

Women Like That: The Mysterious Aphra Behn

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) is considered the first female professional writer in England. She wrote plays, comedies mostly, novels and poetry. Not much is known about her life. She called herself Mrs. Behn, apparently married and widowed by the age of 25, but whether there was a Mr. Behn is disputable. A few sure facts are known, but for the most part, Aphra Behn remains a mysterious figure.

She was active in the period of the English Restoration, between the rule of the staid, Puritan Oliver Cromwell and the reign of William and Mary. The flamboyant Restoration was a reaction to the misery of the English Civil War that put the Roundheads in charge, and to the asceticism of their leader, Cromwell, who closed all the theaters on religious grounds.

Aphra's work was suited for her era, characterized by a frank bawdiness that sometimes shocked even her contemporaries. She lived for herself, and wrote what she thought. However, she was, by her own admission, writing for money.

Her love life, like just about every other aspect of her life, is almost all conjecture. She seems to have had an affair or at least an intrigue in her youth with a man named William Scot during a trip to the New World. Her biographers consider the trip to have actually happened because of the richness of detail in a few of her works that are set in America.

She is also often linked to a lawyer named John Hoyle, another shadowy figure, but Hoyle was a homosexual and doesn't appear to have been much interested in women sexually. Aphra *appeared* to have had intense feelings around him. Her biographers either can't or won't mention any possible female lovers for her.

"You left me to torments," Aphra wrote. "You ... left me love and rage, furies and calentes, even madness itself. Indeed, indeed, my soul, I know not to what degree I love you; let it suffice I do most passionately." Maybe. The lines come from the introduction of a 1950s edition of her works whose author quoted it from a book by Vita Sackville-West, who quoted it from Charles Gildon. Gildon was a friend of Aphra Behn, but is completely unreliable as a biographer; he "apparently" found the letter among her papers, or maybe in among Hoyle's. Even the primary sources of her life

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are suspect.

What *is* known is that at the age of twenty-five or so Aphra was sent to Holland to work as a spy (using the code name Astrea) for the English government while the two countries were warring with each other. The English government did not pay her enough to return, and when she did manage to get back to England she was thrown into debtors' prison.

By 1670, she was out of prison, a seemingly respectable widow, and a fixture on the writing scene as a poet, editor and playwright. The theaters had been re-opened by King Charles II, who decreed that women should play female roles instead of boys as had been the convention.

Women playwrights were having their plays produced, although most who did turned out one or two. Aphra made a career of it and wrote more than twenty. Her plays were peopled by lively, cross-dressing heroines. In her last play, *The Widow Ranter*, set in Virginia, the title role is a woman who drank, smoked, cross-dressed and "took her man with her breeches on."

Aphra addressed such issues as gender roles and forced marriage. Her stories and plays often did not have the conventional ending of a marriage between the hero and the ingenue.

Her poetry, often political, often sexual, was always frank. She not only described lesbian love, but got right to the point: "Show thy Coral Lips, my Love,/ Kiss me softer than the Dove,/ Till my Ravished


Soul does lie/ Panting in an Exstasie." In a poem titled "To the fair Clarinda, who made Love to me," she put forth the widely held idea of the time that sex between women was not really sex and they could therefore have their pleasure and innocence too: "...That we might Love, and yet be Innocent./ For sure no Crime with thee can we commit, or if we should — thy Form excuses it."

Her love poetry was often addressed to a mysterious androgynous figure. In a verse titled "To Lysander" she wrote of watching a fellow member of a concert audience whom she described as having a "Mouth all full of Sweetness and Content/ And your fine killing Eyes of Languishment;/ Your Bosom now and then a sigh would move." Her object had an "easy and all tempting" body. The person to whom it was addressed was given a male name, Lysander, but the terms used usually described women.

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Aphra Behn died in 1689. The boisterous Charles II was dead, and the proper and more sober William and Mary ruled England. People in general were becoming more concerned with propriety and good manners. If Aphra's work and life had shocked her contemporaries, it had no place at all in the new setting, and was regarded as "indecent." ▼

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