

Aphra Behn

(1640-1689)



Aphra Behn was born in Kent, England in 1640. She was a British dramatist, novelist, playwright and government spy. She is considered to be the first woman to make a living through her writing. Although there were other women writers before Behn, few of them enjoyed financial success.

Aphra Behn's early life is shrouded in mystery; even the identity of her parents is unknown. It is presumed that Behn was Eaffry Johnson born to Bartholomew and Elizabeth Johnson therefore, her father would have been a barber.

In 1663 she travelled with her family to Surinam, West Indies, where her father was to take on an administrative post. In Surinam Aphra studied the history, and acquired personal knowledge of the African prince Oroonoko and his beloved Imoinda, whose adventures she related in her novel, *Oroonoko*. Her father died on the voyage and the family eventually returned to England.

Upon her return, she married Mr. Behn, a London merchant of Dutch extraction. Very little is known about her husband. Unfortunately, after three years of marriage, she lost her husband. She was only twenty-six at the time. After the death of her husband, Charles II employed her in Secret Service in the Netherlands during the Dutch wars. At Antwerp she successfully accomplished the objects of her mission; and towards the end of 1666 she wormed out of one Van der Aalbert the plot formed by De Ruyter, in conjunction with the DeWitts, to sail up the Thames and burn the English ships in their harbours. This

she communicated to the English court, but although the event proved her intelligence to have been well founded, it was disregarded. Disgusted with political services, and penniless, Behn returned to England and turned to her literary talent. Her first play, *The Forc'd Marriage*, established her reputation and she continued to produce enough substantial work each year to make a living.

Although Behn gained a lot of merit for her writing, she nonetheless suffered from the biases of her time against women writers in general and women dramatists in particular. She was assumed by many of her contemporaries to be a prostitute because of her connection to the theatre and because at the time, women who sold their writing were seen as selling themselves. Furthermore, Behn's reputation suffered because of the topics she chose. Many of her eighteen extant plays portray various forms of prostitution, and some of her novels and poems contain frank eroticism that shocked early audiences. Being one of the earliest female playwrights, she was seen as someone who, like an actress, displayed herself to the public. Since actresses were viewed as—and some were—prostitutes, it was assumed by many that Behn was a prostitute, too.

Like her role model, William Shakespeare, Behn often mined ideas from existing works and vastly improved upon them. She often complained that her works never attained the fame they deserved because they were “writ by a woman.” However, her achievement survived her, for by the nineteenth century Virginia Woolf would exclaim in *A Room of One's Own* that a woman could live the writer's life since, “Aphra Behn had done it!”

Aphra Behn died on April 16th, 1689. She is buried in Westminster Abbey. Engraved on her tombstone, perhaps at the request of her lover, John Hoyle, are the words, "Here lies a proof that wit can never be / Defence enough against mortality.”

Her works include at least 15 "novels" (short stories, really), a book of poetry, translations from Latin and French, and at least 17 plays, many of them comedies. Her best known works are her novel *Oroonoko* (1688) and the plays *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670), *The Rover* (1677), *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678), *The Roundheads* (1681), and *The City Heiress* (1682).

Aphra Behn was a woman of great talent and after three hundred and twenty years, her talent, perseverance and determination is still greatly appreciated. Aphra Behn proved to many that women can accomplish great things when they put their minds to it.

References:

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