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Aphra Behn's Comedies: A Critical Reassessment

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto práci vypracoval samostatně a uvádím plný seznam citované a použité literatury.

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ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

Tato práce si klade za cíl zmapovat literární ohlas her Aphry Behn a zasadit tyto hry do literárního kontextu dramatu v době Restaurace Stuartovců. Reputace Aphry Behn a jejího díla od dob Viktoriánské Anglie velice utrpěla, její díla byla předmětem cenzury a nedostávalo se jim pozornosti, kterou by zasluhovala. Její tvorba byla znovuobjevena na konci dvacátého století. Práce si klade za cíl poskytnout současný kritický pohled na její hry.

The thesis is about to map the literary reception of Aphra Behn's plays, situating it within literary context of Restoration Drama. Due to subjection of her oeuvre to critical and moral fashion, Behn's work and the reputation of herself as authoress has suffered from either censure and or neglect since the Victorian times, only to be rediscovered at the very close of the twentieth century. My thesis is to provide a contemporary critical view of her drama.

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to provide a contemporary reassessment of Aphra Behn's comedies, situating it within the context of Restoration drama, the later receptions of her works, and to present a contemporary critical view of her plays, while profiting from the growing body of recent research in Behn.

Before discussing Behn in any detail, it is worth to mention her immediate literary context in playwriting. It is equally important to discuss the question of woman writing during the Restoration period, to be able to situate her within the context of English society.

For discussion of Behn's comedies it is useful to mention her biographical information as her upbringing and political allegiance is deeply reflected in her plays. Also, it is worth of mention that much of her long-doubted biographical information seems to have become increasingly credible in the last thirty years.

The biographical section will also briefly discuss Behn as a poet, fiction writer, and translator.

Further sections will focus on the way Behn uses the genre of comedy. What are her recurrent motifs, characters, settings, themes and what is her message, thus possibly answering the question of relevance to 21st century readership.

Following will be a brief overview of Behn criticism discussing separately criticism of 17th & 18th century, early 20th century, and mention the change of perception of Behn during the late 20th century, accompanied by an overview of the state of contemporary critical writing.

This thesis aims to provide a feasible answer to the above themes, sum up the available information and provide more, as it will be needed.

Behn's Comedies within the Literary Context of the 17th Century

When discussing a literary person, and any person in general it is useful to give the person a context. This cannot be done in a perfect way, as trying to give a full context would inevitably lead to describing the history of world and tracing its notions as they have been passed down since prehistory.

It would be a task of gargantuan proportions to provide an exhausting description of plays written during Behn's lifetime in England, as merely those written during the last four decades of seventeenth century number about 400 pieces (play count taken from: *Aphra Behn*, 26).

This chapter shall therefore be a brief sketch of authorship of the second half of 17th century in terms of both women written literature and men authored comedies in England, focusing on the main tendencies that were the basis from which grew the literature of the Restoration period.

Staves gives us a very good overview of women writing of the period. She observes that during the Interregnum and the Restoration the Quaker women were very eager to preach and publish pamphlets. This is also a period of colonial writers such as Anne Bradstreet and Mary Rowlandson. And even after the Restoration of Charles II, some women defend the 'good old cause'. She also notes that: 'Almost 40 percent of all the first editions of books and pamphlets published by women between 1660 and 1690 were religious writings by Quaker women.' She further explains that as Quaker women were traditionally empowered speakers and activists for righteousness they became natural leaders of abolitionist and women's suffrage campaigns. (*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*, 29-30)

Further she notes:

Much of the writing of late seventeenth-century women was prompted, not by aesthetic ambition, but by this impulse to write what they believed to be truths, most urgently, to record the truths of their own experiences and what they believed to be truths that men in

positions of authority would not put in their records of the times.

(A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789, 31)

On the same page Staves reminds us that Quaker women were not the only ones active in religious writing, and that upper class Anglican women started publishing as well (*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789, 31*).

Taking in consideration the information above, it is clear that religious literature was the topic of the day during Restoration, and that women did not find it too awkward to express on the topic. As nearly 40% of the women written literature during the Restoration period was dealing with religion it is clear that women were not restricted to cookbooks, tales for children, and advice to young girls literature.

Beside being an expression of one's spirituality, and a way to enrich the Christendom, publishing religious literature became a way for women to defend themselves, and effectively wage battle with misogyny.

Shannon Miller in her article "All about Eve: Seventeenth-Century Women Writers and the Narrative of the Fall" argues that women were supplying counterarguments to the idea that women are culpable for the Fall, and that they are inferior to men (as voiced in Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, idle, forward and unconstant Women, 1615*) (*The History of British Women's Writing 1610-1690, 64-65*).

It might be interesting to note that if we read Paul Heger's *Women in the Bible, Qumran and Early Rabbinic Literature: Their Status and Roles* we will find out that this discussion has been going on for millennia, and that even the Qumran scholars were giving a more neutral view of women than Joseph Swetnam proclaimed (*Women in the Bible, Qumran and Early Rabbinic Literature: Their Status and Roles, 46-47*).

One of the most universally admired poets of the time was Katherine Philips, also known as The Matchless Orinda. Staves mentions that her poetry celebrated female friendship, love, and the virtues of rural retirement which she

associates with purity and innocence. Her poetry is more secular than that of religious authors. (*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*, 49)

It might be worth of note that before her untimely death of smallpox, Philips managed to publish her translation of Corneille's tragedy *La Mort de Pompée*, which became 'the first play by a woman to be performed on the British public stage.' (*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*, 53)

One may not fail to mention Cavendish family. William Cavendish, 1st Duke of Newcastle upon Tyne, his wife Margaret and his daughters Jane and Elizabeth were all practising playwriting (alongside other literary pursuits).

Margaret Cavendish was both a poet, fiction-writer and a playwright, beside other pursuits such as philosophy, and science. *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) is considered to be her masterpiece. Staves speaks of it as: 'Formally inventive, *The Blazing World* builds its narrative from generic elements including the philosophical essay, romance, utopian fiction, dialogue, travel narrative, and beast fable.' (*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789*, 82)

Marion Wynne-Davies in her article 'Early Modern English Women Dramatists (1610-1690): New Perspectives' explains that there were two major developments in way how women conceptualised writing of their dramatic texts in the seventeenth century: '... translation was eschewed for original writing, and performance gradually became intrinsic to the text.' She further mentions the innovation in woman's writing of the time as a recurrent element. Also in the 17th century appears a trend for performability of the plays. (*The History of British Women's Writing, 1610-1690*, 188)

She continues that the Cavendish women were making the first step in the performability of plays: they were envisioning a performance during writing. She also mentions the fact, that Duke of Newcastle's support was of great benefit to the playwriting skills of his daughters and wife. (*The History of British Women's Writing, 1610-1690*, 188-189)

Duffy argues that play *The Humorous Lovers* is by Margaret Cavendish, although printed and performed under her husband's name has been somewhat successful, despite facing criticism of being identified as a woman's, and facing remarks stemming from male chauvinism. (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 104-105)

From the words of both Staves and Wynne-Davies, it can be inferred that Restoration period was one of innovation in literature, especially in the area of women writing.

Women have become active in the field of religious literature, original playwriting and there were famous feminine poets as well.

It is time to turn towards male playwrights who affected the period and Behn herself.

William Cavendish serves here as a bridge between feminine writing and male writing as he was a strong supporter of women authorship, especially within his family. Beside being an intellectual, meritorious statesman, general, and in general a Royalist, he was also a poet, playwright, and a translator.

Among his plays we can list *The Country Captain*, or *Captain Underwit* (printed 1649), *The Varietie* (printed 1649), *The Triumphant Widow* (performed 1674, printed 1677), and possibly *The Humorous Lovers* (performed 1667, printed 1677; although it is disputed whether he or his wife wrote it). He also provided translation of *L'Étourdi* by Molière which Dryden later reworked into *Sir Martin Mar-all, or The Feign'd Innocence* (1667).

John Dryden is known as a prolific poet, playwright, literary critic, and translator. In 1668 he was named the first Poet Laureate. M. H. Abrams et al. note that Dryden was the commanding literary figure of 17th century, and the author whose work portrays the image of the age, expressing all important aspects of the life: politics, religion, philosophy and arts. His poetry is public, social and ceremonial rather than lyrical. As for plays he wrote rhymed heroic plays, comedies, opera and tragedies. Later in his life he started writing formal verse satire. Also he created poetic language that would remain basis for the poetic

language until early 19th century. (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 1786-1788)

Sir George Etherege, was an English playwright. Christopher Gillie describes that the three comedies he wrote influenced the style of Restoration Comedy and that their plots are unimportant, comedy depending on handling of witty and frequently cynical dialogue. (*Longman Companion to English Literature*, 510) Professor Trevor R. Griffiths adds in his introduction to *Etherege: The Man Of Mode* that after his success in the theatre he was appointed a representative to the Diet of Holy Roman Empire at Regensburg (*Etherege: The Man Of Mode*, v).

Further he proposes that Etherege's play he discusses is critical, of both the rakish character and the fop, and that he parallels them. Further he argues that the play's topic is critic of the excess. (*Etherege: The Man Of Mode*, xiii-xvi)

William Wycherley was an army officer, princely tutor, and a dramatist, having published four plays. Timothy Decker describes that while his plays deride fools and dupes, they also show the more perceptive characters as becoming abusive and predatory. He also notes that: 'Those who successfully manipulate language become socially powerful, yet language itself becomes meaningless in the process.' And that his works describe the tension between the necessity to adapt to immorality and the longing to resist it. (*The Oxford Encyclopaedia of British Literature*, vol. 5, 351)

If we take this information for Behn's context and use it in the following chapters we shall see that Behn was able to provide comedies that have their comicality stemming from the witty handling of the dialogue (similarly to her male counterparts) and that she manages to implant very sharp social criticism on a range of topics. This range of topics is broader than that of some other comedy writers – especially of those who were less prolific. Like Dryden she is able to write in verse, although verse is not the focus of her plays. Knowing her writing discusses sexuality explicitly, we can say she wrote in manner deeply similar to that of male authors of Restoration. Yet she differs in fact that her plays are in some way centred upon women.

Behn as a 17th Century Figure

Hidden from history.

Anne Laurence describes term 'hidden from history' as:

The term 'hidden from history' is used when the history of a hitherto neglected group begins to appear: as, for example, in the case of black history, women's history, lesbian and gay history and, most recently, the history of gypsies and travelling people. The phrase is not simply used to describe the group's emergence into mainstream history: it also has an explicit message that these groups have lacked a history because society has been unwilling to see them as a separate group with particular rights.

(Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History, 3)

Behn belongs to a group described by this term. She was a woman, and moreover, she was a woman writer. Her work was not fairly discussed for nearly two centuries, and she was truly rediscovered in the late 20th century.

The main source for this chapter is the 1989 edition of *The Passionate Shepherdess* by Maureen Duffy. One can not miss the difference that 1989 edition preface makes to the whole book, as the author opts to give a summary of her recent research in the preface, rather than to edit the body of text of the book. This way she, possibly unknowingly, creates a certain mass of conflicting material which shows her progress of gathering biographical information about Behn, and of course this research dramatically affected Behn scholarship, making much of the disputed information from 17th century sources much more credible. Even though there are scholars such as Wiseman (*Aphra Behn*, 4-7) who doubt them still and require hard evidence.

Nevertheless I opt to work with the information available, as it seems hardly possible to provide a better source of information for her life, than Maureen Duffy had provided during the years of her research.

Aphra Behn, nowadays known as the first professional woman playwright, was born Eafry Johnson to an impoverished branch of a gentle family on mother's side, and a yeoman father owning little more than their coat of arms, right to vote in parliamentary elections, an inn and a patch of land, but having connections to gentry and noble families. Her father might have also been a steward to Lord Strangford. Her mother was also a wet-nurse to Colonel Thomas Culpepper, and Duffy reminds us that we should not view a wet nurse as a person held in low estimation – it was held as a quasi familial bond, and the Colonel's mother was the daughter of Robert Sydney, Earl of Leicester. Her two brothers were doctors and her family was altogether well-tied to many noble families. (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 13-17; 28-30)

Duffy also notes, that Behn claims that her father died on voyage to Surinam to take up an official appointment as 'Lieutenant-General of six and thirty island, besides the continent of Surinam.' Duffy theorises that it might have been a result of great social mobility of the period or that Behn's mother remarried. Yet she remains certain that Behn set sail for Surinam. (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 36-37). It might be useful to add, that in the light of the interconnectedness of her family with Kentish gentry and nobility, Behn's claim certainly seems plausible despite no surviving official records.

After returning from her journey to Surinam she probably married a merchant called Behn (there are multiple possibilities) (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 56-58), who may have died in the Great Plague of London.

Becoming a widow gave Behn new choices: becoming the King's spy in 1666, which resulted only in great debts, and after that she faced debtor's prison and the uncertain future. As Maureen Duffy writes:

Once she was out, however, the problem how to survive presented itself again. She could marry. She could be kept. Or she could try to keep herself. Incredibly, it must have seemed to many people, she chose the last.

There was just one more possibility which she considered or which was suggested to her: a convent. (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 100)

Apparently Behn chose to become a writer, and as Wiseman says, she was a Tory writer (*Aphra Behn*, 3).

This was not a very respectable choice, as is noted by Laurence in her *Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History*:

From the second half of the seventeenth century, the performing arts were one area where women were able to practise a profession and to excel. But public performance was not considered a respectable *métier* for a woman and there were considerable social pressures against women making a profession out of the arts.

(*Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History*, 141)

By the time her first play was produced she was already a well-known poet (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 105) and later became a fiction writer and a translator of scientific texts which as Susan Staves mentions below bore greater prestige and importance than we give it now.

There are real tensions between these two Janus faces of my history, and the reader will have to judge how well I have managed them. The face turned toward the Restoration and eighteenth century sees women's nonfiction prose, religious writing, and translation as having been more significant than they are in the twenty-first century operative canon (although there are signs that the canon is shifting).

(*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain 1660-1789*, 7-8)

Behn translated works by French Enlightenment scholar Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle such as *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* as *A Discovery of New Worlds*, and *Histoire des oracles* as *The History of Oracles, and the Cheats of the Pagan Priests in two parts / made English*. Both were published in 1688 and were probably the more prestigious of Behn's at the time, being the scholarly books of Enlightenment.

Duffy in her *The Passionate Shepherdess* mentions that by appending an introductory essay to *A Discovery of New Worlds* arguing against the objections of Father Taquet against the Copernican theory of Earth and other planets orbiting

the Sun and other scholarly observations Behn made, she could have easily earned the reputation of a scholar. (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 279-281)

This could make her both famous and infamous at the same time. Laurence writes that: 'Translation was one of those scholarly activities which were felt to be within women's capacities.' on the other page she mentions another important fact: 'Women were largely excluded from the world of scientific exploration and experiment...' (*Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History*, 178-179).

By making scientific arguments she have overstepped the boundary of scholarly translation and people might either praise her for her deeds or condemn her for being even further non-conformist to the models of society.

But where did Behn receive the sufficient learning to be discussing astronomy?

In time when as Laurence notes 'Both men and women thought that learning inhibited a women's chances of marriage.' (*Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History*, 177) and their education was focused on marriage, practical skills, moral values (*Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History*, 165) it might be feasible to ask such a question.

The answer at hand is that she might have picked up education from one (or both) of her brothers, who were well educated.

As one of the first professional female writers, she encountered both a vogue for female authorship (Which Duffy describes as similar to curiosity for seeing a talking horse (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 104-106)) and a strong opposition of misogynic figures, who as S. J. Wiseman mentions claimed that it must be some of her lovers that wrote her pieces instead of her (*Aphra Behn*, 29-30).

Catherine Gallagher in her article "Who was that Masked Woman" argues that Behn embraced the idea of equation between a poetess and prostitute which definitely increased her fame (or infamy) and publicity at the cost of her reputation. (*Aphra Behn, Contemporary Critical Essays*, 12-31)

Sexuality would have been a common topic in the seventeenth century. Laurence claims that, women were highly aware of their sexuality and that it would be something discussed (*Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History*, 66).

Nearly all of Behn's writing revolves around sexuality, but in a different way than male libertine authors discussed it. Staves mentions that Behn claims special knowledge and authority in speaking of love. Furthermore she argues that: 'Behn, trying to work out a female libertinism, confronts the woman's problems of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, lost reputation, and most painfully, male lovers who, once sexually satisfied, rapidly grow indifferent.' (*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain 1660-1789*, 71)

The final lines of Behn's Preface to *The Lucky Chance* (the whole Preface has been of great interest to her biographers) are: "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." (*The Rover and Other Plays*, 191)

As will be discussed in the section concerning Behn criticism, it is interesting how much of a prophecy is hidden in these proud lines. After a brief period of great fame that extended a few decades past her death and her burial in Westminster Abbey, Behn's name became infamous in the eighteenth century – it was robbed of fame – and the memory of her retired from the ungrateful world for nearly two centuries.

Behn's Playwriting:

Genre

Behn wrote both tragicomedies (which mixed tragic potential with comic outcome) and comedies, but only one tragedy – the emotive *Abdelazar* (1676). (Aphra Behn, 26)

As comedies and tragi-comedies form the representative part of Behn's playwriting, and this thesis focuses on them, there will be little said about her only tragedy.

As Duffy writes: 'Cibber thought *Abdelazar* poorly written. Aphra Behn never again wrote a full blown tragedy, which suggests that, like marriage, it was an experiment she was disinclined to repeat.' On the following page, she mentions that compared with Ottway's and Dryden's tragedies, Behn puts emphasis on the action, while Dryden and Ottway on poetry (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 134-135).

Given the fact that tragedy was the high genre of playwriting at the time, it could simply require being entirely poetic which did not suit Behn's style of writing, and in turn Behn's style didn't much suit the audience.

The pattern of putting greater emphasis on action than verse is native to Behn's plays in general, although one cannot miss that at certain key moments, Behn switches from prose to verse, and that her plays can be littered with songs and poems despite the fact, that the bulk of the text is unrhymed.

Concerning Behn's comedies, it is useful to consider the proposition and reasoning provided by Duffy in *The Passionate Shepherdess*:

In practice few plays fall into the category of unrelieved tragedy or comedy. Most are tragi-comedies which lie at different points along a scale that reaches from farce to tragedy. Aphra Behn's first two plays are technically comedies in that they end happily but, in so far as their form of expression is mainly serious, rather than witty or comic, and their situations have the potential for tragedy, they must be called tragi-comedies. (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 108)

I would like to expand the reasoning, that even *The Emperor of the Moon*, although it is one of her brighter pieces, is not entirely free of a tragic element, that serves as possibly the main moral points of the play: that parents should not be picking spouses for their children. Doctor Baliardo serves for the ‘villain’ who would never accept the marriage of his daughters to their lovers. He also serves for the laughing stock of the play as he is lured into believing that the lovers of his daughters come from the Moon.

Despite the incredibility of the situation proposed by the play, I would say, that the play has a hint of something, that is not purely comic: the issue of parents picking spouses for their children, and as we will discuss in another chapter, picking one’s partner is one of Behn’s recurrent topics.

Wiseman notes that:

Behn’s comedies of intrigue (apart from *The Rover* and the exceptional *The Widow Ranter*) tended to be set in London many, though not all, were ‘city’ comedies in that they dealt with urban life and presented political, gender, and economic struggle in an urban setting similar to that inhabited by their audience. Her tragicomedies of the 1670s and later 1680s, however, use a different kind of plotting and foreign setting. *The False Count* and *The Dutch Lover* are both tragi-comedies, which John Loftis argues are influenced by Spanish plays of the period.

(Aphra Behn, 26)

Although that Wiseman states that Loftis argues that *The False Count* and *The Dutch Lover* are influenced by Spanish plays I would go a bit further and say, that Aphra Behn actually wrote Spanish comedies, and that *The Dutch Lover* is one of them (others being for example both parts of *The Rover*, *The Feigned Courtesans*, *The Emperor of the Moon*).

Speaking of Behn’s (and Centlivre’s) comedies Nancy Copeland in her book *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre* writes:

Not only are they ‘women’s comedies’, most are ‘Spanish’ comedies or employ some of that form’s characteristics. Plays of this type share a set of well-established conventions, including staging as well as plotting and characterization.

(*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 10)

Loftis defines the conventions of post-Restoration Spanish comedy: Spanish or Portuguese characters or settings, which he extends to include Spanish-controlled parts of Italy such as Naples, the setting of *The Rover*, episodic structure and an emphasis on action, the honour code as a central feature, generating in turn the duels which are characteristic of this type of play, and night scenes, which provide ‘an emblematic expression of the confusion that envelops the characters and a necessary condition for the mistaken identities on which the plot turns’ as well as the lack of consequences for the many duels. Loftis also stipulates a Spanish source as a necessary requirement for this type of play...

... Other critics are willing to admit plays that Loftis excludes: ones that have Italian settings, for example, or that cannot be traced to a Spanish original.

(*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 11)

If we observe the above criteria for Spanish comedies, many of Behn’s plays fit in either completely (as the ones listed above) or partially (*The Widow Ranter* is set in Jamestown, which is a foreign setting but not Spanish, and would thus fit in only partially).

I would argue, that Given Behn’s tremendous fame and popularity, it is probable that her writing style was not only influenced by Spanish comedies written by others (which she was aware of and used them as sources), but that she influenced the whole genre herself, especially by creating long lasting plays and powerful heroines that behave not as pawns but as queens in the game of chess.

Mode

A happy ending is considered to be a part of any definition of a 'comedy'. Many of Behn's comedies have it... yet they offer a thoughtful reader more than one opportunity to question the happiness of the ending.

Kate Aughterson elaborates a bit on this topic in her guide *Aphra Behn: The Comedies*. According to her, the use of commentator characters, characters whose character fails to improve, or are simply excluded from the happy ending, and furthermore Behn also juxtaposes convention with unconventionality (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 52-53).

This is far from the typical idea of comedy, in fact it features tragic points, and as Aughterson notes: There is a possible tragic outcome as well (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 52-53). Especially if we consider behaviour of many of the characters and the questionability of their moral values.

This results in ambivalence of the ending, which although presented as a happy ending of a comedy, features disturbing undertones and uncertainties that grant many of Behn's plays a feeling of unresolvedness.

As Ema Jelínková writes in her *British Literary Satire in Historical Perspective*:

Although many critics associate satire with comedy, satire in narrative more closely resembles tragedy in its unresolved ambivalence.

(*British Literary Satire in Historical Perspective*, 10)

Therefore it can be argued that many of Behn's comedies are in fact satires. As such, they can be divided into having two primary targeted areas: politics and interpersonal relationships, especially between men and women, or between parents & children. Also duelling becomes one of the ridiculed aspects of the society.

Jelínková also discusses in her book the topic of Restoration satire, and in the chapter there is the introductory paragraph to Restoration theatre quoted below:

Restoration theatre provides us with the darker elements of the human psyche. Restoration comedies of manners (as opposed to the much-idealizing heroic drama) are at the same time perceived as satires, flaunting the extremely cynical status quo of the newly liberated society. Characters in plays are motivated primarily by carnal desires and lust for money. These tensions and questions as to the nature of humanity (beastly and rabid inside, polite and sophisticated on the outside) are often explored by the artists of this period.

(British Literary Satire in Historical Perspective, 32)

This gives us one of the areas to look for objects of satire in Behn, as we will do further in this chapter

In another chapter of her book, Jelínková speaks of women satirists, mentioning Behn, and some of the areas of her objects of satire: double standards for men and women; outspoken and charming rakes, pursuing whatever they want the most, regardless of their prey (*British Literary Satire in Historical Perspective*, 64-65). Still, these are very few of the things that Behn satirises and the list will be further expanded on the following pages.

Themes, Objects of Satire & Characters

Given the above argumentation that Behn wrote satire, the next step is determining what was Behn satirising and why. We already know that she was a Tory writer.

Her satire is multifaceted, sometimes showing signs of discontent even with those whom she supports. We will start discussing the political part of her satire.

As Susan J. Owen says in the opening of her article “ ‘Suspect my loyalty when I lose my virtue’: Sexual politics and Party in Aphra Behn’s Plays of the Exclusion Crisis, 1678-83”: ‘Behn was not only writer commenting on the sexual politics of her time, but she also intervened in the high politics of her time’ (*Aphra Behn, Contemporary Critical Essays*, 57).

Behn comments on the politics of her time through her plays, and does so by creating Whig characters such as old merchants, citizens & puritans and making villains out of them, while members of impoverished gentry and aristocracy – Tory characters – are the heroes, or at least would-be heroes. Behn frequently pairs up both plots and characters and then we get even contrastive gallants, despite the fact that Whig characters are usually similar to each another in character.

This leads us to a couple of questions: How do Tory characters differ – especially if they differ in a single play? How does she make villains out of Whig characters?

Behn does not use merely a single type of male royalist character: she uses both rakes (Willmore, Galliard, Gayman...) and enamoured gallants of high morals (Belvile, Fillamour, Belmour) and contrasts them.

There are also either neutral minor characters (servants) or comic characters that are not Whig characters (Blunt, for example) which are not serving politic part of the plot. Behn’s Spanish comedies also feature native characters who are frequently obsessed with honour, although hypocritically they do not have honourable aims all around (in *The Rover*: Don Antonio, meant to get

married yet looking for the courtesan at the same time, Don Pedro nearly ravishing his sister unknowing it is her).

Whig characters are characterised by hypocrisy and lust, especially for young maids, and money. This all is frequently paired with old age of the villain characters (as Sir Feeble Fainwould, and Sir Cautious Fulbank in *The Lucky Chance*, or the puritan divine Tickletext in *The Feigned Courtesans*.) and foppishness (Tickletext again, as well as Sir Signal Buffoon).

One of the objects of satire that stems from what has been mentioned so far is the subject of 'sense of honour' combined with hypocrisy. The Whig characters, as well as some of the 'honour bound' characters are considering themselves honourable if they just manage not to get caught. Such characters are for example Don Antonio, Don Pedro, Tickletext, Sir Signal Buffoon, Sir Feeble Fainwould, Sir Cautious Fulbank, Gayman, and Julia Fulbank. There are contrasting characters to these behaving with much more integrity with the code of honour and Christian beliefs (Belville, Fillamour...).

Examining given sets of male characters one might easily come to the conclusion that they are actually caricatures. If we look at their names, we easily find out that they are very descriptive, and this is what Aughterson says in the conclusion to her *Rakes and Gallants* section:

All the male characters have allegorical names (unlike the women characters). The rake's names help tell us how these characters are to be interpreted morally. Willmore and 'the rover' tell us that free will and roving manner will dominate his actions. Belvile, meaning 'belle of the town', names him an attractive gallant. Fillamour, meaning 'fine love', and Galliard, a lively dance, suggesting a courtly and a fun-loving character respectively. Belmour, a beautiful love, and Gayman, a man epitome of frivolity, are all names which infect and inflect our interpretations of their characters. The names are a guide as to how the characters will and do act within the play, and a guide to Behn's satirical aim.

(Aphra Behn: *The Comedies*, 123)

The same can be said about the villains: Sir Feeble Fainwoud, Sir Cautious Fulbank, and the puritan divine Tickletext are more than descriptive names for an old man wishing for a young bride, old man who values money over his wife and a man who is more than a bit willing to go into erotic thoughts, despite being a puritan divine.

It is interesting to point out, that although the 'Tory' characters win the in comedy, there still a heavy presence of dichotomy of honourable Christian idealist Tory characters and rakes. This results in rather unquestionable happy ending for the pure ones, while rake characters, who usually bear some additional bad character traits along, end up with a happy ending that is more disputable.

This much more subtle criticism might be interpreted as a gentle reminder to the court and the king, but also to the whole society, that moral values have their place.

Sometimes, however, this mostly-indirect critique of rakishness completely overshadows the political aim of the play. Wiseman argues that Behn in *The City Heiress* is providing both a very sharp critique of Whigs through Wilding's speech. And still Behn portrays Wilding as an extremely inconsistent syphilitic person untrue even to his own twisted ideals. Also Wiseman points that this play was a very sharp satire of the audience near the stage, and its community. (*Aphra Behn*, 39-42)

A syphilitic man courting two women while keeping a whore, and later using her as a weapon against his uncle is a very contradictory character, and can be easily described as a caricature... However, with our knowledge of Restoration society, such caricatures might have very well been sitting in the audience, receiving plenty of thinking matter.

Despite that, one might say, that Behn was no image of purity to be chastising anyone, having adopted for herself the imagery of a sexually available woman. However, it is not entirely impossible to criticise society, while being part of the criticised layers, and it is not entirely uncommon amid satirists to criticise one's own.

As Aughterson mentions in the quotation above, women characters are generally not carrying allegorical names (an exception to the rule being for example the character Sensure). Also there might be a parallel in the name of Angellica Bianca and Aphra Behn, as Janet Todd mentions in her introduction of *Aphra Behn: Contemporary Critical Essays* on page 9.

In fact, in opposition to simplified, caricaturised male characters, Behn uses developed female characters and frequently imbues them with the potential to progress the plot.

While discussing feminine characters we are moving out of the field of political satire, into the satire of social relationships, and satire of commentary on the position of woman within society. Of course there is no distinct boundary between the two, but one is more expressed with male characters whereas the other with female ones.

Being more developed characters and complex situations, these will be dealt separately, in the plays: *The Rover*, *The Feigned Courtesans*, *The Lucky Chance* and *The Emperor of the Moon*.

The Rover

Florinda

Kate Aughterson provides a very good description of Florinda as a polite, ladylike character who does act in reaction, not out of her own initiative, and that she is more of a victim of the circumstance than agent of her destiny. Having nearly become a victim of multiple rapes, Florinda points to the vulnerability of a passive woman who has moved out of the confines of family and domestic space. (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 84-85)

Hellena

Aughterson follows with the description of Hellena. She speaks of her as self-aware, active, witty and outspoken, having no trouble speaking her mind, nor taking up a disguise (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 85-86), and successfully manage to find herself a husband.

One of the things she doesn't do, if we compare her to some other of Behn's active heroines is that despite her skill in fighting with words she does not use a sword, nor pistol. This might be explained by her background of being raised to become a nun.

Angellica Bianca or... Aphra Behn?

A famous, proud and beautiful... courtesan, sharing her initials with the author. Behn was about 37 when *The Rover* premiered, and probably was still counted among beautiful women (she had a reputation of beauty). There might be many interesting parallels of Angellica Bianca and the author.

Duffy makes an interesting claim, that Hoyle is the probable model for Willmore (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 144). If Hoyle is model for Willmore, and Behn shares her initials with Angellica, she might have put a bit of her personal history into the play. Still I would say, that Angellica – a woman who first refuses love and accepts money, and then after a turning point of her life in desperation grabs a pistol to threaten, and possibly kill the man, who has hurt her – is not necessarily that far in her portrayal from Behn, who served the Crown as a spy, later opted to become the first professional female playwright (working for money publicly), and plainly spoken: sought fame with all courage she could muster.

Angellica's speech quoted in *Aphra Behn: The Comedies* along with its analysis: it is metrical, self-analytical, intimate & simultaneously dangerous. The speech is rife with metaphors and tropes. It gives us Angellica's idea of prostitution as a way of achieving equality with men. And it introduces one tragic closure into the play. Aughterson also notes that the content of the speech is a plea for men to honour their words given to a woman (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 81-83). Also we might notice that Angellica opts for sex outside marriage, which does not end up happily, opposed to Hellena's choice.

Given all we know, it is more than probable that Behn made this character as a vessel for part of her life story and a speaker of her own cause.

Lucetta

Lucetta is a minor character, but it might be interesting to question her presence within the play. Behn might have just needed an evil character to create a comic situation, or she might have been reacting to misogyny of her time, by admitting that there were evil-acting women, but showing them as an exception. She is one of her few women characters that are painted in a way that is hard to sympathise with (other morally-wrong characters such as Julia Fulbank are meant to be sympathised with by the reader, perhaps by their current pursuit of love, while Lucetta pursues money).

The main messages of *The Rover* – beside the message that Royalists were cool roving adventurers during the Cromwellian period – is that a man should keep his word, even to a woman (or *especially* to a woman) and that polite, ladylike passivity is not a good protection against rakish or blunt men.

The Feigned Courtesans

Marcella & Cornelia

Both are sisters to Julio, who is looking for them. Both are feigning being courtesans, in order to hide from their brother's pursuit, and both are looking for their gallants. What is the difference?

Aughterson quotes dialogue from Act 2, scene i, of *The Feigned Courtesans* that perfectly shows us their difference in character. Marcella is the conventional type wishing for the stability of life in marriage. Cornelia is more of a wild girl who does not mind the idea of becoming a courtesan as that would mean economic and sexual liberty. Aughterson notes that while in a man Cornelia's stance would be rakishness, in a woman it can be perceived as a cry of sexual freedom and autonomy. She then argues that the discussion reminds us of the woman's need for economic support, and that selling oneself might be a way to support oneself. (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 88-91)

Aughterson also brings up a range of questions stemming from the dialogue mentioned above:

Should women conform to patriarchal models of female conduct, in both deed and word?

Does sexual liberation bring about equality for both men and women?

Should we care about appearances?

To what extent can prostitution be an act of self-determination?

(*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 88-91)

Cornelia does reject the idea of being merchandise of someone else's transaction. It is also interesting that Marcella calls Cornelia 'mad' (as much as Hellena called herself 'mad' in *The Rover*) and Aughterson argues that this is a way in which Behn distances herself from the character's opinions (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 91).

It might be added that Cornelia has no trouble with assuming the role a messenger boy, and intervening in the plans of Laura Lucretia, in order to get Galliard, making use as much of the circumstance as she is able to.

Laura Lucretia

Laura is a character with psychology somewhere between Hellena and Angellica from *The Rover*. She definitely does not want to become a public woman, yet she is a very active pursuer of the man she fell for – Galliard, and she is not afraid of luring him into her bed. Like Marcella or Cornelia she has no trouble with assuming the identity of a courtesan, and she has no trouble with assuming a male identity: that of a Count Sans Coeur, nor is shy to successfully wield a sword (as she does in scene I of Act 2) (*Aphra Behn: The Rover and Other Plays*, 117).

Despite her lively activity and effort, she ends up with the prospects of marrying her fiancé and not Galliard whom she was plotting for, although it might be argued that she is still safe from the worst as, despite her politics, she yet remains a virgin.

Aughterson analyses her soliloquy of Act 5, scene I as following:

Laura's language echoes that of a tragic rather than comic heroine. Like Angellica in *The Rover*, Laura is prepared to have sex, whilst the

other women only play with the idea. Their tragic self-presentation, and their exclusion from happiness at the play's closure, may be conservative moral punishments, in conventional comic mode, for any behaviour not conforming to the dominant model of how sexual relationships should work. However there is an alternative way to read and view this. By placing a tragic register within a comic frame, Behn demands that we listen to these women's voices. We see them marginalised not only by their own desires and attempt to enact them, but by the constraints placed upon them by men's attitudes. Additionally, in each play their views are echoed and paralleled by a successful woman (Hellena and Cornelia respectively), intimating that there should be a space for female sexual autonomy, but that social constraints prevent this.

(*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 93)

While Aughterson's analysis is definitely valid, it might be more probable that Behn wrote the characters of Laura and Angellica both as a plea for understanding for women, who, through sheer love, want to give themselves away, and a warning to women to be careful about what they allow men to do with their bodies, as many men are looking for sex, not marriage (or long-term relationship). Both Angellica's, and Laura's man of choice is a rake, which either may lead or leads to a potential disaster.

The fact that *The Feigned Courtesans* depicts the failure of the bravest and most cunning woman in pursuing her plans, might be either considered a criticism of a woman pursuing a man with love in mind, or it might be just Behn writing her own story. We know that authors in general frequently tend to be autobiographic – to some degree.

Also it is worthy to mention, that none of the heroines is content with their fiancés, as was the matter of *The Rover* (where Hellena was not given a fiancé but was supposed to become a nun instead) and they set out to get themselves the men they desire.

It might be hard to determine what Aughterson means by 'female sexual autonomy'. I would say that it is the ability to choose one's partner. And it was actually *partially* present at the time. There simply were families that allowed their children to pick their wife or husband with (at least a limited amount of) freedom. Behn definitely strived to criticise those who did not. How did she actually do it? Simply by making her characters shun the arranged marriage and making happy-endings be a romantic marriage and not a forced/arranged one.

The Lucky Chance

Lady Fulbank

It is interesting to note how Aughterson portrays Lady Fulbank. In the few pages devoted to her character she claims that Lady Fulbank is unconventional, honest, self-knowledgeable, refusing to conform to behavioural models, quotes Lady Fulbank's line: 'I value not the censures of the crowd.' Aughterson continues that Lady Fulbank at the moment chooses virtue, won't be owned by another man, and that her rhetoric is similar to libertine, but defending free thinking and virtuous independence. (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 96-98)

It would be less misleading to consider her character to be a bit more self-contradictory and inconsistent than it is presented in the *Aphra Behn: The Comedies*.

Her idea of honour is that honour is intact as far as no-one knows it was violated. The same can be said about her relationship to virtue. Before the conversation cited by Aughterson in *Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 94-95, Lady Fulbank has already possibly cornuted her husband, and yet pretending that virtue pleases her more than cuckolding him. I would argue that such a succession of events and claims is not a result of character's honesty, but of lack of care of her husband, combined with amount of hypocrisy. Which of course leads us to Lady Fulbank as an image of perverted virtue, and false honesty.

Furthermore in Act 5 scene 6 of *The Lucky Chance* there is a clear contradiction to her claim cited above: 'I value not the censures of the crowd.' It reads as following:

GAYMAN Can you be angry, Julia?

Because I only seized my right of love.

LADY FULBANK And must my honour be the price of it?

Could nothing but my fame reward your passion?

What, make me a base prostitute, a foul adultress?

Oh, be gone, be gone, dear robber of my quiet. (Weeping)

SIR CAUTIOUS [*aside*] Oh, fearful!

GAYMAN Oh! Calm your rage, and hear me: if you are so,

You are an innocent adulteress.

It was the feeble husband you enjoyed

In cold imagination and nothing more;

Shyly you turned away, faintly resigned.

(The Rover and Other Plays, 263-264)

Fame is something that could be labelled ‘public perception’ that she refused to be considering important a few scenes before. She is either taking her honour outwardly, or again speaking against her own words.

Her honesty, and self-knowledge can therefore be doubted.

But why do we perceive her as a ‘good’ character whom we are compassionate (although critical) of?

Simply because of being married to an old, cowardly man (Sir Cautious), who values money over his young wife, and by being adored by Gayman, who, although being of very questionable morals, is one of the protagonists that the audience wishes success for.

But why did Lady Fulbank marry Sir Cautious? She preferred money to man she loved. It seems that she is took it the more practical than idealist route: marry for money, and keep yourself a lover.

Behn must have created this triangle of loose morals (Julia – Gayman – Sir Cautious) to cause an uproar of discussion. People would be discussing what is morally wrong, where there was much wrongness on all sides. Possibly the worst would be the wife-selling – putting up the Whig character to worst criticism.

Leticia

Leticia is (along with Belmour) a completely different character than Lady Fulbank. She is young, loving, faithful, shy, and passive, fearing woman. She functions as a lady-in-distress character.

Despite being powerless she is perhaps the easiest character to sympathise with, although due to her passivity there is not much, besides her lyricality to speak about.

Aughterson mentions that Behn gives Leticia's character the ability of expression in blankverse, which makes her expression feel more elevated (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 98-99).

Her name means 'happiness' in Latin, despite the fact, that she is not happy most of the play, but it might be hinting to the happy closure of the play.

A passive lady-in-distress of very noble character, Leticia is perhaps Behn's most morally abiding character whatsoever. Also she is probably one of least interesting of her characters, although one can not be able not to sympathise with her.

* * *

There are many social matters discussed in the plays above: double standards for men and women (much discussed by feminist critics), man & woman relationships, husband & wife relationships, arranged marriages & strategic marriages (marrying for money), also worth of mention are relationships of children and parents. Also it might be questioned whether Behn uses swordfighting scenes merely as a way to entertain the audience, or if she wishes to criticise duelling that was still common within the society (despite being outlawed by the King).

As far as social satire is concerned, perhaps the most striking of things Behn is pointing are double standards for men and women, this might be seen in the difference of fates of male and female characters who are behaving in a rakish manner, and the way audience perceived them.

The rakish behaviour is part of the matter next on the list: man & woman relationships. Rakes did not take their promises to women as seriously as they would their word to a man. Through her critique Behn urges men to be sincere and faithful in their promises to women. And also to be taking women as sentient beings and not just as objects of sexual pleasure or more simply as prey or source of income (as Willmore, Galliard, Gayman or Blunt would be using them).

The relationship of a husband and a wife is shown as complicated and intertwined with the topic of arranged and strategic marriages and further combine with the relationships of parents and children. We can compress it into a stamp 'familial relationships'.

Young unmarried characters are generally running away from their arranged marriages trying to be married to the ones they fall in love with. This is a medium for Behn's critique of both loveless arranged marriages and parents choosing spouses for their children.

Strategic marriage for money might be undertaken willingly – as is in the case of Lady Fulbank. Behn is showing a certain level of criticism against that as well by contrasting it with Leticia's pure love.

Duelling is another recurring motif of her plays. Both in *The Rover*, and in *The Lucky Chance* it causes trouble to the protagonists. Belmour arrives in *The Lucky Chance* as an outlaw, whereas Belville in *The Rover* becomes imprisoned. Yet in other plays such as *The Feigned Courtesans* and *The Dutch Lover* duelling becomes rewarding. It is therefore open to question, and further research whether Behn desired to ridicule duelling or whether she simply successfully used it as a motif of Spanish comedy.

As far as political satire is concerned, it might be said that while Behn remains overtly supportive to the royalist cause, she manages to subtly criticise the rakish lifestyle of the court simultaneously.

The Emperor of the Moon

Is an altogether different story when compared to the plays mentioned above, and thus deserves its own chapter.

This chapter won't be discussing characters in such detail as they were discussed above, as they are less developed than in the afore mentioned plays.

Plot is very simplistic: two noblemen court daughter and niece of a savant against his wishes. Uncle is a savant interested in astrology and alchemy, and with the help of two stock comic characters (and their mistress): Harlequin, Scaramouch they manage persuade him, through staging a play (inside the play) that they are the rulers of Moon. They wed doctor's daughter and niece, and just afterwards cure him of his lunacy (belief in alchemy and astrology).

As Staves mentions, *The Emperor of the Moon* is based on:

... an Italian *commedia* acted in France, Nolant de Fatouville's *Arlecchino, imperatore nella luna*, but much of the dialogue is Behn's. The play demonstrates her familiarity with earlier seventeenth-century voyages to the moon, including Francis Godwin's *Man in the Moon* (1638) and Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des états et empires de la lune* (1656). Some imaginary voyages principally aimed at satire, but Behn's genial *Emperor* is more about having fun with a rich mix of ideas and jargons and about the pleasures of theatricality.

(*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain 1660-1789*, 80)

Theatricality is one of the topics of the play, as much of the plot simply is 'a play within a play'.

The Emperor could be also taken for a Spanish comedy – the setting is Naples controlled by the Spain, and plot is centred on love intrigue, with certain parts of the plot taking place during night time. These arguments would be for a Spanish comedy. But is far closer to *commedia dell'arte* with its use of exaggerated stock characters (Scaramouch, Harlequin, Doctor...).

If one would be thinking of *The Emperor of the Moon* a satire, it would be a Horatian satire which is mild and laughable, aimed at the belief in astrology, and possibly by its relation, to alchemy, which seem to be in Behn's view pure foolishness. The other wave of criticism is aimed on patriarchal control over children in terms of their possible future marriage.

However, there is a lack of possible tragic outcomes though, and most situations with any pessimistic outlook are so comical, that any hint of seriousness or tragedy is disqualified.

There is nearly no ambivalence of ending as the audience is not promoted to think about the hastiness of marriages, nor effects of characteristics of characters upon their future relationships, although it might be reached by over-analysis.

The play ends up happily, presumably for all sides. Although we might not be certain about Harlequin-Scaramouch plot, but those are generic and nameless characters – more of a technical means to progress the play – and the audience definitely does not take them seriously, despite being possibly the most developed characters. Furthermore, there are no directly visible uncertainties present in the play.

All this would argue against satire but for pure comedy with a corrective aim.

Still the play is littered with small hints of misogyny put into the mouths of various characters ranging in their causes from pure lunacy, hotheadedness and misunderstanding to a wish for revenge.

In Act I, scene 2, Doctor Baliardo exhibits the 'lunacy misogyny':

CHARMANTE I hope you do not doubt that doctrine, sir, which holds that the four elements are peopled with persons of a form and species more divine than vulgar mortals—those of the fiery regions we call the salamanders, they beget kings and heroes, with spirits like their deietical sires. The lovely inhabitants of the water, we call nymphs. Those of the earth are gnomes or fairies. Those of the air are sylphs. These, sir, when in conjunction with mortals, beget immortal races.

Such as the first born man, which had continued so, had the first man ne'er doted on a woman.

DOCTOR I am of that opinion, sir, man was not made for woman.

CHARMANTE Most certain, sir, man was to have been immortalized by the love and conversation of these charming sylphs and nymphs, and woman by the gnomes and salamanders, and to have stocked the World with demi-gods, such as at this day inhabit the empire of the moon.

DOCTOR Most admirable philosophy and reason.—But do these sylphs and nymphs appear in shapes?

(*The Rover and Other Plays*, 284)

This extract shows us multiple points. First of all that Doctor Baliardo is foolish enough to believe in the Moon world. By saying that man was not made for woman, he assumes a misogynic stance. Still he asks whether the sylphs and nymphs have shapes... Isn't it a sexual question? He moves the focus of his sexuality from women onto mythical beings. This creates a sense of a lunatic misogyny.

Charmante and Harlequin nearly kill their friends out of jealousy, after they encounter them in a wardrobe. There are also multiple swordfights between Harlequin and Scaramouch across the play (over their mistress).

There are multiple scenes where the male lovers show their jealousy and... opinion of women. One of such examples of a jealous lover is the whole Scene 3 of Act 1 (*The Rover and Other Plays*, 289-296) which is too long to quote but in itself shows prejudice against the fidelity of woman by jumping to the conclusion that the encountered man must be a lover... must be *her* lover.

In his speech closing Act 2, Scaramouch says: 'I must deliver these letters, and I must have this wench, though but to be revenged on her for abusing me.' (*The Rover and Other Plays*, 312)

Far from the chivalric expression of love as it might be, Mopsophil is not behaving any better, for she toys with her two lovers for the whole play. In the last scene she even says: ‘... well I better take up with one of them, than lie alone tonight.’ (*The Rover and Other Plays*, 332)

The whole acting of her character of course confirms the Scaramouch’s idea that his mistress is abusing him, and makes his acting less misogynic, still... does he really want to revenge on her in the end? We don’t know. Possibly not.

The misogyny expressed by the characters is altogether minor and is by most the result of jealousy.

Another issue the play brings into discussion is the patriarchal control over the marriage of the offspring. It is the main theme of the play, along with the questioning of the wisdom of authority (as the authoritative patriarchal figure was proven foolish).

However the criticism is not sharp, as it needs to remain within the overall mood of the play: it needs to be laughable.

It is interesting that in *The Emperor of the Moon* the topic of male sexual libertinism seems to be absent. All characters, except the old Baliardo, are eager to marry, and seem not to be interested in the adventurous rakish life. This might be an interesting turn in Behn’s writing... does she simply voice some of her idealism in this play or is there something else happening? This might prove a valid question for further research.

The Emperor of the Moon is a completely different play than the satires discussed before it. It is not a Spanish comedy, but it is modelled after the Italian commedia dell’arte. It definitely is not satiric, although it might be slightly corrective. It lacks most of Behn’s serious topics, and only the topic of arranged marriage is touched on more than a homeopathic scale.

Settings & Stagecraft

Behn makes use of both domestic and foreign settings (Rome, Naples, Madrid, Jamestown...) in her plays, both interior and exterior locations. Usually they are city plays, although in *The Widow Ranter* a considerable part of the story takes place in the heath and the wood.

From the foreign set plays we might name *The Emperor of the Moon* and *The Rover* for Naples, *The Feigned Courtesans* for Rome, *The second part of The Rover*, and *The Dutch Lover* for Madrid, and *The Widow Ranter* as taking place in and around Jamestown.

From the domestic plays such as *Sir Patient Fancy*, *The City Heiress*, *The Lucky Chance* can be mentioned as set in London.

Behn's plays frequently utilise both daytime and nighttime, making use of both the confusion and mysteriousness of the night.

Observing the data mentioned so far, we can say that Behn's plays generally tend to be situated into cities and tend to use both daytime and nighttime.

* * *

But what was the theatre Behn wrote for? What were the novelties of the Restoration theatre?

Wiseman gives us a very good description of Restoration theatre as one that was reconstituted and transformed after the closure of theatres during the Civil War and Protectorate. There were two patent companies organising the theatres of London, located at two theatres: the King's and the Duke's. The repertoire of plays before the civil war was divided between these companies and King went regularly to theatre instead of having performances at court. The theatre became politicised during the Civil War, and plays were reacting to the contemporary political events through the imagery of the Civil War and Protectorate. (*Aphra Behn*, 25)

The Restoration had been a tumultuous era in terms of political situation. Both Whig and Tory authors were playwriting, and the audience was composed of both Whig and Tory politicians and sympathisers. Theatre was full of politics (as well as poetry was). In theatre one would meet the whole spectrum of the society starting at the top with the King, and ending just above the lowest classes of the London society. It is no wonder that plays were stirring the society.

As Jane Spencer mentions in the Introduction to *Aphra Behn: The Rover and Other Plays* the description of theatre featuring beside other things: long platform stage, reaching out into the pit, boxes, galleries resulting in intimacy of players and the audience, scenic area behind the proscenium arch, used for spectacular scenery and other effects. (*Aphra Behn: The Rover and Other Plays*, xi)

It might be useful to emphasize that the Restoration drama was an indoors affair. Theatres were built with a roof and thus both the actors and the audience was protected from the moodiness of the British weather. This allowed the theatre to become more developed than could be the open air theatres of the previous era.

Spencer continues by arguing that Behn was ‘a great asset to the Duke’s Company, developing into a theatrical innovator who used the whole stage area, with forestage scenes increasingly interspersed with acting in the scenic area behind the arch.’ (*Aphra Behn: The Rover and Other Plays*, xii)

Also he notes that:

‘One of Behn’s hallmarks is the frequent use of the ‘discovery’ scene, when one set of scenery, painted on shutters, is drawn back to reveal actors in place behind. The successive revelation of a number of scenes, painted in perspective, was itself a visual novelty that delighted Restoration audiences, and Behn incorporated such visual effects into dramatic action, revealing the foolish Blunt, gulled by the jilting wench Lucetta, crawling out of a sewer...’

(*Aphra Behn: The Rover and Other Plays*, xii)

He further adds that Behn makes clever use of trapdoors, and uses balcony for Angellica’s territory in *The Rover*. In *The Emperor of the Moon* she gives the

audience spectacle of Parnassus and a temple, large flying machine and smaller chariots, actors pretending to be a tapestry and a telescope with a talking head. (*Aphra Behn: The Rover and Other Plays*, xii-xiii)

Spencer gives us a very good overview of Behn's skills in successfully and imaginatively utilising the whole space and much of the possible equipment of her time. By a comparison we might see Behn as a skilled artist-craftsman perfectly knowing the tools of her trade.

But this technical knowledge of theatre and how to use it was definitely not all that Behn's playwriting was. As Nancy Copeland argues throughout *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre* many of her plays were adaptations of previous pieces (as were many of Shakespeare's plays, and of nearly any other playwright of the period), altering them frequently in nearly every aspect and frequently using merely the bare plot with heavy modifications and creating a completely different message of the play.

Copeland lists us a number of shared points with Killigrew's *Thomaso*, the source play of two parts and ten acts, while noting that source for Florinda-Belville plot is Calderon's *Mejor está que estaba*, which of course, makes it even more of a Spanish comedy. A number of scenes are based on *Thomaso* very closely. Behn changes the setting from Madrid to Naples during the carnival festivities (carnival would not be usual in Spain). Carnavalesque setting is very beneficiary for the Spanish comedy, as it allows it to fully develop its features. Copeland continues that *The Rover* differs strongly from other Spanish comedies, even from those that use carnivalesque setting by its reorientation of values. (*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 18-19)

It is clear that Behn adds a feminine point of view and arguments to the genre. An example of such a point of view is Helena's response to Willmore's try to persuade her to love him freely: 'And if you do not lose, what shall I get? A cradle full of noise and mischief, with a pack of shame and repentance at my back?' (*Aphra Behn: The Rover and Other Plays*, 82) Which definitely serves as a sharp criticism and counterargument to libertinism.

Copeland continues her description of alterations that Behn did to *Thomaso* showing the reader how many places were improved with her attention to detail and theatrical genius by changing the neo-platonism of some of Killigrew's characters into romantic idealism, which contrasts with materialist pragmatism of other characters or by postposition of appearance of Angellica and conflating the two scenes it were in *Thomaso*. Also she makes Angellica a powerful and proud character in the way of her acting, unlike her regretful counterpart in *Thomaso*. Furthermore Behn makes use of greater part of the stage, makes her female characters more eroticised (and thus more visually appealing to the audience). Very fittingly she notes of Florinda: 'Florinda's experiences once she leaves her brother's house expose not only the brutality of male libertinism and the double standard applied to women based on their class, but also the inadequacies of her kind of femininity.' (*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 20-25)

From this all it is evident that Behn managed to use a play by Killigrew to make a point (or actually more of them, as was discussed above). Furthermore as far as we know *Thomaso* as a play *failed and was never performed*. *The Rover* managed to survive on stage for more than a century (reproduced until 1760, and with heavy alterations due to the fact that Behn's plays faced heavy criticism on moral grounds – J. P. Kemble's *Love in Masks*, 1790 (*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 53-59)) and now, during the period of rediscovery of Aphra Behn's works, is highly acclaimed by the scholarly societies both due to its multifacetedness, highly developed feminine characters, and a formidable sense of humour.

Aughterson in her *Aphra Behn: The Comedies* opens her chapter on Behn's Staging noting: 'Behn's theatrical and visual sense of how her plays should work on stage is clear from both the way the text performs and the authorial stage directions. (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 147)' She also provides a simple framework for analysis of staging that might be abbreviated into the following questions:

1. How do scenes achieve significance in relation to the surrounding scenes?

2. How do stage directions (including ones implicit in dialogue) illuminate the visual and physical choreography of dramatic meaning?
3. How dialogue, action and stage business illustrate and illuminate the blocking and choreography of characters, and the manipulation of stage space to engage the audience?
4. How characters manipulate the audience and consequently how Behn expects her dramatic writing to be interpreted?
5. How technical effects (including lighting, stage properties and mechanical devices) enhance dramatic meaning and understanding?

(*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 149)

She then applies the said framework on chosen scenes from *The Rover*, *The Lucky Chance* and *The Feigned Courtesans*. In discussing *The Rover* she argues, that by sandwiching Blunt's interlude with Lucetta between examples of Willmore's sexual voraciousness, the audience is drawn to see parallels between Blunt and Willmore and to see Willmore's, Blunt's and Belville's experiences as a continuum, seeing women as commodities. She further argues that women exhibited in the scenes she discusses are far more clever, sexually active, and intelligent than men. (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 150)

Also she notes that beside providing precise description of lighting, enlivening objects or parts of the scenes, and stage directions giving us an exact sense of visual imagining of the environment. Behn also plays with the expectations of both her characters and the audience using the element of surprise and at her time spectacular technical effects (descent and disappearance of a bed). (*Aphra Behn: The Comedies*, 150-153)

It might be interesting to mention how much visual play does Behn make in *The Emperor of the Moon*. It comes as little surprise as the play technically is 'a play within play'. Behn's imagination goes rampant while creating a fantastic scenery and depicting a fantastic topic of the Moon Empire. This results in the play being richly interwoven with stage directions.

Stage directions serve to create either a visual comedy (for example the whole Scene 1 of Act 3, when Harlequin fools the officer), or to create a breathtaking fantastic spectacle that stretches over the whole Scene 3 of Act 3 and besides setting up rich decoration of the stage, also utilises music, song, dance, chariots, duelling Scaramouch and Harlequin, and Moon, through which the Emperor, Prince and their train arrive.

Not having the opportunity to see the last scene (3.3) of the play acted, one might wonder how Behn wanted it to affect the audience. It combines comic aspect of audience's knowledge that *The Empire of Moon* is made up with an enthralling spectacle that, once Doctor Baliardo finds out that he has been deceived, returns into the comic relief of a happy ending. The overall mood of the pompous last scene depends upon the concrete staging and acting of the play.

Aughterson continues her chapter 'Staging' by discussing staging in *The Feigned Courtesans* and *The Lucky Chance*. Some of the points she mentions in her conclusion could be shortened into:

1. Behn has a clear three-dimensional understanding of how her texts will play on stage.
2. She uses all parts of stage to create a sense of fully rounded world, and thus develops complex relationships in both visual and thematic manner.
3. She uses stage directions and character blocking to confirm or contrast characters' senses of themselves and others.
4. Music, song and dance are key aspects of Behn's theatrical repertoire.
5. Behn's uses discovery scenes in structural, spatial, visual, and thematic way.

(Aphra Behn, *The Comedies*, 163-165)

To conclude on stagecraft, I fully agree with Spencer's and Aughterson's arguments that Behn managed to skilfully exploit the opportunities of the Restoration theatre, and fully integrate them into her plays creating a strong sense of realism in her plays, and convey a message to the audience. Also she was very skilled at adapting earlier plays making extremely successful pieces out of them.

The Development of Behn Criticism

The way Behn was portrayed changed greatly across the 350 years that elapsed since she set on the journey of professional writing.

17th Century

During the 17th century Behn faced two streams of criticism: those who were supportive of Behn, who were usually Royalist wits, and fellow Royalist playwrights, and those who opposed her – usually either misogynists or moralists. In relation to the latter group it shall be useful to mention ‘the myth about Behn’.

Duffy argues that Behn was receiving friendly support from Dryden, Henry Neville Payne, Ravenscroft, Buckingham and Rochester (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 121-128). Of course this support might be seen as somewhat uncritical as it stems out of her own group – the circle of people supporting the Crown, against the Parliament. Still, given the fact that they praised her skill and probably were also the ones she discussed her works with, it is important to note that she received support from a major group.

It is also important to note what Duffy mentions: that of the fifteen dramatists living at the time when she produced *The Forc'd Marriage* were: two earls, a duke, titular baron, and four were knights (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 111). This was the kind of élite society that Behn was part of – despite being of a much lower social status, she was definitely accepted.

Duffy also mentions part of the opposition Behn faced: the argument that ‘... if a woman wrote it, it can't be very good and if it's any good a woman can't have written it.’ and that she argued against Shadwell's thesis that plays should ‘amend men's morals and their wit’. Also her literary fate was affected by the political situation of the country (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 124-126).

Copeland mentions Michael Corder's description of the myth about Behn as: ‘that Behn's writing reflects a life pre-eminently concerned with sexual love.’ Further noting that this myth was developing during Behn's lifetime and lasted into 19th century. (*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 8)

This background stems from her erotic writing, and is in reality highly improbable, unless Behn was barren. Laurence mentions that we hardly know anything about contraception in Early Modern England. And that any deliberate attempts to inhibit fertility were regarded as a sin. We have little evidence for any birth control, and as she mentions the only techniques available until the early eighteenth century to prevent conception were coitus interruptus, abstinence and extended nursing. (*Women in England 1500-1760, A Social History*, 63-64)

Another point of view might be offered by Copeland's quotation of Tim Hitchcock that '[n]on-heterosexual sex outside the context of marriage was certainly a heinous sin, but it was not a perversion of "nature", nor a psychological illness.' (*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 4)

If we take into account her play *The Convent of Pleasure*, one might think that Behn might have been advocating female homosexuality. She might have simply acknowledged its existence (as the society of the time probably did). She might have become lesbian towards the later years of her life, due to her disappointment with John Hoyle deserting her. This would then be possible during the last decade of her life. But we can not be certain about any such outcome, and while reading her texts it is important to keep in mind that in Restoration contexts 'making love' would have been an expression for amorous courting, not for sex.

The amount of sexual life Behn led is an open question, especially given the low amount of her letters that survived until today. We are therefore left with impressions given by her poems, plays and literature, and it is important to keep in mind, that Behn was writing professionally: in other words, she was writing what would earn her her living in high society. And thus we are left with the Myth of Behn.

Yet against this mythical background Behn was judged by her contemporaries, and we can hardly judge how much of it was reality. Still it was the argument that made Behn gradually more and more infamous and near-forgotten during the next two centuries.

18th Century

Among the many changes the 18th century brings to drama, we shall note the most relevant ones for Behn's plays: theatres become bigger and more middle-class, plays become more didactic (*Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, 78;80). It is clear that the didacticism of the plays stems from the middle-class audience and the ideology of society. Let us explore these changes deeper.

In *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*, Felicity A. Nussbaum notes Ballaster's words that about 1740 the cult of domesticity prevailed and quelled women's expression of both the erotic and the political. She continues that at mid century maternity and femininity displaced overt sexuality. (*Torrid Zones*, 24)

Nussbaum further argues that it was the interest of the British Empire to denounce overt female sexuality within Britain – and exclude it from England's borders in order to heighten the prestige of the British nation (*Torrid Zones*, 95-96).

According to Paul Goring, Jeremy Collier published in 1698 *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* leading to a debate regarding proper social function of theatre bringing into focus growing public dissatisfaction with theatrical culture (*Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, 79-80).

Staves also mentions the emergence of Societies for the Reformation of Manners alongside with the prominence of moral writing attacking Restoration drama including Behn's (*A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain 1660-1789*, 91-92).

If one does read through the chapter 'The Rover and the Repertoire' of Copeland's *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, we see the process through which Behn's play becomes gradually more fitting to the transforming morale values of the 18th century: the story changes and the characters transform and their features becomes increasingly less accented. This is true even for new productions and plays inspired by Behn's work.

Copeland supports these arguments for example by arguing that Manley's play *The Lost Lover* while inspired by Behn's *The Rover* features passive, and de-sexualised women as the successful ones, and that some womanly qualities can be admirable in a man. She also notes that in the 1709-10 production of *The Rover* Willmore becomes the leading role of the play. (*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 51-52) On further pages we see the process of Behn's play being trimmed losing Angellica's soliloquy, transformation of Blunt subplot, diminution of Bellville-Florinda plotline. Also we see Steele's criticism of the play on moral grounds. Later renditions of the play she discusses in the chapter also exclude scenes of Blunt's emergence from the sewer.

It is interesting that she shows another contemporary point of view: defence. Ryan was defending his 1741 production by pointing to the fact that Belville and Florinda were acting virtuously and that the play shows that 'Vice, however adorn'd with Charms, has not Force enough to fix the Rover's Mind, which the Spirit, Wit, and Virtue of Hellena's Character compleats, without Knowledge of her Birth or Fortune'. (*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 58)

Not much to the surprise of the reader the Kemble's 1790 rendition of *The Rover* is further altered and little of interesting parts of Behn's invention remain. Copeland provides discussion of Kemble's version on pages 59 to 65, concluding with words:

"Kemble's *Rover* deprived Behn's play of sex, danger, ambivalence, and even spectacle, thanks to the reduction in the number of masquerading supernumeraries and the substitution of uniform dominos for many of the 'masquing habits' called for in the original. Its protagonists are simplified into familiar late-eighteenth-century types—innocent 'romp', impulsive gentleman, victim of love—and an attempt is made to inoculate it with prudential morality..."

(*Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, 65)

During the 18th century the binary character of criticism shifts towards a staunch opposition towards Restoration mode of writing, and to massive alteration in the Kemble's adaptation of Behn's longest living play, which made it unplayworthy, as the core of the original play disappeared, *The Rover* then disappears, and Behn is known mostly as an immoral and unread author until the first rediscovery during the onset of the 20th century, and later rediscoveries in the second half of 20th century.

Early 20th Century

Early 20th century criticism of Behn is impersonated by the personae of Virginia Woolf, Montague Summers and Victoria Sackville-West. They will be discussed in this chapter comparatively separately, despite being interconnected.

Virginia Woolf

Wiseman describes Woolf's discussion of Behn starting from the point of view that was depicting Behn as an uneducated and unfree woman (compared with Charlotte Brontë), and using her as a step on the ladder leading to the emancipation. Woolf doesn't give a detailed critical analysis, nor is historian. (*Aphra Behn*, 112)

Given Behn's biography discussed thus far, this point of view is already refuted. Behn was in her time an autonomous woman, widely acknowledged author of poetry, fiction and drama, and also probably achieved reputation of a femme-savante.

Woolf changed her view of Behn by 1929, removing the unfavourable contrast with Charlotte Brontë from her critic of Behn, still she valued Behn far more for the fact that she wrote on equal terms with men than for the quality of writing she produced. She values her more as a feminist figure than a feminine author. Beside mentioning these facts, Wiseman also questions whether Woolf read Behn in detail at all. (*Aphra Behn*, 114-115)

Taking in account the information mentioned, Woolf seems to be discussing Behn for a purpose: using her as a feminist figure. It is strange that she demotes her literary effort when compared to her role as being on par with the men of her time, because her writing has a palpable sting of feminism in it and touches the question of equality, dialogue, frankness & fidelity between men and women frequently in her writing. Wiseman's questioning of whether Woolf read Behn in detail, seems more than adequate.

Montague Summers

Montague Summers is Behn's first modern editor. Unlike Woolf he needs an introduction: He was a deacon of the Church of England, and discontinued further studies necessary to take higher orders after being accused of pederasty, and due to being rumoured to be interested in Satanism. He translated *Malleus Maleficarum* into English, and wrote varying books on demonology, while claiming to be a Catholic priest.

Wiseman paraphrases that 'Janet Todd, reminds us Summers produced an edition of Behn illuminated by a rich knowledge of European as well as English theatrical and literary culture.' Wiseman also continues that Summers has made deeper emotional, sexual, and social investments into his literary criticism and his work started to collide with his publication on the topics witchcraft, demons, and human-diabolic relations. He also seems to have combined being an unlicensed celebrant of Roman mass, with devotion to black mass and pressing his friends into attending black mass with him. (*Aphra Behn*, 111-112)

Taking in accord all this information one can say that Summers is a very controversial figure, and should be read carefully. Still we might credit him for providing the first modern edition of Behn accompanied by his *Memoir of Mrs Behn*, although it might be necessary to look for minor alterations and his projections into the memoir of her life. This search might be better left up to a scholar with an appropriate level in of knowledge both in literature and theology as they are more qualified to discern the influences of Summers' other research.

Victoria Sackville-West

The last of the three discussed personae is Victoria Sackville-West, an English poet, novelist and garden designer... and also the author of *Aphra Behn: the Incomparable Astrea*. According to Wiseman that it was Sackville-West who substantially influenced Woolf's perception of Behn in *The Room of One's Own*. Also it is important to note that Sackville-West's view of Behn was heavily influenced by Summers. Still Sackville-West is able to notice that Behn is both a "'perfectly competent' writer" and 'an engaging and significant person' (*Aphra Behn*, 113; 115).

Wiseman also quotes Sackville-West's text describing Aphra as: 'Gay, tragic, generous, smutty, rich of nature and big of heart, propping her elbows on the tavern table, cracking her jokes...'

This brings an altogether different view of Behn, that I must argue against: Behn was in company of Earls. She was living in a high society – and therefore she was out of money most of the time. Duffy argues against the impression that Sackville-West gives about her writing:

This is the view that permeates Victoria Sackville-West's short biography, that she was slapdash, a thoughtless hack with occasional flashes of talent. Sackville-West pictures her in a rather grubby *robe-de-chambre* dashing off her careless dialogue with Grub Street knocking on her door. Nothing, I maintain, could be farther from the truth. She wrote quickly, as most of her contemporaries, Dryden in particular, were forced to do. She wrote often in a room full of people as did Jane Austen. These were the conditions of the time before writers aspired to 'a room of one's own'. Such a room was likely to be a garret. The writer who wasn't on the run from the bailiffs was a social animal...

(*The Passionate Shepherdess*, 121-122)

Sackville-West's point of view is somewhat controversial, possibly because she was little informed on Restoration England in terms of literature, or that she was making conclusions from comparing it to the literature of early 20th century. Yet it is important that she paid more careful attention to Behn's writing than Woolf did, and brought us a more valid criticism of Behn's oeuvre. Still her work is unsurprisingly far from the current state of research regarding Behn.

Behn criticism of early 20th century is highly disputable and unreliable and Behn scholarship definitely benefits from later additions that will be discussed below. Still it is important to note that the foundations lie in this period and to keep in mind that the critics might have their own aims and agendas they pursue—either knowingly or unknowingly.

Late 20th century & contemporary criticism

Since the onset of the Second-wave feminism there is an increase in Behn scholarship. Authors such as Maureen Duffy and Janet Todd have provided biographical basis for further research. Duffy, and Todd are both scholars and authors of non-scientific literature. Todd is a novelist and Duffy is a novelist, poet and playwright.

A well written biographical research by Duffy published as *The Passionate Shepherdess* in 1977 (with later editions adding information from further research) created contexts that other Behn scholars can utilise in their research and argumentation. We have a more certain idea of who Behn was and what style of life she probably led. We know her political allegiance and also the importance of where she was growing up in for said allegiance. And despite not knowing many things about her life, we know enough to start working.

It is important to note that Todd is far from being just a biographer (and novelist), Todd has been an active Behn scholar for nearly three decades and remains so, having started her Behn-specific writing with her edition *The Complete Works of Aphra Behn* (7 vols., 1992-6) and with her latest addition *Aphra Behn – A Secret Life* (2017) being the latest Behn biography. She has also been dealing with Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jane Austen in depth and has edited *An Anthology of British Women Writers* (1989, with Dale Spender).

Following the way paved by biographers come both the briefer and more narrowly focused research papers on Behn, and volumes discussing a wider range of authors than just Behn. Given the growing basis for Behn scholarship, it is easier to find material to base one's research on without a large amount of 'fieldwork', this leads, along with the increased canonicity of Behn's writing, in greater amount of Behn-related research being produced than earlier. Furthermore, Behn appears in research that is not primarily Behn-related, but deals with feminist questions in/around Behn's lifetime.

For the wide-ranged books one might mention *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789* by Susan Staves which tries to give a

detailed history including the most important writer along with the circumstances of their writing and the values of the society they lived in. Also, one of her articles 'Behn, Women, and Society.' in *Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn* (2004) deals with Behn.

Among some of the more widely-aimed books is Nancy Copeland's *Staging Gender in Behn and Centlivre*, where she provides analysis of two plays by both authors and the changes in society that are taking place during their times, and after them. She discusses Behn in at least two more of her research articles: 'Imagining Aphra: Reinventing a Female Subject' in *Theatre Topics* (vol. 4 num. 2; 1994) and in 'Aphra Behn in the Contemporary Theatre.' in *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (2010).

Susan Wiseman's academic writing frequently features Behn, as Behn happens to be within her sphere of research. Besides publishing book titled *Aphra Behn* (1996) and the articles: ' "Perfectly Ovidian": Dryden's Epistles, Behn's 'Oeneone', Yarico's Island', *Renaissance Studies* (2008) and 'Abolishing Romance: Representing Rape in Oroonoko' in *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and its Colonies* (2004) that are targeting Behn. She authored books on writing and politics, and deals with English Renaissance writing, some of her latest publications being *Writing Metamorphosis in the English Renaissance 1550-1700* (2014) and *Early Modern Women and the Poem* (2013) edited by her.

Kate Aughterson has authored a guide to Aphra Behn's comedies *Aphra Behn: The Comedies* (2003) which contains both scholarly argumentation and a guide for non-scholarly writers to apply critical thinking and scholarly methods onto Behn's plays. Concerning Behn she has also published an article with a very descriptive name: ' "As for mine": Aphra Behn and Adaptations of City Comedies'.

Catherine Gallagher has, despite being primarily interested in 18th & 19th century literature, written at least one article on Behn (related to her gender & sexuality study field), and edited *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, by Aphra Behn*

(1999), also a chapter of her book *Nobody's Story. The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (1994) is devoted to Behn.

Elin Diamond discusses Behn in her *Unmaking Mimesis : Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (2003) and in her articles 'Gestus and Signature in Aphra Behn's *The Rover*' (1999) and 'Modern Drama/Modernity's Drama' (2001).

There are many other authors discussing Behn. One of the sources for latest information is The Aphra Behn Society and its open access scholarly journal supported by the University of South Florida Tampa Library (available online at <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/>). 'The journal focuses on gender and women's issues, and all aspects of women in the arts in the long eighteenth century, especially literature, visual arts, music, performance art, film criticism, and production arts.' (cited from: 'ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1630-1830 | English | University of South Florida' <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/> accessed 21st April 2019).

The majority of scholars discussing Behn are women scholars and writers, many of them are interested both in gender & sexuality studies, and in literature. They are analysing her writing with the aims of analysing feminine thinking and life opportunities for women in the second half of the seventeenth century beside the aims of literary criticism.

Behn scholarship has been growing in the last fifty years with increasing speed, in the last decade the Aphra Behn Society came into existence in the United States, while much of the research (especially biographical) is being conducted in the UK, and Aphra Behn is nowadays renowned as both a literary persona and a feminist figure of her time for having successfully attempted reaching self-sufficiency by professional writing at the high ranking circles of British society during the Restoration period. Earlier feminist research has tended to neglect the quality of Behn's writing when compared to her 'feminist success' in achieving certain milestone of equality (having proclaimed herself equal in writing during her life time, and having got away with it), nowadays it incorporates the fact that Behn was one of the best, and most versatile writers of her time.

Summary

My thesis discusses Behn from multiple viewpoints.

Behn was clearly a much disputed author from the start of her writing, being a very skilled one, but balancing a point between fame and infamy. After her death her name started to gradually fall into infamy. Century after her death, her plays have disappeared, or have morphed in a way that not much of the original remained.

They were rediscovered during the early 20th century, with mixed reception by her critics, although it might be argued that Woolf had not read her critically, unlike Summers and Sackville-West, and Sackville-West's reading might have been influenced by lack of knowledge of life in 17th century.

During the Second-wave feminism Behn criticism started growing rapidly and by now it has provided a solid basis for scholarly work, that discusses not only Behn and Restoration literature, but also the status of women within the society of the period and gender studies in general.

I have argued that many of Behn's tragicomedies are satires, and depending on the situation at the time of their writing, they are highly politicised. Despite that, these satires also secondarily target some of those, whom they support, creating an interesting twin layered satire primarily targeting Whig politicians, and secondarily those of Royalists, who prove to be unfaithful to their lovers, promising much, and keeping none of their words. Thus Behn asks men to take women seriously and manages to voice both her criticism of Whigs, hypocrisy, rakish behaviour, and support the Royalist cause, fidelity and purity. Her plays thus generally feature layers of social criticism.

Both her stagecrafting and literary skills have proven to be extraordinary, and Behn was one of master poets, playwrights and fiction writers of her time. As for her playwriting it is important to note both her ability to express herself in both verse and prose, as she uses combined text in her plays, frequently incorporating songs. Furthermore she had a very good spatial imagination, and is able to position characters specifically on the stage, in relation to the situation, and profit

from it. She was able to make use of all the novelties of the Restoration stage and was innovative.

Despite being written over three centuries ago her plays are still very diverting, even in their written form, despite the fact that their political part is no longer valid, and remains in the plays for those with interest into Restoration England.

The gender and sociocritical feature of the play is valid up to now and has been topic to much of scholarly discussion and research among the Behn scholars during the last four decades at least. Contemporary research also deals with Behn's literary skill, and is growing rapidly and Behn has found her place in the literary canon.

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis deals with comedies written by Aphra Behn, with her playwriting, and with the literary reception of said comedies. The thesis has the aim of mapping the major tendencies of literary criticism in relation to Behn's comedies and to provide their contemporary reassessment. It also provides an overview of a selection of authors currently writing on Behn.

Key words: Aphra Behn, Restoration, comedy, satire, playwriting, 17th century, women writing.