

APHRA BEHN'S (NON)CANONICITY  
AS A RESTORATION PLAYWRIGHT

*María José Coperías Aguilar*  
Universitat de València

---

1. INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth-century female writer Aphra Behn was one of the most prolific authors of her time and second only to Dryden in the production of plays. She is the author of at least nineteen plays, seventeen of which are signed with her name; a short novel, *Oroonoko*, and about fourteen other works of fiction; several collections of poems and some translations. She was a professional writer in the sense that she did not write just for pleasure or private reading, but made her works known, either on the stage or by publishing them, and did so in order to make a living.

*The Rover*, her most popular play, was performed every season in London between 1677 and 1743, and had revivals in 1748, 1757 and 1760 (Owens, 1996: 131), and *The Emperor of the Moon*, first performed in 1687, also had regular revivals in the following years. At the same time, in 1696, she had her novel *Oroonoko* turned into a successful play by Thomas Southerne. Some of her plays were separately reprinted between the years 1697 and 1698, and a complete edition was published in 1702. Aphra Behn also became a source of inspiration for a second generation of female playwrights, who started to write after 1695<sup>1</sup>. Many of her most outstanding literary contemporaries –Dryden, Rochester, Otway or Wycherly– seem to have admired her (Todd, 1996a: 2). And she must also have been respected by the members of London high society, as can be inferred from the increasing social category of her dedicatees<sup>2</sup>.

Nonetheless, as we will see in greater detail later in this paper, she was also fiercely attacked and abused, mainly on the basis of bawdiness, by many of her contemporaries. This is not reason enough, however, to account for the

---

<sup>1</sup> Between 1695 and 1700, a further six women had plays staged (Hughes, 2001: 194).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, she dedicated *The Second Part of the Rover*, first performed and published in 1681, to the Duke of York, king Charles II's brother and future king of the country himself.

oblivion into which she fell from the eighteenth century onwards. There seemed not to be a place for a woman in the canon of the great authors (Owens, 1996: 131), and as Angeline Goreau has put it “[f]or nearly two hundred years after her death, she disappeared almost entirely from the pages of biography, of literature, of history itself” (1980:7). Although some of her more respectable poems, that is to say the non-erotic or -political ones, were still being published in anthologies of women poets in the eighteenth century and *Oroonoko* was a favourite among her works, as it has continued to be in the following centuries, Aphra Behn’s plays slowly but steadily disappeared from the stage.

The nineteenth century was even harder on her as she was condemned as a writer and rejected as the antithesis of what a woman should be or at least represent (Todd, 1999: 3). Such a writer as Aphra Behn, who had often been repudiated as a morally depraved minor writer, could hardly be accepted by Victorian morality and her plays suffered the hostility of many critics. Even those critics<sup>3</sup> who admired her work and considered her an important writer felt it necessary to apologise for her coarse licentiousness and the alleged depravity of her life and work.

Although in the twentieth century she was still attacked by several critics, Aphra Behn was rescued by Montague Summers, who published an expensive, limited, six volume edition of her works, where he defended her warmly. A few years later, in 1927, Vita Sackville-West published the first book-length study and biography of Aphra Behn; and a couple of years later her friend Virginia Woolf rendered homage to the dramatist by recognising her as the first professional woman writer and acclaiming the debt all women owed her. Around the mid-twentieth century, George Woodstock acknowledged her as a precursor of the eighteenth century English novel. But it was from the 1970s onwards that, thanks mainly to feminist criticism, she underwent a revaluation<sup>4</sup> and came back to the canon of English literature; since then she has been the object of countless articles and studies, especially in the last ten or fifteen years<sup>5</sup>.

It should be noticed, however, that Aphra Behn was not the only Restoration playwright to suffer oblivion or censure in later centuries.

---

<sup>3</sup> Heidi Hutner mentions Leigh Hunt, William Forsyth or William Henry Hudson (1993: 2), among others.

<sup>4</sup> According to Heidi Hutner, “feminist critics have resurrected her as the foremother of British women’s writing” (1993: 1).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Markley (2000: 237) explains how in the mid 1970s only one of her plays, *The Rover*, was in print and just twenty years later several of her plays were available in paperback, along with a new edition of her complete works by Janet Todd, and over twenty-five articles were published just between 1994 and 1996.

Society and morality started to change towards the end of the seventeenth century with the access of William of Orange and Mary to the throne. In 1698, Jeremy Collier published his influential *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*; whereas in the early forties it was mostly the Puritans who considered the stage sinful and managed to have theatres closed down, now attacks started to come from the representatives of many other religious groups (Duffy 1977: 256). In the following century, Restoration was demonised as a period of courtly licentiousness and plays slowly left the repertoire (Todd, 1999: 3). In the nineteenth century, the frank treatment given to sexual relationships and the irreverence present in Restoration plays clashed with the prudery and morality of Victorian society. When, Leigh Hunt dared to issue the first standard edition in 1840 of whom he considered the four major Restoration dramatists, *The Dramatic Works of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar*, the result was an article by Lord Macaulay in the *Edinburgh Review* where he fiercely attacked these playwrights in particular and Restoration drama in general for being “a disgrace to our language and our national character” and “a mouthpiece of the most deeply corrupted part of a corrupt society” (quoted by Markley, 2000: 232). Plays from this period completely disappeared from the stage and, even in the twentieth century, very few tragedies and none of the heroic plays were ever performed; only some comedies survived.

As we have seen in the case of Hunt's edition, just a few Restoration dramatists have managed to keep their plays within the canon in the last three hundred years. Although more than five hundred known plays were written between 1660 and 1700 (Markley, 2000: 226), most ideas about drama in this period are based mainly on one specific genre, the comedy of manners, and a small group of canonical authors, namely, Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve and Dryden (Payne, 2000b: xv). It is interesting, though, to see how two different canons have developed over time regarding Restoration drama: on the one hand, there are the plays that have occasionally been performed on the stage, often those by the first three authors in our short list above, and, on the other, Dryden's heroic tragedies that, although widely studied and highly considered as to their literary value, have very rarely been produced after 1700 (Markley, 2000: 227). This does not mean, however, that these authors have always been accepted with the same degree of enthusiasm<sup>6</sup>, which proves how changeable the canon is. As Markley puts it,

---

<sup>6</sup> Markley (2000: 228-9, 232) offers two different examples, both concerning Etherege. He reports some reviews published by Robert Steele in 1711 in which, whereas he praises Congreve, he condemns Etherege. At the same time, John Bell's *British Theatre*, which was published in the 1790s, and printed texts that were regulated from the prompt-books of eighteenth century performances at three of the most important London theatres included plays or adaptations of plays

“watching or reading a play is a complex social experience”; many factors interplay in this activity and trying to impose what he calls “transhistorical standards” on literary works has proved to be unsuccessful since critics, as well as dramatists, cannot step outside of their own context to other objective judgements (Markley, 2000: 228, 230). As we have already pointed out on several occasions, morality, for instance, or at least the transgression of morality accepted on the Restoration stage, is completely in opposition to morality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both on and off the stage.

## 2. PLAYING AGAINST THE CANON

Taking into account how successful Aphra Behn was with the public –only in 1677 she staged and/or published four plays, among them her popular *The Rover*, and in 1682 she also had three plays on stage– in her own time, why did she disappear from the canon to be recovered only recently? Part of the explanation should be found in the criticisms that, in spite of her success, she was subject to in her own time. Aphra Behn was usually attacked on basis of three main accusations<sup>7</sup>: not having any education and therefore lacking “learning” for writing plays, bawdiness, and being a woman in a men’s world. In fact, all three issues are closely linked and derived from the situation and consideration of women in the seventeenth century. As was customary at the time, Aphra Behn’s plays were preceded by a “prologue” and ended with an “epilogue”, very often written by herself. These texts were privileged occasions to establish her position about different matters, and she took advantage of that fact. We are going to have a look at some of the prologues, epilogues, prefaces or specific letters addressed to the readers<sup>8</sup> in order to try to understand the reason for the criticisms she had to suffer and see how she defended herself.

At different points during the Restoration, a debate arose about the aim and the structure of plays, mostly of comedies. Both critics and authors discussed whether drama should please or instruct and, probably due to the accusation often made by Puritans that the stage was a bad influence on

---

by Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, Farquhar, Otway or Lee, as well as some minor authors like Cibber or Rowe, but none by Etherege.

<sup>7</sup> There was a fourth accusation, of plagiarism, against which Aphra Behn had to defend herself in a Letter to the Reader which appeared in *Sir Patient Fancy*. In fact, adapting and even reshaping whole plots from previous plays or French (mainly Molière) or Spanish authors (Calderón) were widely used practices in Restoration drama.

<sup>8</sup> Criticisms could only be known once a play had been staged; so she took advantage of the opportunity that the publication of the play gave her to make her point.

the morals of the spectators, most of them favoured instruction over pleasure, by saying that the end of comedy was moral (Todd, 1996a: 170; Corman, 2000: 52). Aphra Behn, however, chose pleasure over instruction

... as I take it Comedie was never meant, either for a converting or confirming Ordinance: In short, I think a Play the best divertisement that wise men have; but I do also think them nothing so, who do discourse as formallie about the rules of it, as if 'twere the grand affair of humane life. This being my opinion of Plays, I studied only to make this as entertaining as I could... (*The Dutch Lover*, Reader, 89-93)<sup>9</sup>.

Although Aphra Behn often used her plays to support Royalism and the political position of Tory thought, something that could be understood as instructing or indoctrinating, and she also defended more freedom for women in, for instance, their choosing of husbands, which again could be understood as a form of instruction, she never considered that the aim of comedy was to improve human behaviour or morality. Moreover, she did not think that other playwrights' works had managed to do so either

... in my judgement the increasing number of our latter Plays have not done much more towards the amending of mens Morals, or their Wit... (*The Dutch Lover*, Reader, 67-69).

Aphra Behn did not agree either with following the theory of the unities of time, place and action so much defended by French dramatists. Her plays, like much of Restoration drama, are full of multiple plots taking place over several days and in different settings among an important number of characters, something which seemed to be more in accord with the preferences of English audiences (Corman, 2000: 55). It seems that she had been criticised for writing in an unregulated manner or disordered way, that is to say, not following the unities, and she had to defend herself

Then for their musty rules of Unity, and God knows what besides, if they meant any thing, they are enough intelligible, and as practible by a woman; but really methinks they that disturb their heads with any other rules of Plays besides the making them pleasant, and avoiding of scurrility, might much better be employ'd

---

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from Aphra Behn's plays correspond to Janet Todd's complete edition of her works (1996b); numbers refer to lines.

in studying how to improve mens too too imperfect knowledge of that ancient English Game, which high long Laurence<sup>10</sup> (*The Dutch Lover*, Reader, 133-138).

In fact, what she was saying was that rules and unities had been invented by pedantic, learned men who failed to understand what popular drama was. In her opinion, the unities had to do with learned critics, but not with professional writers. In order to write, she did not need knowledge of the classics but of society (Todd, 1996a: 136-7) and that is what she acquired. She was a very sociable person often surrounded by many people, even when writing, who frequented taverns where she drank beer and learnt the words and ways of both rakes and fops. Along with Edward Ravenscroft, who also thought that art could not be separated from ordinary life, Aphra Behn is probably the author who has best reflected the society of her time. As some critics have said, “[w]hat Behn brought to the august literary critical tradition of her time, which tended to treat literature as timeless, was a very real awareness of historical contingency and specificity” (Todd, 1999: 2).

Aphra Behn wrote for money and she was not ashamed to recognise that this was so. In her play *Sir Patient Fancy* she clearly acknowledges this. In a Letter to the Reader where she has defended herself from accusations both of plagiarism and bawdiness and where she comes to the conclusion that “[t]he play had no other Misfortune but that of coming out for a Womans” (19-20), she ends by saying

... [the author], who is forced to write for Bread and not ashamed to owne it, and consequently ought to write to please (if she can) an Age which has given severall proofs it was by this way of writing to be obliged, though it is a way too cheap for men of wit to pursue, who write for Glory, and a way which even I despise as much below me (24-28).

Immediately, at the very beginning of the Prologue to the same play, she repeats the idea that she writes for money

We write not Now as th’Ancient Poets writ, / For your Applause of Nature,  
Sense and Wit; / But, like good Tradesmen, what’s in fashion vent, / And Cozen  
you, to give ye all Content (1-4).

Writing did not seem to be a great thing in Behn’s view; she had written her plays for money and she reckoned others had done the same. That is the reason why she despised learning applied to the writing of comedies and she

---

<sup>10</sup> Aphra Behn refers to a game of chance played especially at Christmas (Todd, 1996b: 535).

even mocked those who were learned, at the same time as she seemingly apologised for “her want of letters”

I have often heard indeed (and read) how much the World was anciently oblig'd to it for most of that which they call'd Science, which my want of letters makes me less assur'd of than others happily may be: but I have heard some wise men say, that no considerable part of the useful knowledge was this way communicated, and on the other way, that it hath serv'd to propagate so many idle superstitions, as all the benefits it hath or can be guilty of, can never make sufficient amends for... (*The Dutch Lover*, Reader, 33-39).

We should not think, though, that she despised learning (only when pedantically applied to the writing of comedies), as she always regretted her lack of more formal education and especially not knowing Latin or even Greek well enough, which put her at a great disadvantage in the male dominated literary world. At Aphra Behn's time, young girls could get some degree of education by being taught at home by tutors, by being sent to a girls' boarding school or, if belonging to a poor family, by being sent to learn the basics from the parish priest (Goreau, 1980: 25). The kind of education given to girls was aimed at either practical aspects: reading and writing, accounting, or at giving them some polishing accomplishments that might make them more attractive for would-be husbands: singing, dancing, playing the flute, a smattering of French, needlework and similar things. Aphra Behn was very lucky in comparison to many other women and, although she did not belong to a rich family, she had the opportunity of getting some education. It seems that she could play the flute, speak some French and that she had read more than was usual for many women at the time about history, philosophy or literature (Goreau, 1980: 271). She also had clear handwriting, which might have given her the opportunity of working copying texts, a comparatively important industry at the time, when she was young (Todd, 1999: 21). Of course, university was out of the question for any woman at the time, which was a great disadvantage, especially in the case of Aphra Behn, as university provided a chance for establishing literary friends and connections with future patrons. As Angeline Goreau puts it, learning was “utterly out of women's sphere” (1980: 24).

Just in a period of two years, or two seasons, between 1676 and 1678, she had four successful plays on stage: the tragedy *Abdelazar*, and the comedies *The Town Fop*, *The Rover* and *Sir Patient Fancy*. According to W.R. Owens (1996: 142), it was probably her great productivity and her economic success that led several critics to launch frequent and virulent attacks on her. With *The Rover* she was largely accused of plagiarism, something perfectly

understandable as she had copied many situations, names of characters and episodes from Killigrew's play *Thomaso*<sup>11</sup>, written just a few years earlier. When *Sir Patient Fancy* was first performed, she was again accused of plagiarism; on this occasion she was supposed to have copied plot and characters from the French writer Molière

Others (...) cried it was made out of at least four *French Plays*, when I had but a very bare hint from one, the *Malad Imagenere*, which was given me translated by a Gentleman infinitely to advantage: but how much of the *French* is in this, I leave to those who indeed understand it and have seen it at the Court (*Sir Patient Fancy*, Reader, 14-19).

Most of the accusations, though, were against her immorality, both in her personal life<sup>12</sup> and in her plays; that is it, her plays were considered bawdy. Already in 1678 in the Letter to the Reader at the beginning of *Sir Patient Fancy*, she took advantage of the opportunity that publishing the play gave her to vindicate her play

I Printed this Play with all the impatient haste one ought to do, who would be vindicated from the most unjust and silly aspersion, Woman could invent to cast on Woman; and which only my being a Woman has procured me; *That it was Baudy*, the least and most Excusable fault in the Men writers, to whose Plays they all crowd, as if they came to no other end than to hear what they condemn in this; *but from a Woman it was unnaturall...* (*Sir Patient Fancy*, Reader, 1-6).

Probably what hurt her most about these criticisms was that they quite often came from other women who, instead of understanding her and being on her side, attacked her mainly for being a woman who wrote in the same way as men did. But, of course, what was natural in men was "*unnatural*" in women.

Explicit references to sex and sexual relationships had been present in many Restoration plays since the early 1660s, something in accordance with what was happening in Charles II's court, where promiscuity, frivolity and extravagance were the norm and the king himself openly kept several

---

<sup>11</sup> Aphra Behn included a Post-Script in the printed version of *The Rover*, defending herself against the accusations of having plagiarised Killigrew's play.

<sup>12</sup> In Pilar Zozaya's opinion, her own attitude in real life did not help improve her reputation as a bawdy writer: she was a member of Charles II's licentious court, she was gay and witty and liked the company of all kinds of people, she was a literary friend and admirer of the Earl of Rochester, a prototype of the libertine rake, and she had a long and complex relationship with John Hoyle, another example of the libertine rake of the period.



mistresses (Goreau, 1980: 165). As a logical consequence of this atmosphere and taking into account that during Restoration an important part of the audience was made up of members of the court, in the late 1670s –the period when *Sir Patient Fancy* was written, 1678– there was an emergence of “sex comedies” much bolder than the ones in the preceding years. However, the following decade saw a change against sexual explicitness on the stage. This reaction came mainly from women who attended the theatre and who, by setting up a Society for the Reformation of Manners, wanted to bring about a change not only on the stage but also in society at large<sup>13</sup> (Owens, 1996: 142).

This shift in the consideration given to sex on the stage greatly affected one of Aphra Behn's plays, *The Luckey Chance*, written in 1687. In a long Preface she prepared for the printed version, she passionately defended herself. She started by placing the origin of all the criticism in the envy her success aroused in other writers

The little Obligation I have to some of the witty Sparks and Poets of the Town, has put me on a Vindication of this Comedy from those Censures that Malice, and ill Nature have thrown upon it, tho in vain: The Poets I heartily excuse, since there is a sort of Self-Interest in their Malice, which I shou'd rather call a witty Way they have in this Age, of Railing at every thing they find with pain successful (...). And nothing makes them so through-stitch an Enemy as a full Third Day<sup>14</sup> (...) and when they can no other way prevail with the Town, they charge it with the old never failing Scandal... (1-11).

In order to prove her point, she offers a list of plays and examples by contemporary writers against which similar charges of bawdiness could be made regarding plot, situations or explicit allegedly indecorous acting on the part of the actors (lines 54 to 78). Something that, in fact, has been used by those attacking her in the sense that in order to present her worse than she is, some plays *not* by her pen have been attributed to her

And to fortifie their Detraction, charge me with all the Plays that have ever been offensive; though I wish with all their Faults I had been the Author of some of those they have honour'd me with (33-36).

---

<sup>13</sup> Another evidence of this new attitude towards dealing with sex on the stage would be Collier's book, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, mentioned above, published in 1698.

<sup>14</sup> During Restoration, an author's earning was based on the money the play made on the third day it was performed; therefore, “a full Third Day” meant the success of a play in itself and profit for the author.

Aphra Behn, foreseeing all these problems, had taken her precautions and, before taking it to the stage, she says, had it read by several men of repute in the literary world and more specifically the theatre: Davenant, Sir Roger L'Estrange, who was the one to license it, Thomas Killigrew and some of the actors of the company, something that made her feel confident enough about the play as she was sure "they left nothing that cou'd offend" (lines 47-48). What is even more, she also had the play read by

... several Ladys of very great Quality, and unquestioned Fame, and received their most favourable Opinion, not one charging it with the Crime, that some have been pleas'd to find in the Acting (94-97).

And once they had seen it, they could not find any fault either,

Other Ladys who saw it more than once, whose Quality and Vertue can sufficiently justifie any thing they design to favour, were pleas'd to say, they found an Entertainment in it very far from scandalous... (97-99).

It is clear then that what she wrote was not so scandalous as some critics and other voices declared it to be, or –at least– it was not more objectionable than what other playwrights were presenting on the stage. The problem seems to have been not so much the contents of what Aphra Behn wrote, but the fact that she was a woman. She knew that and she denounced it in her writings: in the Letter to the Reader preceding *The Dutch Lover*, she complains about the prejudice expressed by a "wretched Fop" in the audience

This thing, I tell ye, opening that which serves for a mouth, out issued such a noise as this to those that sate about it, that they were to expect a woful Play, God damn him, for it was a womans (106-108).

A similar complaint about prejudice in the audiences was expressed a few years later in, again, a letter preceding *Sir Patient Fancy*, when she confirmed that the only censure the play could suffer was having been written by a woman.

The play had no other Misfortune but that of coming out for a Womans: had it been owned by a Man, though the most Dull Unthinking Rascally Scribler in Town, it had been a most admirable Play (19-21).

On a future occasion, she even dares to challenge the audience or any reader to judge her play without thinking it has been written by a woman and then see what their judgement of it is

... I make a Challenge to any person of common Sense and Reason (...) any unprejudic'd Person that knows not the Author, to read any of my Comedys and compare 'em with other of this Age (...) had the Plays I have write come forth under any Mans Name, and never known to have been mine; I appeal to all unbyast Judges of Sense, if they had not said that Person had made as many good Comedies, as any one Man that has writ in our Age... (*The Luckey Chance*, Preface, 20-25, 88-91).

Why this prejudice against a woman writer? Why this disdainful attitude to her work? According to W. R. Owens (1996: 135), in the seventeenth century the role of women in society was based on the idea that they were inferior to men in every respect; this was preached in church as well as expressed by moralists in many other contexts. Consequently, a woman was demanded to be chaste, obedient, pious and silent. Many documents of this period (letters, diaries, etiquette manuals, sermons, etc.) do actually mention "the feminine sphere", that is to say, the private domain, the house, in opposition to "the masculine sphere" or the world at large where men were free to move and express themselves. Stepping out of this private sphere, making herself known or public, meant that a woman was trespassing on masculine territory and that she was endangering not only her chastity, reputation, honour and virtue, but also her husband's, in the event that she were married, or her father's, if she was not. Knowledge was considered to be part of male property, it was part of the world, of the public sphere and that is why women were precluded from knowledge, along with education (Goreau, 1980: 34).

Aphra Behn knew perfectly well that she was entering a men's world and in the Prologue to her first play, *The Forc'd Marriage*, she even boasts about doing so. In a speech where she starts by speaking about women's beauty and how quickly it fades, as a result of which they have also to resort to wit, she continues by stating that

To day one of their party ventures out, / Not with design to Conquer, but to  
Scout: / Discourage but this first attempt, and then, / They'le hardly dare to sally  
out again (23-26).

Aphra Behn was not the first woman to write, or even to write plays. However, there were some differences from earlier women writers. Not going

much further back in time, some women writing just before or around the period when Aphra Behn did were Katherine Philips, Frances Boothby, Elizabeth Polwhele and Lady Cavendish. All of them wrote at least one play, apart from poetry and maybe some prose. Some of their plays were performed, but this was not their initial intention and none of them wrote for money. Lady Cavendish, for instance, always resisted the publication of her texts, even against the insistence and encouragement of her husband. Many other women<sup>15</sup> who decided to publish their work did so either anonymously or under the name of a male relative; if not for silence, they certainly opted for invisibility. Aphra Behn, on the contrary, was economically dependent on the theatre and she wrote many and very commercial plays, which –on top of everything– were sexually and politically charged (Wiseman, 1996: 29). We might ask, then, what kept those other women in the seventeenth century from writing and especially from wanting to have their work published under their own name. In Angeline Goreau's opinion (1980: 150), there seems to have been two main reasons: on the one hand, the idea that wit belonged to the masculine sphere, as we have already hinted above, and, on the other, the fear of overstepping feminine modesty, of stepping out of their sphere.

Aphra Behn was not afraid of going beyond any forbidden barrier and, instead of choosing the protection of invisibility, she opted for defending herself by means of her writings. She had entered the masculine sphere, she was proud of it, and she would not let any criticism dishearten her from continuing writing

I Here, and there, o'reheard a Coxcomb Cry / Ah, Rott it – 'tis a Womans  
Comedy, / One, who because she lately chanc't to please us, / With her Damn'd  
stuff will never cease to tease us. / What has poor Woman done that she must be,  
/ Debar'd from Sense and Sacred Poetrie? / (...) pray tell me then / Why Women  
should not write as well as Men (*Sir Patient Fancy*, Epilogue, 1-6, 43-44).

By doing this, Aphra Behn was placing herself in a dangerous position, as she was making herself too “public”. Her successes and her increasing fame annoyed other writers who had not achieved what she had, but it was probably her independence of mind that irritated them most, and she was accused of not knowing her place (Goreau, 1980: 231). That is to say, she had failed to keep within feminine modesty, which was equivalent to being a whore. Angeline Goreau (231) quotes a poem by Wycherly, one of the most reputed writers at the time and a canonical Restoration dramatist since then,

---

<sup>15</sup> Angeline Goreau (1980: 150-153) mentions, among others, Anna van Schurman, Anne Wharton, and Anne Finch, the Countess of Winchelsea.

who allowed himself to write a poem addressed to Aphra Behn, where he makes nasty comments on her growing “public” fame, punning on the double sense of the word as it was applied to feminine sexuality at that time. Following Angeline Goreau’s hint (144-162) that the word “publication” contained the term “public” and therefore a woman’s publication might automatically imply a public woman, Catherine Gallagher (1999) has widely developed in her much quoted and reprinted article the idea that “publication” immediately implied a “prostitute”. Janet Todd also joins these two scholars by saying that “the female playwright could combine the opprobrium felt for the professional writer with the scorn directed at the oldest female profession” (1996a: 135).

Two more issues may have contributed to this image of Aphra Behn. She was not only the first professional woman dramatist, but after Dryden and Shadwell, she was only the third professional dramatist of either sex to appear since 1660, as in the first decade of the Restoration the stage had been dominated by gentleman amateurs who wrote plays (Hughes, 2001: 6). The professional writer was actually a social phenomenon that was to take place in the second half of the seventeenth century and writing as a profession was contrary to the notion of a proper lady (Goreau, 1980: 1). The second aspect is that Restoration was the period when women entered the theatrical marketplace not just as writers, but also as actresses. Actresses first appeared on the public stage in the late 1660s and they were also often accused of immodesty. With the exception of the wives or daughters of actors and managers, no young lady of a good family would consider becoming an actress. In fact, if we have a look at the origins of most women who became actresses, many of them were in some irregular position. Needless to say, some of them accepted the advances they were subject to on the part of the noblemen attending the representations and soon became their kept mistresses.

In spite of her defence of female authorship, and the right and possibility of a woman writing as skilfully as any man might do, she cannot completely escape from her feminine education and the time and circumstances in which she lived. That is the reason why, at the end of the Preface to *The Luckey Chance*, she claims for her masculine side

All I ask, is the Privilege for my Masculine Part the Poet in me, (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv’d in, to take those Measures that both the Ancient and Modern Writers have set me, and by which they have pleas’d the World so well. If I must not, because of my Sex, have this Freedom, but that you will usurp all to your selves; I lay down my Quill, and you shall hear no more of me, no not so much as to make

Comparisons, because I will be kinder to my Brothers of the Pen, than they have been to a defenceless Woman; for I am not content to write for a Third day only. I value Fame as much as if I had been born a *Hero*; and if you rob me of that, I can retire from the ungrateful World, and scorn its fickle Favours.

And she also claims “Fame”, being known, being public.

### 3. CONCLUSION

From the very beginning of her literary career, Aphra Behn denounced in her plays the situation women were subject to, for instance, being used as commodities in arranged marriages, as the title of her first play indicates –*The Forc'd Marriage* (1671)– by fathers, brothers or uncles for their economic or social benefit. Although it must be said that many of her heroines were outspoken, independent, witty young girls who spoke their mind and eventually got their way. However, it is in the prologues, prefaces, letters to the readers of her plays and epilogues that Aphra Behn can actually speak with her own voice and establish her position, especially as regards women. In Jessica Munns’s words, “these prefaces and forewords are places where she assumes responsibility for her own discourse as a woman” (1993: 59).

As Aphra Behn herself complained about in the texts we have analysed here, the author and her work were in fact measured by a double standard. Whatever she wrote, however chaste it might have been, was bound to be condemned as lewd, just for the fact of being a woman and daring to publish it. Even the greatest of her contemporaries, Dryden, admitted this to be so when advising a young girl not to publish her work and not to step out of the boundaries of feminine modesty, as Aphra Behn had done; although, he admitted he was not the best judge, having been a libertine himself in the past (reported by Goreau, 1980: 234).

Aphra Behn belonged to the Restoration canon as far as plots, structure of the plays, use of the stage, characters, vocabulary, situations and provocative acting of her plays is concerned. She also belonged to the canon regarding success, acceptance by the audience and protection of the nobility and even members of the royal family. What made her different and placed her out of the canon for so many years was being a woman and not hiding it; on the contrary, she boasted that she was a woman, that she had entered a men’s domain and that she could write as well as any man. Although she remained forgotten for a long time, it has eventually been recognised by critics in general that she “made a public space for women” (Todd, 1996a: 4). In a century, the twentieth, when feminist criticism emerged with strength in its

own right, Aphra Behn could not remain hidden any longer. However, it is still difficult to find any of her plays in anthologies of Restoration drama, and even though her play *The Rover* has been produced in recent years by two well established companies, none of the others seems to be very successful with would-be producers. Aphra Behn still has some way to go to be part of the canon.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Corman, B. (2000). "Comedy". In: D. Payne (ed.) (2000): 52-69.
- Dietz, B. (ed.) (1989). *Estudios literarios ingleses. La Restauración (1660-1700)*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Duffy, M. (1989 [1977]). *The Passionate Shepherdess. The Life of Aphra Behn, 1640-1689*. London: Phoenix Press.
- Gallagher, C. (1999). "Who was That Masked Woman? The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Comedies of Aphra Behn". In: J. Todd (ed.) (1999): 12-31. This article was originally published in *Women's Studies*, 15 (1988), and reprinted on several occasions.
- Goreau, A. (1980). *Reconstructing Aphra. A Social Biography of Aphra Behn*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hughes, D. (2001). *The Theatre of Aphra Behn*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Hutner, H. (ed.) (1993a). *Rereading Aphra Behn. History, Theory, and Criticism*. Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia.
- Hutner, H. (1993b). "Rereading Aphra Behn: An Introduction". In: H. Hutner (ed.) (1993): 1-13.
- Markley, R. (2000). "The canon and its critics". In: D. Payne (ed.) (2000): 226-242.
- Munns, J. (1993). "'Good, Sweet, Honey, Sugar-Candied Reader': Aphra Behn's Foreplay in Forewords". In: H. Hutner (ed.) (1993): 44-62.
- Owens, W. R. (1996). "Remaking the canon: Aphra Behn's *The Rover*". In: W. R. Owens & L. Goodman (eds.) (1996): 131-191.
- Owens, W. R. & L. Goodman (eds.) (1996). *Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon*. London: Routledge and The Open University.
- Payne, D. (ed.) (2000a). *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Payne, D. (2000b). "Preface". In: D. Payne (ed.) (2000): xv-xviii.
- Todd, J. (1996a). *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Todd, J. (1996b). *The Works of Aphra Behn 5, 6 and 7*. London: William Pickering.
- Todd, J. (ed.) (1999). *Aphra Behn*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

- Wiseman, S. J. (1996). *Aphra Behn*. Plymouth: Northcote House and The British Council.
- Zozaya Ariztia, P. (1989). "Aphra Behn: la primera escritora profesional en Inglaterra". In: B. Dietz (ed.) (1989): 265-303.