



University of Manitoba

Aphra Behn: Queer Sexuality, Gender, and Writing Fancy.

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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 Katherine Philips’ poems, as well as figures such as Anne Lister, a notable early historical queer figure.

Thesis

*epistemology as a term means a system or way of understanding the world

The fantastical or fanciful imaginings of Aphra Behn creates a world of utopic longing within her writings where non-normative sexualities and gender performances may exist unencumbered and without censure. These utopic and fanciful imaginings make a literary world which gives to the early lesbian subject and gender rebellious, discursive meaning. Behn’s writing imagines a world where everyone, both men *and* women, long for a different way of life, ultimately creating a rebellious epistemology.

Sex in Early Modern England

The Buggery Act of 1533 was effectively the first civil sodomy law passed within England. But the inadvertent effects of this law were not immediately seen, rather than fully stopping sex acts labelled as “sodomy,” it suppressed them, relegated those who participated in them to the realm of euphemism. No one would outright admit they engaged in sodomy, its illegality and harsh punishment saw this through. But many periodicals, diarists, and commentators were quick to express unease at possible sodomy or rumored sodomites in society—evidently, the early modern homosexual did not wholly disappear. However, the official definition of who could be sodomites or perform sodomy was virtually exclusive to *men*. As a result, women who engaged in sex with other women, much like the modern 20th century development of homosexuality, was not given an official recognition or name until much later.

Proto-Lesbians

*proto-lesbian or early lesbian is used to refer to women in early historical periods who sexually and romantically desire other women.

Like the male sodomite, the early lesbian was understood not in absolute terms, but in euphemistic language, the “tom” or “tommy” to refer to the individual, a “game of flats” for the sex act itself. Some of this language and slang still survives today, but the most interesting terms that became dominant shorthand for these women in the seventeenth century was the “tribade” and the “hermaphrodite.” These terms specifically refer to the active person, or “top” in the sexual act. The importance of the latter terms are because they link **sexual transgressions** with that of **gender transgressions**.

The **tribade** has three primary elements in this period:

1. Still sexually female
2. Typically presented masculinely, through clothing and gendered behaviour
3. The result of the above and her sexual desire of other women led to her clitoris engorging to the point of being a “female member,” in order to penetrate or rub her partner to satisfaction.

While the tribade pushed the threshold of what was considered female, she was still considered a woman (Donoghue 34-37).

The **hermaphrodite** similarly was a figure of plurality—not meant to refer to what we understand as intersex, but the hermaphrodite could be simply any of the following:

1. A woman dressed in men’s clothing,
2. A tribade,
3. A woman/man with mixed genitals, or **any combination of the above** (Gilbert 12-14, 35-36, 158-162).

Because of the uncertainty in exactly *whata* hermaphrodite was, except as a transgression sex, it was used as a model to explain the transgressive early queer female sexuality.

“**Femme-Friend**” this figure became a great source of anxiety in its development in the late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century. It denotes a woman who outwardly dresses and behaves within feminine gender roles but underneath her petticoat lurked the same danger as the tribade.

Significance

The discourses and definitions above are made primarily by male, patriarchal figures of authority, from religious and medical tracts. They are a way of explaining **away** proto-lesbian desire and portray it as **unnatural**. Aphra Behn will go on to appropriate these discourses to give back agency to and humanize the pathologized proto-lesbian subject.

Acknowledgements

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Who Was Aphra Behn?

Born: 1640(?)–1689

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.

Most well-known for her theatrical works, but later turned to poetry, prose, and wrote one of the earliest examples of the English novel.

Much of her life is speculation, almost nothing is known for sure, even her supposed status as a widow. If it is fabricated, being a widow rather than a maid would have allowed her considerably more freedom in Restoration society.

Part of the Restoration period (1660–1680). Though the Restoration is considered distinct in literary scholarship and most typically placed within eighteenth-century studies, there are still considerable echoes and overlap culturally with the larger early modern period, or “long seventeenth-century.”

A later female writer Vita Sackville-West in the twentieth century critiqued the fantastical nature of Behn’s writings, but it is precisely this fantastical or fanciful nature that Behn uses to subvert cultural norms and expectations (Rollyson 34-37).



Figure 1. a painting of Aphra Behn from: Beale, Mary. “Portrait of Aphra Behn”. Wikimedia Commons

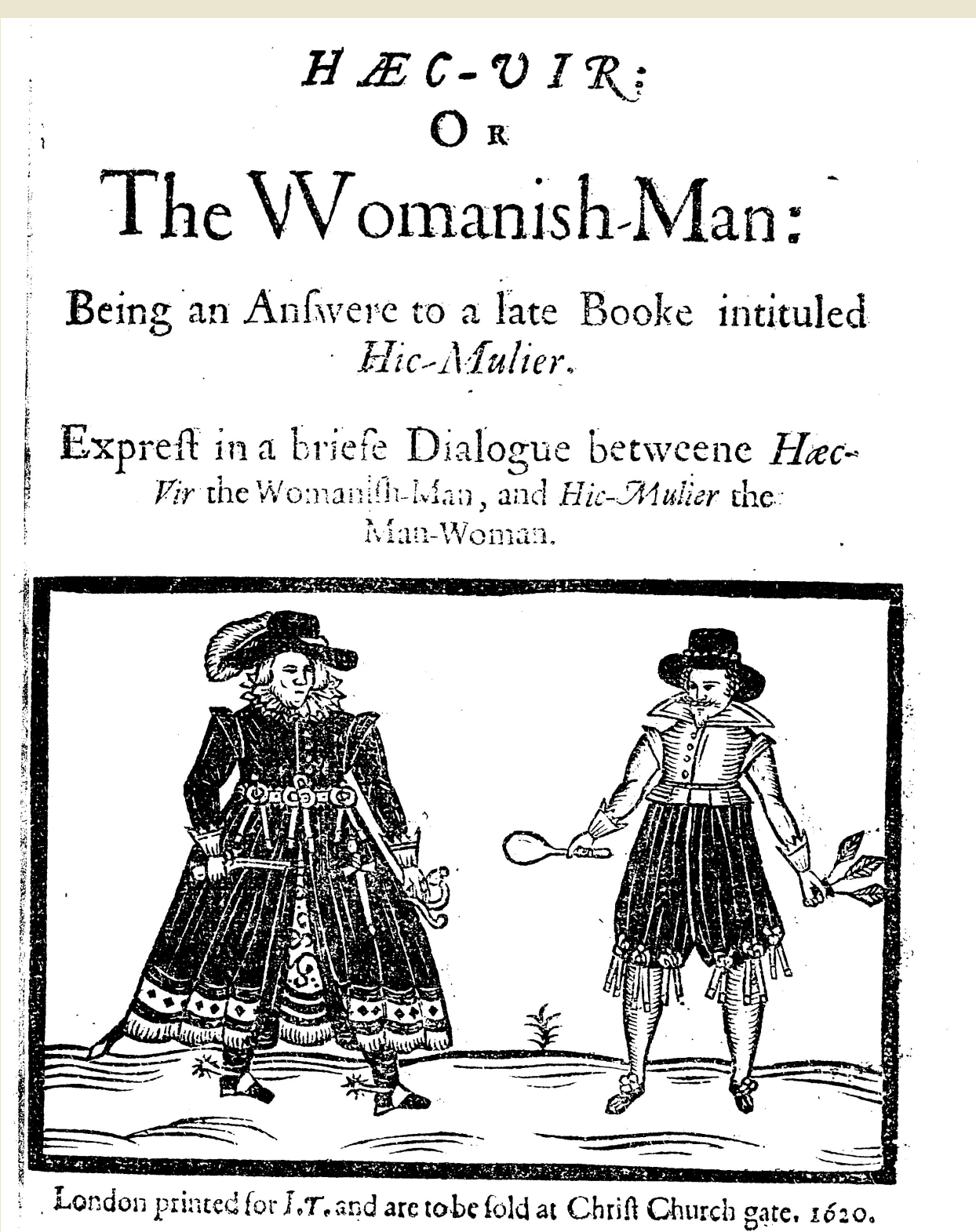


Figure 2 (left). Depicts a mannish-woman and a womanish-man meeting. See Critical Methodology. Anonymous. *Haec-Vir*. Courtesy of The Huntington Library.

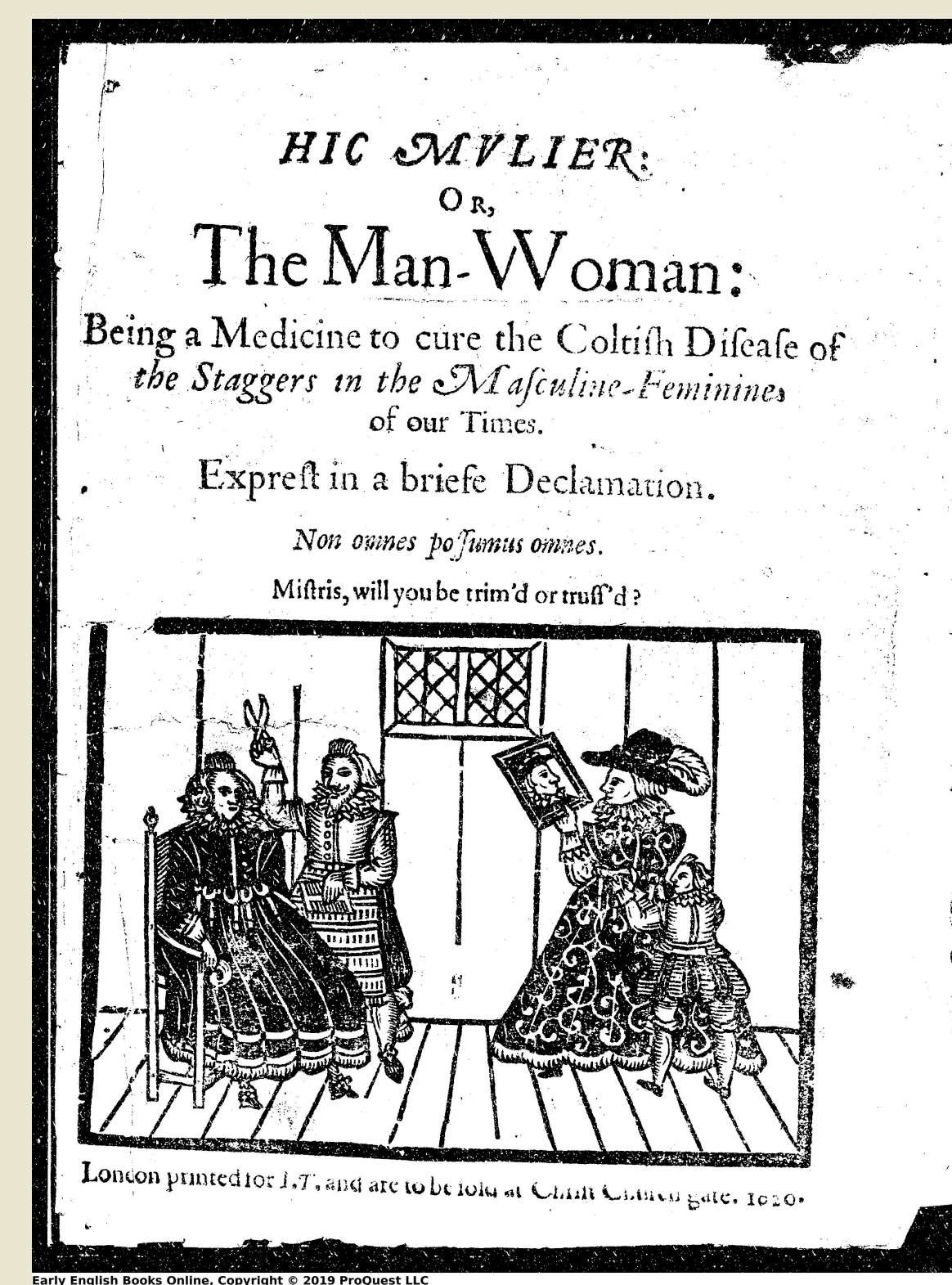


Figure 3 (right). Depicts two masculine-dressed women in a barbershop. See Critical Methodology. Anonymous. *Hic Mulier*. Courtesy of the Huntington Library.

Critical Methodology

Queer Theory

Queer theory, primarily that of Judith Butler’s writings, is used to understand how power structures made up of discourses, cultural norms and practices, privilege certain identities and abject 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 simply 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 trends towards the overarching challenge to heterosexual 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 up of pamphlets, paramedical texts and diagrams, as well as religious tracts, the materials circulating in society around Aphra Behn make up the comparative analysis.

Shown in Figures 2 and 3 are examples of pamphlets both depicting cross-dressing and disparaging it. **Figure 2** depicts from *Haec-Vir* a mannish-woman (left) meeting a womanish-man (right), in this ironic opening where each mistakes the others’ gender. The womanish-man is decked in ridiculous and feminine objects, such as ribbons, a fan, and a mirror. **Figure 3** depicts from *Hic Mulier* two women in a barbershop, one getting her hair cut short, the other regarding herself in a mirror.

Literary Analysis

Literary scholarship is based on close reading and analysis of a primary text. In addition, Aphra Behn has been typically relegated to only being analyzed for how her theatrical works relate to her contemporaneous politics. I believe it is important to analyze Aphra Behn intertextually, that is in relation to other authors, texts, and tropes. In doing so, entire textures and complex relational structures are revealed. Some other texts include Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Petrarchan sonnets, female writing, and pastoral romance genres.

Discussion

“To the fair Clarinda, who made Love to me, imagin’d more than Woman. By Mrs. B.”

In Ovid’s work, he resists the dissection or fascinated culture of his society that wanted to “undress” or “strip down” the hermaphrodite in order to learn the truth of its body by obscuring or covering the body up. By undressing the hermaphroditical figure, the looking could both objectify and deradicalize their transgressive form. Behn uses a similar tactic, in her poem she undresses, or alludes to a female member lurking underneath the “fairest flowers” of Clarinda’s body (16). These euphemisms are taken directly from pastoral tradition, flowers referred to the genitalia of women, snake for the male genitalia. While Behn uncovers the hermaphrodite for herself and the reader, the speaker reminds us that the public outside the poem does not know—Clarinda’s outward “form excuses it” (15). Clarinda goes from a hermaphrodite and veers more towards the femme-friend, confusing and thwarting the expectation to undress and be able to identify easily, the tribade or hermaphrodite. Further, the change in Clarinda is only “Imagin’d,” which similarly plays with expectations of bodily and genital malformation as a result of female same-sex desire. In addition, Behn places this bodily metamorphosis *after* the supposed love-making and amatory desire between the two women, in doing so it challenges the patriarchal assumption that proto-lesbians only desire other women after, and because of their gender and sexual transgressions. Behn takes dehumanizing cultural ideas surrounding proto-lesbian sex and creates a poetic language to describe it celebratorily.

“Verses design’d by Mrs. A. Behn to be sent to a fair Lady, that desir’d she would absent herself to cure her Love. Left unfinished.”

In this poem, Aphra Behn specifically uses Petrarchan tropes. Namely, that which Wyatt, a famous English poet who was one of the first to import the Petrarchan 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. By breaking down the clear distinction between the self and the other (a very typical and foundation way Western thought constructs identity), Behn uses female same-sex erotics to destabilize the way we conceive of identity. In challenging the making-up of identity at its core, Behn tries to imagine differently, conceive of identity-creation outside this patriarchal and heterosexual model.

Note: the way Aphra Behn’s poetry is edited in the Miscellany explicitly foregrounds her gender, the editor and possibly Behn herself, collapse the boundary between the poetic speaker and the author, making the gender of the author of great importance. This is part of why we can clearly see love between women, as well as typically gendered tropes within the poems.

Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister.

In this novel, Octavio, a conquest of the main character Silvia (notice the language here, *he* is the conquest, not her) is my main focus. He becomes increasingly disparaged by other male characters for becoming too effeminate, corrupted by a feminine influence. The intense misogyny in this period is present in this character arc. Octavio, as a result, becomes shut-out from patriarchal privilege, becoming seen as less-than male, closer approaching “weak” femininity. But rather than attempting to regain his lost masculinity, Octavio fully embraces his effeminacy and in a truly spectacular scene, is depicted as a saint ascending into the heavens as he leaves the world for a convent. This monastery scene as it is known, has an overabundance of gendered tropes: women were associated with being put in religious convents after being “ruined,” which is an ironic turn on him—a man—being ruined and put into a monastery. The text itself celebrates Octavio’s disavowal of patriarchy and his masculinist society, this scene begins to imagine a world for *men* outside patriarchal and hegemonic masculine expectations. Aphra Behn, importantly includes men in her utopic vision of a world imagined differently.

Further Reading and Bibliography

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