

## Aphra Behn

(1640–89)

Little is known for certain of the life of the mysterious Aphra Behn, the first woman in England to have made her living by her pen. She was married briefly but widowed at the age of twenty-five. She spent some time in Surinam, where she observed the injustices of slavery. In 1666 she worked as a spy in Belgium for the Restoration court of Charles II. In 1668 she was thrown into debtors' prison in London.

By 1670 Behn began making money through her writing with the production of her first play, *The Forc'd Marriage*. This was followed by more than a dozen successful plays, though she also demanded, as she said in one poem, to assert "my masculine part, the poet in me." In addition to writing drama and poetry she was the author of what some critics deem to be the first novel in English, *Oroonoko; or The Royal Slave* (1688).

Her work, and apparently her life too, often challenged convention to such an extent that her contemporaries described her as "not a lady" and "among the rakes of her day." Her writing was often concerned with feminist themes, including pleas for the more serious education of women and the acceptance of women writers, as well as witty insinuations, in poems such as "The Willing Mistress" and "The Disappointment," on a woman's right to (hetero)sexual pleasure.

Her love poems to other women, however, which appeared especially in her volume *Lycidus* (1688), may not have been viewed as presenting particularly significant challenges to the prejudices of her day. Her poem "To My Lady Morland at Tunbridge" was even rewritten with only slight alterations as "To Mrs. Harsenet . . .," suggesting that Behn really saw such an address of intense admiration from one woman to another, in which the speaker "much a Lover grew," as being consonant with socially approved behavior and in no way unconventional.

Yet Behn also seems to play with such conventions of romantic friendship in her poetry by hinting at the possibility of going beyond them. In "A Song. By Mrs. A.B." in which the speaker identifies herself as female through the title, she asks for the same intimacies that Iris allows her male lover. In her poetic address to the hermaphroditic Clarinda, Behn teasingly suggests why she could so boldly request such favors. After all, society agreed that two women "might Love, and yet be innocent/ For sure no crime [that is, illicit sexual congress]" could be committed if no male was involved. "To the Fair Clarinda . . ." provides a provocative hint that

"romantic friends" may have sometimes laughed at the shield that convention allowed them in relationships that we would describe as "lesbian."

FURTHER READING: *The Works of Aphra Behn*, 6 vols., ed. Montague Summers (1915; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967). Judith Kagan Gardiner, "Aphra Behn: Sexuality and Self-Respect," *Women's Studies*, 7: 1/2 (1980). Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York: Dial, 1980).

### TO MY LADY MORLAND AT TUNBRIDGE

As when a Conqu'rour does in Triumph come,  
 And proudly leads the vanquish'd Captives home,  
 The Joyful People croud in ev'ry Street,  
 And with loud shouts of Praise the Victor greet;  
 While some whom Chance or Fortune kept away,  
 Desire at least the Story of the Day;  
 How brave the Prince, how gay the Chariot was,  
 How beautiful he look'd, with what a Grace;  
 Whether upon his Head he Plumes did wear;  
 Or if a Wreath of Bays adorn'd his Hair:  
 They hear 'tis wondrous fine, and long much more  
 To see the *Hero* then they did before.  
 So when the Marvels by Report I knew,  
 Of how much Beauty, *Cloris*, dwelt in you;  
 How many *Slaves* your Conqu'ring Eyes had won,  
 And how the gazing Crowd admiring throng:  
 I wish'd to see, and much a Lover grew  
 Of so much Beauty, though my Rival too.  
 I came and saw, and blest my Destiny;  
 I found it Just you should out-Rival me.  
 'Twas at the Altar, where more Hearts were giv'n  
 To you that day, than were address'd to Heav'n.  
 The Rev'rend Man whose Age and Mystery  
 Had rendred Youth and Beauty Vanity,  
 By fatal Chance casting his Eyes your way,  
 Mistook the duller Bus'ness of the Day,  
 Forgot the Gospel, and began to Pray.  
 Whilst the Enamour'd Crowd that near you prest,  
 Receiving *Darts* which none could e'er resist,  
 Neglected the Mistake o'th' Love-sick Priest.  
 Ev'n my Devotion, *Cloris*, you betray'd,  
 And I to Heaven no other Petition made,

But that you might all other Nymphs out-do  
 In Cruelty as well as Beauty too.  
 I call'd *Amyntas* Faithless *Swain* before,  
 But now I find 'tis Just he should Adore.  
 Not to love you, a wonder sure would be,  
 Greater then all his Perjuries to me.  
 And whilst I Blame him, I Excuse him too;  
 Who would not venture Heav'n to purchase you?  
 But Charming *Cloris*, you too meanly prize  
 The more deserving Glories of your Eyes,  
 If you permit him on an Amorous score,  
 To be your *Slave*, who was my *Slave* before.  
 He oft has Fetters worn, and can with ease  
 Admit 'em or dismiss 'em when he please.  
 A Virgin-Heart you merit, that ne'er found  
 It could receive, till from your Eyes, the *Wound*;  
 A Heart that nothing but your Force can fear,  
 And own a *Soul* as Great as you are Fair.

## A SONG.

By Mrs. A. B.

While, *Iris*, I at distance gaze,  
 And feed my greedy eyes,  
 That wounded heart, that dyes for you,  
 Dull gazing can't suffice;  
 Hope is the Food of Love-sick minds,  
 On that alone 'twill Feast,  
 The nobler part which Loves refines,  
 No other can digest.

In vain, too nice and Charming Maid,  
 I did suppress my Cares;  
 In vain my rising sighs I stay'd,  
 And stop'd my falling tears;  
 The Flood would swell, the Tempest rise,  
 As my despair came on;  
 When from her Lovely cruel Eyes,  
 I found I was undone.

Yet at your feet while thus I lye,  
 And languish by your Eyes,

'Tis far more glorious here to dye,  
 Than gain another Prize.  
 Here let me sigh, here let me gaze,  
 And wish at least to find  
 As raptur'd nights, and tender days,  
 As he to whom you're kind.

TO THE FAIR CLARINDA,  
 WHO MADE LOVE TO ME,  
 IMAGIN'D MORE THAN WOMAN.

BY MRS. B.

Fair lovely Maid, or if that Title be  
 Too weak, too Feminine for Nobler thee,  
 Permit a Name that more Approaches Truth:  
 And let me call thee, Lovely Charming Youth.  
 This last will justifie my soft complaint,  
 While that may serve to lessen my constraint;  
 And without Blushes I the Youth pursue,  
 When so much beauteous Woman is in view.  
 Against thy Charms we struggle but in vain  
 With thy deluding Form thou giv'st us pain,  
 While the bright Nymph betrays us to the Swain.  
 In pity to our Sex sure thou wert sent,  
 That we might Love, and yet be Innocent:  
 For sure no Crime with thee we can commit;  
 Or if we shou'd—thy Form excuses it.  
 For who, that gathers fairest Flowers believes  
 A Snake lies hid beneath the Fragrant Leaves.  
 Thou beauteous Wonder of a different kind,  
 Soft *Cloris* with the dear *Alexis* join'd;  
 When e'r the Manly part of thee, wou'd plead  
 Thou tempts us with the Image of the Maid,  
 While we the noblest Passions do extend  
 The Love to *Hermes*, *Apbrodite* the Friend.