic line. Yet at the same time, this passage is situated as part of a translation that worked as an act of homage to one of the most influential male poets of the time, Abraham Cowley.

Cowley was known mainly for his pindaric odes and his committed royalist verse. While much of his verse was written from political exile, during the civil war, it was very much an elevated, public mode of poetry, one in which the poet was engaged with the affairs of state, rather than those of the private life. In translating *Of Plants*, Behn was aligning herself with Cowley and his politics. The section that she translated was about the oak tree, a plant with specific and widely recognised symbolic connections to the Stuart royal family.



[3]

Frontispiece to the 1678 Edition of Abraham Cowley's Collected Works (Private Collection of S. Whitehead) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Behn began imitating Cowley very early on, and many of her most important state poems took the Pindaric form that he had popularised with his Pindarique Odes. Behn was a writer with serious political and philosophical opinions to express, and who often saw herself as participating in a tradition of male Tory and Royalist writers. In the dedication to *The Lucky Chance*, she refers to 'My Masculine Part, the Poet in me'.

So how do we tally these very different models of writing embodied in the male and female traditions? On the surface, it looks impossible, to consider together the state poems, such as the poem to Catherine, Queen Dowager, after the death of Charles II, with the erotic poetry, such as

'On Desire'. The political poetry refers to a concrete world outside the poem, to individuals who are known in public life, and it has a clearly identifiable panegyric function. The amorous poetry bears no such relationship to the external world.

While critics have attempted to pin down various pastoral lovers as representing, for example, Behn's lover John Hoyle, the poetry ultimately evades fixing in this way. It does not have a practical agenda in the same way that the state poetry does, nor is it as clear where we situate the author. But for all this, there are ways in which the two types of Behn's poems are informed by the same interests.

Perhaps the most important link between the political and sexual poetry is their shared attitude to poetic rhetoric as providing a way of controlling the reader's understanding of a situation, and therefore controlling its political, ideological, and moral value. An understanding of poetry as meditation on the power of language to represent, and persuade, runs through both Behn's political and amorous poetry.

One of Behn's most revealing political poems, the *Pindaric Poem to the Reverend Doctor Burnet* (1689) is a meditation on the relationship between pen and power. In it, she observed that writing, the medium she had exploited all her life in her efforts to effect political change, was now being used by Gilbert Burnet, to usher in the Glorious Revolution that would effectively end her career as a public poet:

'Oh strange effect of a seraphic quill!
That can by unperceptable degrees
Change every notion, every principle
To any form, its great dictator please:
The sword a feeble power, compared to that,
And to the nobler pen subordinate;
And of less use in bravest turns of state'.

The sort of political panegyrics that Behn had written to Charles II, James II, and their queens, were premised on the widely accepted notion that eloquent language had a political agency in its own right. By reconfiguring the events of political life in an elevated idiom, the poet made them real, granting them an existence in the public sphere.

Another aspect of the agency of poetic language was that its eloquence became a testament to the elevated nature of the subject it sought to describe. In an age that remained committed to the idea of the divine right of kings, and was constantly looking for signs of the verification of the sanctified nature of kingship, the monarch's ability to prompt such high-flown verse became a validation of his divinely ordained status. In other words, one you could tell the king was the real thing because of the grandiose verse he inspired.

Behn's Manipulation of Genre in 'The Disappointment'

The manipulation of eloquence and its qualified power to give an account of events is also foregrounded in Behn's amorous verse. Behn highlights the way in which in presenting a poetic narrative, the speaker is granted a form of authority over events in which she might otherwise be powerless. One example of the way in which this might work is found in her well-known poem 'The Disappointment'.

'The Disappointment' belongs to a genre of poems, usually written by men, on the subject of premature ejaculation or impotence. The most famous other example of the genre is the Earl of

Rochester's poem 'The Imperfect Enjoyment', in which his inability to perform marks the starting point of a sustained and comic attack on his penis. In this genre of poems the speaker of the poem was always a man. Usually the poem would tail off into either a comic mock-heroic piece on the penis as recalcitrant soldier, or a resolution in which the man was finally able to perform. The emphasis falls fully on the man's role in the sex act, which succeeds or fails wholly in terms of his perception of his ability to sustain his erection.

Janet Todd has suggested that Behn's poem was probably a product of her friendship with this circle, an attempt to show that she too could try her hand at one of the most laddish of poetic genres. Her poem was a paraphrase of a French libertine poem on premature ejaculation, entitled 'L'Occasion Perdue'. But what differs in her version is that we are told of the woman's disappointment. The speaker clearly identifies with Cloris, the woman in the poem, as she states:

'The Nymph's resentments none but I
Can well imagine or condole:
But none can guess Lysander's soul'.

From the beginning, then, what we are presented with is an object lesson in the way in which a poetic retelling affects the meaning of what is told, as a woman tells what is traditionally a man's story.

The moment of sexual failure in Rochester's poem is followed by a description of the understanding woman, who from 'her body wipes the clammy joys', and asks 'must we not pay a debt to pleasure too?' From this point we never see the woman again. The speaker launches into a tirade against his pathetic member, which culminates in a series of curses that it may be punished by wasting away in consuming weepings. Other poems of the genre replicate this focus on the male response. The anonymous 'One Writeing Against his Prick' is exclusively composed of a tirade against the speaker's penis: his female lover only appears as the 'Port hole' that it has failed to enter.

In contrast, in Behn's poem we predominantly see the woman's point of view after the eponymous disappointment. Behn takes a genre devoted to the retelling of an event that traditionally marginalising the woman's experience, and replays it through the mouth of a woman.

Behn omits the second half of the French poem, in which Lysander pleads with Cloris to stay for another round of lovemaking. What we have instead in her poem is a description of Cloris's response to the disappointment, often through a reversal of potent images associated with female sexuality. The speaker inverts the Genesis myth of Eve's temptation by the serpent, rearranging its central components to tell a very different story. When Cloris touches the limp penis, it is compared to a snake. But rather than be tempted by the serpent, which according to Genesis will ultimately bring about her sexual subjugation, we are told that:

'Never did young shepherdess,
Gath'ring of fern upon the plain,
More nimbly draw her fingers back,
Finding beneath the verdant leaves a snake'.

The snake, which should be a symbol of seduction, or sexual awakening, is here literalised, returning to the slippery and creepy-crawly amphibian that it really is. Here there are two stories being retold: both the imperfect enjoyment, and the seduction of Eve.



[4]

Apollo and Daphne by Benedetto Luti [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Behn also plays with the image of Cloris's flight. We are told that Cloris flees from Lysander 'like lightning through the grove', and in the same way that Venus 'when her Love was slain,/With fear and haste flew o'er the fatal plain'. The scenario of which this fear and haste is most reminiscent, and which is evoked in the reference to Daphne, is an attempted rape. The attempted rape is an image that figured over and over again on the Restoration stage, and became central to imaginative and titillating reconstructions of the sexual encounter. But in 'The Disappointment' what causes this anxious flight is not the threat of forced sex, but Lysander's inability to perform in any sort of intercourse. In remodeling the imperfect enjoyment from the point of view of the disappointed woman, Behn borrows images and scenes from other representations of sexual encounters to demonstrate the authority gained in the narration of an event.

Behn's Translations and her Quest for Literary Status

Behn was attracted to poetry because of its high-culture status. Translation was considered to be a lesser art than original composition, but translations did hold a lofty association with the classics. Behn could use her translations to increase her literary status. In the case of her translations of Fontenelle, Lucretius, and La Rochefoucauld, translations also enabled her to enter into controversies on science, religion, and philosophy that otherwise would not be deemed fit subjects for the writings of an unlearned woman.

The problem with translation was that as a woman, barred from university education, she was not equipped with the tools of the trade. She didn't have the fluency in Latin and Greek that her contemporaries like Henry Higden and Thomas Creech did.

The concept of translation was crucially linked to gender by the fact that translating the classics opened those works up to the many women who didn't have the education to read them in the original Latin or Greek. This is a central concern of Behn's poem to Thomas Creech, on his translation of Lucretius. Behn writes:

'Till now, I cursed my birth, my education,
And more the scanted customs of the nation:
Permitting not the female sex to tread,
The mighty paths of learned heroes dead'.

Her great compliment to Creech is that in translating Lucretius, he opens up access to the classics:

'So thou by this translation dost advance
Our knowledge from the state of ignorance,
And equals us to man, ah, how can we
Enough adore, or sacrifice enough to thee!'

Behn seems divided between a desire to play the woman as victim, and the desire to compete in the public sphere on the same terms as men. In the epistle preceding one of her earliest plays, *The Dutch Lover*, she took issue with the notion of dramatic rules, and male playwrights' obsession with them. She argues the case for the uneducated playwright, using Shakespeare, with his 'little Latin and less Greek', as the prime model of the brilliant author not hidebound by learning. Yet at the same time she was also anxious to show that she could play the learning game. As ever, she wanted it both ways, and so she goes on to refer in the same epistle to Hobbes and Apollonius, suggesting that she too is mistress of the full range of classic and native authorities.

What are we, then, to make of Behn as translator and woman of learning, when she seems uncertain whether to play the ingenu or the old hand? Do her translations mark her difference from the male models that she follows, or her ability to imitate them?

A good place to start such an inquiry is with Behn's translation of Tallemant's 'Voyage to the Island of Love', published in 1684. This long poem analyses desire, courtship, and 'conquest' from the point of view of the male lover, Lisander, who tells the story of his love for Aminta to his friend.

'Voyage' is a love allegory, a sort of secular pilgrim's Progress. The poem describes Lisander calling in at various places, such as 'Jealousy' and 'The River of Despair', on his way to the consummation of his love in the final section, which is called 'The Prospect and Bower of Bliss'. It ends with the death of the nymph, Aminta, who dies during an erotic encounter in the bower.

Behn's version differs from that of Tallemant's in many ways, and one of the most significant of these is that her translation is more sensual than the original. For example, she transforms the French author's rather stale and abstracted 6-line catalogue of Aminta's beauties into 23 lines emphasizing the explicitly sexual attractiveness of her subject. The originally French translates roughly to:

'Because all the charms of blooming youth,
All that can inspire tenderness in the heart,
Her freshness, plumpness and sweet majesty,
The charming beauty of her mouth and complexion,
That pleasing mixture of roses and lilies,
Made the charm of her beautiful eyes inevitable'.

The description is mildly erotic in its mentions of physical attributes, but is not overtly sexy and certainly not bawdy. Behn's version reads:

'Her Neck, on which all careless fell her Hair,
Her half-discover'd rising Bosome bare,
Were beyond Nature form'd; all Heavenly fair.
Tempting her dress, loose with the Wind it flew,
Discovering Charms that wou'd alone subdue,
Her soft white slender Hands whose touches wou'd
Beget desire even in an awful God;
Long Winter'd Age to tenderness wou'd move,
And in his Frozen Blood, bloom a new spring of Love'.

The account emphasises the sexual attractiveness of a woman for the benefit of a male spectator, who, as in the theatre, is to be aroused by the partial discovery of her body as the wind blows her dress aside.

It is not immediately clear where Behn is positioning herself in translating a work like the *Island of Love*, written by a male author, with a male speaker, intended with a male audience and male pleasure in mind. Her modification of her source, shown above, involves the addition of sensational detail: in this she clearly exaggerates the libertine position that underpins Tallemant's erotic fiction.

We can read Behn's version in two ways. One is that in masquerading so entirely in libertine discourse, in becoming such a stagey kind of predatory male lover, Behn exposes the theatricality of conventional ways of describing sexual desire. In presenting a speaker who is even more of the libertine than he was in her original source, she shows the way in which that source was based on very set cultural constructions of gender difference: man as spectator and narrator, woman as object to be viewed. But we could also read it as Behn demonstrating again that she can do what she should not be able to do: write like a man, translate her French source so well that she sounds more like him than he does himself.

If Behn's translations are problematic in terms of gender issues, they're also complicated in terms of the concept of the writer as professional or amateur. Behn was attracted to translation because of its high-culture status, but also because it could pay well. Behn clearly wanted her translations to perform as literary products for an eager marketplace, and as works of literature, contributions to current debate about the nature of translation, that were being conducted by prestigious male contemporary writers like John Dryden, the Earl of Roscommon, and the Duke of Buckingham.

In her preface to *Seneca UnMasqu'd*, Behn outlines her theories about translation, and about the proper extent of the translator's fidelity to the text. Discriminating between writers who adhere strictly to the source, and those who adopt a looser approach, she declares her own preference for the freer style of translation, which is closely linked to a tradition of amateur writing. She says:

'For my part I must own I always prefer that unstudied, and undesigned way of writing (tho not so approved of by the learned) which is used by a Courtier who has Wit, as that of the late Lord Rochester and present Lord Mulgrave'.

Here she is clearly associating the freer forms of translation with the tradition and culture of the

aristocratic amateur. Yet she was producing these translations for money, to replace the sources of income she had lost by lack of interest in the theatre. At the same time that she was emphasising the ease and gentility of her translations in her prefaces and dedications, she was also literally begging for more money for them. There's an existing letter from Behn to the publisher Jacob Tonson, in which Behn asks Tonson for more money for her edition of *Poems on Several Occasions*, which included the translation 'a Voyage to the Island of Love'. Urging him to up the fee from £20 to £25, she says:

'Pray speake to your Brother to advance the price to one five pound more[?] I have been without getting so long that I am just to the poynt of breaking, especially since a body has no credit at the Playhouse as we used to have, fifty or sixty deepe, or more; I want extreemly or I wo'd not urge this'.

When we turn to the texts themselves, it's interesting to see that the ways in which she adapted her French sources suggest that her own translations were in fact very similar to the works of the 'Dramatick poor Devils' that she scorns in her preface and that she wishes to distance herself from. She transplants the French narratives into the world of Restoration comedy. If you look at the alterations she made to Tallemant's original in her *Lycidus: or the Lover in Fashion*, the social setting has a theatrical air. Whereas in Tallemant the young lover proceeds in an abstract fashion on his allegorical course of love, Behn shows Tallemant's development into a foppish, complacent gallant. She changes the names of the two women wooed from the pastoral Sylvie and Iris into a Bellinda and Bellimante, reminiscent of the names of heroines on the Restoration stage.

Behn blurs the distinctions between the high cultural genre of translation and the low cultural world of the playhouse, complicating our understanding of the relationship between genres and the relationship between amateur and professional writers. As ever, we are left uncertain as to where to position Aphra Behn.

See also:

[Who is Aphra Behn?](#) [5] - by Abigail Williams (ed. Kate O'Connor)

[Aphra Behn and the Restoration Theatre](#) [6] - by Abigail Williams (ed. Kate O'Connor)

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

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