

Margarete Rubik ed. 2011  
*Aphra Behn and Her Female Successors.*  
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**Re-Reading Aphra: Experimentations with Genre and Gender from the Restoration to the Present**

Aphra Behn's figure and her lasting influence in the production of a huge number of seventeenth-century and more recent authors is the *leitmotif* of Margarete Rubik's new collection of essays. The place that Behn occupies in Restoration drama and poetry has been amply credited, and her unmistakable stimulus in the development of the English novel has also been the focus of critical attention in recent years. Now classic essays by Mary Ann O'Donnell in the US, and Bernard Dhuicq, Janet Todd, Derek Hughes, Jane Spencer or Ros Ballaster in Europe, among many others, have prepared the ground for a fertile discipline in literary studies which focuses on this remarkable figure. As Rubik makes clear in *Aphra Behn and Her Female Successors*, the essays contained in this volume constitute a selection of the papers presented at a conference held in 2010 at the University of Vienna, organised under the auspices of the "Aphra Behn Europe" Society. Accordingly, the editor states the nature of the contributions as follows: "They approach Behn's works from a variety of new perspectives and put this pioneering Restoration author in the context of the writing practices and philosophical theories of her time in general and of her female contemporaries and successors in particular" (Rubik 2011:12). For this purpose, the contributors in this book try to bridge the gaps between Behn and some of her immediate and much later followers.

Rebecka Grontstedt's essay opens the collection by engaging with an aspect of Behn's production that has often been considered

inconsistent or insubstantial: her literary criticism. In claiming that the prefatory and paratextual materials in Behn's plays need to be reconsidered as critical pieces in their own right and that in them the author delineates her dramatic theory, Grontstedt's proposal is in tune with a similar line of research proposed by critics of the early novel like Paul Salzman, who sees these materials as the first extant theories on the incipient genre of the novel (1999:302). Grontstedt points to Behn's lack of a formal education in the classics as one probable reason why she did not attempt long critical exertions and chose instead to vent her dramatic theory only in her prefaces and introductions which worked at the same time as commendations to her plays (2011:23). This thesis proves right when Grontstedt explores, for example, the prologues and epilogues to *Sir Patient Fancy*, *The Rover*, *The Lucky Chance*, or *The Emperor of the Moon*, among others, to illustrate complex issues relating to dramatic theory and staging in the late seventeenth century, like the new tastes of the changing audience from high to low brow, or Behn's disappointment with the patronage system. The author's conclusion extends further to later women writers who also attempt criticism, many of them Behn's successors, suggesting that she was for them a model to follow.

Next, Margarete Rubik's chapter proposes a detailed reading of some of Behn's "strong" female characters. She focuses on the figure of the amazon, which refers both to a "masculine" representation of women and to an androgynous construction ironically charged with sexual allure and misogynist tropes. Rubik thus distinguishes between "classic" amazons and other types of "masculine" women, including female viragos, women in male disguise and roaring girls. It is interesting how she uses Hughes' brilliant interpretation of Restoration theatre as primarily dominated by a "capacity for violence" (2004:34-35) to support the view that Behn endows her amazons with this ability only to prove that their violence is hardly associated to effective power. By attending to particular examples – the female characters in *The Feigned Courtezans* are a case in point – Rubik argues that these violent and wilful women rarely enjoy the dramatist's sympathies (2011:49). Her concluding remarks portray Behn's residual use of the Amazon figure: women who might adopt

masculine roles (and male dress) ironically to perpetuate gender commodification.<sup>1</sup>

The next entry by Oddvar Holmesland turns from drama to poetry and tries to situate Behn's utopian text, *The Island of Love*, in the larger context of women's writing. The author claims that this poem needs to be read as a critique of patriarchal discourse, but he also makes clear that his purpose is to discuss it in the wider framework of English humanism (2011:59). An interesting feature that the article centres on is the generic complexity of the text that for Holmesland explains many of the reductive critical interpretations of the poem so far. He suggests, therefore, that Lysander's changing nature and behaviour can be understood only by taking into account the varied perspectives of pastoral, romance and realism (2011:70). The essay ends up suggestively by pointing out that Behn's purpose may be to explore a "gentle" kind of masculinity, encompassing heroic virtue and a more egalitarian view of love as friendship.

Antoinette Curtin writes one of the most engaging chapters in the volume. She chooses an interdisciplinary study that draws on plenty of seventeenth-century materials to set Behn's treatment of beauty conventions in a true Restoration context. Using Fontenelle's "A Discovery of New Worlds," for example, she frames the construction of the feminine within the scientific paradigm of the time and establishes relationships between cultural readings of beauty and specific generic types like the romance (2011:77). Curtin also manages to extend the discussion about the limits of beauty to the work of some of Behn's followers, like Delarivier Manley in *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714). She invariably associates beauty with power and analyses its dynamics in Behn's drama, poetry and fiction, like *The Feign'd Curtizans*, "The Golden Age," or *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* and *The Fair Jilt*. Once more, the conclusion spins around the notion of generic experimentation in Behn's works: as she breaks free from the strict boundaries of genre she rejects either/or categorizations of the beautiful woman.

This is followed by Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego's essay which analyses the figure of the jilt in Behn's fiction. He starts with a

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes' comments on Cleomena's complex behaviour as an Amazon in *The Young King*, a play that Rubik also approaches in her article, are remarkable. He explains how she turns from warrior and prospective murderer to docile maid in female attire, finally surrendering power (2001:24-25).

thorough etymological description of the term to proceed to the analysis of this recurrent type in Restoration literature, and especially in prose fiction. Figueroa-Dorrego thus conceives the jilt – understood as villainess, criminal or sometimes whore – in the context of other famous Restoration stories which gravitate partly on the historical, like Mary Carleton’s (2011:98-99). Interestingly, the author studies this liminal figure in the light of the Spanish picaresque. Reading Salvaggio (1993:263), Figueroa-Dorrego maintains that the transgressive nature of the jilt allows Behn’s characters – and Miranda in *The Fair Jilt* in particular – to embrace masculine behaviour from a genre and gender viewpoint: “Miranda adopts the typical masculine role in romance and amatory fiction, taking the initiative in courtship, seducing, ravishing, ruining the lover’s reputation, and coming out on top” (2011:103).

Violetta Trofimova’s article offers a comparative study of Behn’s third part of *Love-Letters* (1687) and Jane Barker’s *The Lining of the Patch-Work Screen* (1726), focusing on the role of the paranormal in both the public and the private spheres. In so doing, Trofimova draws admirably on the context of seventeenth-century specialized books on the topic, coetaneous literary productions and, above all, the rationalist approach adopted by the Royal Society. In the end, the essay proposes that the choice and treatment of magic responds to a real debate going on at the time and that, especially in Behn’s work – that Trofimova particularly engages with –, can be easily interpreted in relation to politics as forces that could destabilise public order but might be also strategic and beneficial in the domestic world.

Roy Eriksen’s is the last chapter in the collection devoted to Behn’s work and the members of the Nineties generation. It includes, nonetheless, more contemporary referents like Doris Lessing’s 1950s novel *The Grass is Singing*, and specializes on the productive topic of experimentation in Behn’s prose fiction, focusing on the way she plays with the boundaries between generic conventions. Eriksen argues that Behn’s ambivalent use of genre is in tune with her ideological ambiguity in the *novella*, going from her Royalist and conservative beliefs to a more progressive treatment of slippery topics like slavery and colonialism. Eriksen’s statement about the intergeneric liaisons in Behn’s *Oroonoko* is analysed in relation to former mannerist *novellas* like George Gascoigne’s *The Adventures of Master F.J.* (1573) and to mediaeval hagiography.

Colonialism is the main theme in Barbara Britton Wenner's work, as she compares Behn's *Oroonoko* and Anna Maria Falconbridge's visions of West Africa, separated by a span of more than one century. In so doing, she proposes an analysis at different levels, taking into account questions of gender –two women's perspectives of the West African landscape–, genre –literary conventions in travel writing–, and politics –the anti-slavery discourse that develops in England throughout the eighteenth century. Especially relevant is Britton Wenner's treatment of the notion of space and landscape that she connects with liminality as a primarily female experience, and that runs counter to the representation of character (2011:140-141). The author observes how both writers differ, though, in one aspect: Falconbridge chooses reality when Behn still draws on romance. Both works managed, nonetheless, to forward their respective political agendas: Behn's support of the Stuart kings and Falconbridge's bitter complaint about the treatment given by the Sierra Leone Company.

Claudia Heuer moves even closer in time to assess twentieth-century criticism on Behn's poetry. Her chapter assesses Virginia Woolf's ambiguous attitude towards Behn's figure, especially in relation to notions of female conduct and literary creativity. Heuer is concerned with diverse topics in Behn such as (literary) androgyny, in tune with Woolf's *Orlando*, or the dubious notion of female authorship (especially in the case of Elizabethan women). The article focuses, though, on Woolf's work while Behn remains a reference in passing.

Aspasia Velissariou's text is a brilliant contribution to the volume. The author chooses Anim-Addo's play *Imoinda* as a counterpoint to Behn's representation of the same character in her *Oroonoko*. The author's choice of two texts that seem to engage in full conversation is remarkable. What is most interesting is how Velissariou's moves swiftly from feminist appropriations of Behn's *novella* – both poststructuralist and postcolonial – to vindicate Behn's mouldering of *Imoinda*. She carries out a detailed comparative analysis of both texts to define Behn's stance as radically sceptic and astonishingly modern: "She questions the humanist appreciation of simple biological existence as the highest value by showing that at some point heroic death might be preferable to disposable life" (2011:177). Velissariou looks for critical support in Hughes (2002:17)

to suggest that Behn chooses the hard way in developing her politics of femininity, leaving essentialism behind.

Wolfgang Görtschacher's essay closes Rubik's collection and moves in a different direction. In contrast to previous chapters, Aphra Behn's works are not the focal point. Görtschacher chooses instead a mystery novel published in 1995 by Molly Brown, *Invitation to a Funeral*, dramatizing Behn's life and her relationships with other relevant figures of the Restoration, like John Wilmot or Nell Gwyn. The author engages with a formal analysis of Brown's fiction, drawing on the dramatic nature of the novel, the real and fictional personas behind the characters, and genre conventions. Görtschacher's wish in the end is to rescue from oblivion an influential political and literary period like the Restoration, and the fascinating figure of Aphra Behn in particular.

In conclusion, this text is no doubt a valuable addition to the rich bibliography on Aphra Behn's studies, which might appeal both to specialists on Behn's *oeuvre* and also to scholars in English literature. In general terms, it amounts to an innovative discussion on the malleability of the concept of literary genre in Behn's work, and an original treatment of gender issues that are necessarily entrenched in the social, political and literary context of the time.

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