Aphra Behn: Queer Sexuality, Gender, and Writing

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**Background**

This project first began by asking a modest question, can we go beyond queer theory and ‘queering’ early modern texts and find evidence of queer individuals? This work was inspired originally by lesbian and gay scholars analyzing the expression of romantic love towards other women in early modern literature. This led to further examination of Aphra Behn’s works during the undergraduate research project.

**Who Was Aphra Behn?**

Born: 1640-1641

One of the first female professional writers in English history, that is, the first to write for profit and for subsistence in the public sphere.

**Critical Methodology**

**Queer Theory**

Queer theory, primarily that of Judith Butler’s writings, is used to understand how power structures make up of discourses, cultural norms and practices, shape certain identities and affect others. In essence it is used to marry our current understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and an earlier historical period. Queer theory in this project is simple how individuals challenge or disrupt the overarching dominant culture in any historical or cultural context. This theory is used alongside lesbian and gay scholars, who in this context, focus more on an analysis of early conceptions of homosexual desire. Queer theory meets towards the overarching challenge to heteronormative patriarchy, whether that be homosexual desire or not.

**Historical and Material Analysis**

As shown in the background section, this research uses historical conceptions of early lesbian and gender rebellion in order to understand how Aphra Behn relates to, responds to, or uses these discourses. Made of up pamphlets, paramedical texts and diagrams, as well as religious tracts, the materials circulating in society around Aphra Behn make up the comparative analysis.

**Significance**

The discourses and definitions above are made primarily by male, patriarchal figures of authority, religious and medical tracts. They are a way of explaining away protobehnian desire and poetry as womanhood. Aphra Behn will go on to appropriate these discourses to give back agency to and humanize the pathologized protobehnian subject.

**Discourse**

“To the dear Clarinda, who made Love to me, images more than Woman. By Mrs. B.”

In God’s work, he resists the divisive or fascinated culture of his society that wanted to “undo” or “strip down” the hermaphrodite in order to learn the truth of this body by observing other or covering the body up. By undoing the hermaphroditic figure, the looking could both objectify and decenter the transgressive figure. Behn uses a similar tactic, in her poem she underscores, or affords to a female member lacking underthe “dazzel flowers” of Clarinda’s body (16). These caperations are taken directly from pastoral tradition, flowers referred to the gentleness of women, snake for the male genitalia. While Behn offers to the reader that they are both human and the reader is made aware that the public outside the poem does not know—Clarinda’s outward “form excuses” it (15). Clarinda’s actions are not the subject of the poem but under the same trend, confusing and thwarting the expectation to undo and be able to identify easily, the tribe or hermaphrodite. Further, the change in Clarinda is only “imaginary,” which similarly plays with expectations of bodily and genital maltreatment as a result of female same-sex desire.

In addition, Behn places this bodily metamorphosis after the supposed love making and amorous change between the two women. In doing so it challenges the patriarchal assumption that proto-behnsian desire only occur after women, and because of their gender and sexual transgressions. Behn takes denaturing cultural ideas surrounding proto-behnsian sex and creates a poetic language to desirably celebrate.

*Vows designed by Mrs. A. Behn to be sent to a fair Lady, that don’t she would become to care her Love. Left untouched.*

In this poem, Aphra Behn specifically uses Petronius’ tropes. Namely, that which Wyatt, a famous English poet who was one of the first to import the Petronian tradition into England, uses in his poetry. The trope is that of the hunter and the hind metaphor, the imagining of the beloved (the woman or object of desire) as being like a deer, and the lover (typically the male poet, or the subject of the poem) as the hunter. Behn specifically breaks down that clear boundary, the “shaft of the arrow pierces both herself and her beloved, they both become the hind. His breaking down the dichotomy between self and the other (a very typical and foundational Western thought constructs identity). Behn uses this trope in order to create “a more complete” understanding of love. In challenging the making-up of identity at its core, Behn tries to imagine differently, conceive of identity creation outside this patriarchal and hetero sexual model.

Further Reading and Bibliography


**Discussion**

*Who was Aphra Behn?* 2010. Depicts a woman and a man meeting. See Figure 1. Depicts a woman and a man meeting. See Figure 1.

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