CRITICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE
WRITINGS OF APHRA BEHN

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WRITINGS OF APHRA BEHN

A Thesis

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

About Mrs Aphra Behn there is practically nothing that can be said with certainty except that she is the author of a number of plays, a few stories and a volume of verse. She has come down to us a dim figure, shrouded from our eyes by the starched and officious hands of nineteenth century morality, so that her life is a legend and her very name a matter of speculation. Some say that while she was a girl she travelled from her English home to America,(1) and others indignantly deny that she did anything of the kind.(2) Some have dubbed her father a barber and others have made him a Lieutenant General. Her maiden name, before she married the nebulous Mr Behn, is thought by some to have been Johnson, and by others Amis or Amies, and her Christian name has been spelt in nine different ways. So that in introducing Mrs Behn it is only possible to outline in brief the theories and suppositions that go to make up her biography.

Biographers are agreed that Mrs Behn was born in 1640 in the little village of Wye not far from Canterbury, but when the question of her parents arises, they differ. The earliest document concerning her history is The Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn, written by One of the Fair Sex, which was prefixed to the collection of her Histories and Novels in 1696. The author of this piece has never been identified,

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(1) See Life and Memoirs, and Memoir of Mrs Behn by Summers.

(2) Paul Elmer More and Dr Ernest Bernbaum.

and it is supposed by Dr Ernest Bernbaum[1] that it was in reality written by Charles Gildon who also wrote an Account of the Life of the Incomparable Mrs Behn, which he prefixed to a posthumous play, The Younger Brother, also published in 1696.

From these we learn that her maiden name was Johnson, and that her father was a barber. But Miss Sackville-West declares[2] that there is no record in the parish register of Wye of a man named Johnson or that he was a barber, but that on July 10th, 1640, Peter and Ayfara Amis were baptised together at the church of Sts. Gregory and Martin. Such proof is convincing.

The next difficulty is whether Aphra went to Surinam or not. Dr Bernbaum absolutely denies that she ever did, and declares that the description of that place, which is found in Mrs Behn's famous novel Oroonoko, is all taken from George Warren's Impartial Description of Surinam, since the details of the descriptions coincide in several instances; that the characters in Oroonoko are false and lifeless, and that there is no reason to suppose that she ever crossed the Atlantic.

Paul Elmer More agrees with him in this matter.[3] But then both were hampered by the barber theory,

(1) Publications of the Modern Language Association, Vol.28.
(2) Aphra Behn by V. Sackville-West; page 19.
(3) The Nation; Sept. 28, 1916.

since they could not see their way to believing that a barber could be appointed, - according to The Life and Memoirs, - Lieutenant Governor of a number of islands and the continent of Surinam, which was the honour accorded to Aphra's father. Now, however, says Miss West, that it is fairly certain that Mrs Behn's father was not Johnson the barber, but Mr Amis, the relative of Lord Willoughby of Parham who had influence overseas, the Surinam theory becomes more probable.

And anyway if, for a moment, all the evidence both for and against the matter be disregarded except the story Oroonoko, of the existence of which there can be no doubt, and the play The Widow Ranter, which is equally certain, then why should any woman who spent her life in England and Europe take the trouble to learn all about conditions in Surinam to write a story, and in Virginia to write a play, when her own surroundings would be so much more natural a background for her plots.

There are two reasons that can be produced for the other side. Firstly, interest in foreign countries and especially those of fairly recent discovery was strong in England, and any plot in a comparitively unknown land would be sure to attract the attention of the reading and theatre-going public. Secondly, people were curious about the native inhabitants of these countries, their habits and manner of living, and particularly their morals and virtues as compared with the

morality and virtue of civilised human beings. It was argued that a savage without any of the benefits of so-called civilisation might be as noble as an Englishman, nay, even nobler. Perhaps there were actual disadvantages to civilisation.

So Mrs Behn, who was by no means blind to the interests of her readers, sets on the one hand the plot of a play in Virginia, and incidentally introduces some interesting sidelights on its corrupt politics, and on the other creates an extraordinary being, a savage, a slave, who nevertheless has a most admirable character and a very cultured intelligence. The result is that the book is successful.

But then Miss West suggests that as the background for another story, The Fair Jilt, was Antwerp, where there is no question that Mrs Behn lived because of the records in the state papers of her political work there, so Surinam was made the background of Oroonoko. "That she used Surinam, in fact, in the same manner as she used Antwerp."(1)

Miss West also draws attention to the dedication of The Young King where Mrs Behn remarks about her muse: "Three thousand Leagues of spacious Ocean she has measured, visited many and distant shores . . "(2) And so she concludes by accepting the fact that Aphra went to Surinam.

But the analogy drawn between the Fair Jilt and Oroonoko is very weak, and in the dedication to The Young King it

(1) Aphra Behn by V. Sackville-West; page 47.
(2) The Works of Aphra Behn, ed. Summers; vol. 2, page 105.

is only her muse that Mrs Behn refers to, not herself. True, her muse had been to America; but had Aphra Behn? Also Dr Bernbaum's scepticism regarding the Life and Memoirs is perfectly justifiable, and while Miss West ostensibly rejects the Life and Memoirs, yet she still clings to the fact that "she was a gentlewoman by birth, of a good family," related to Lord Willoughby, and that her father had been appointed Lieutenant Governor of six and thirty islands besides the continent of Surinam, both of which are recorded in the Life and Memoirs. What do we know of the Amis family? Might not Mr Amis have been a barber after all?

There is, in fact, no definite proof one way or another. Until some further reliable material is discovered it is impossible to solve the Surinam problem. Dr Bernbaum's and Paul Elmer More's arguments are convincing up to a point, and Miss West's are ingenious and possible, but neither side can prove anything.

But about the next part of her biography there is no need to be sceptical. Aphra returned with the family to London and married a Dutchman called Behn. But he died in 1665 - perhaps of the plague - and left his wife apparently destitute. Dr Bernbaum, it is true, doubts the existence of Mr Behn, but after all whether he lived or not does not really make very much difference. It is enough that his wife survived him.

Then comes the Holland episode. Mrs Behn had made some footing for herself in court circles, and now she is sent as a political spy to Antwerp. Here, - so says the Life and Memoirs, - Van der Albert fell in love with her, and from him she obtained secrets of state which she sent on to England. There was besides a rival for her affections in the person of Van Bruin. As a political spy she did her duty faithfully; but politics bored Charles II, and poor Aphra found both her information and herself ignored. She fell into debt, and eventually, after a number of pathetic letters imploring financial aid, returned on a loan to London. Even here the government paid no attention to her, and she was flung into a debtor's prison. How long she remained in gaol is not recorded in the Life and Memoirs, but it seems that some benefactor finally came to her rescue and delivered her from confinement.

And then it was , when she was thirty, that she began to write, for the year 1670 saw the production at the Duke's Theatre, Lincoln's Inn Fields of The Forc'd Marriage; or, the Jealous Bridegroom. It was the first of nineteen years of almost continual writing, for when she died in 1689 she was the author of nineteen plays, thirteen stories and some hundreds of poems.

It is a profitless task as a rule to make inquiry into the private life or the morals of an artist. Often it leads to misunderstanding, seldom to edification. It is enough to

say that Mrs Behn lived in Restoration London; that she was, according to her naïve biographer, a woman of sense and by consequence a lover of pleasure, "as indeed all, both men and women are . . "and that she had as her poems show, numerous admirers. And after all it is not impossible to be sensible and pleasure loving at once, and certainly it is possible to be at once pleasure loving and an artist.

As a woman Mrs Benn has been thoroughly examined, but her works have not been accorded the interest they deserve. So it shall be the purpose of this essay, while touching upon the woman, to concentrate chiefly on her work, and to show that it too is worthy of notice if not of praise.

CHAPTER II

RESTORATION THEATRE CONDITIONS

Before discussing Mrs Behn's plays, which constitute the major part of her works, it is essential to examine the period in which she lived and the conditions under which she wrote. For it is only in the light of this period and these conditions that it is possible to account for her dramatic attitude, the artificiality that pervades her plays, and their all too evident immorality. Drama in the Restoration was an expensive amusement, a rather piquant caviare, unappreciated by and certainly unfit for the general, and in order to understand it thoroughly, it must be remembered that only the upper classes of the time, - a very small percentage of the whole population, - patronised the drama. Theatres were in consequence few in number, because there were not enough theatre-goers to support more. From 1660 to 1682 there were only two major theatres operating at once, and from 1682 to 1695 there was but one. There were also one or two minor theatres, but these, because they had no patent, exerted no influence and lived fitful and sporadic lives.

The Commonwealth was a dark age for actors and theatre managers. Cromwell had no room for the theatre in his puritanical scheme, and so a law against the acting of plays was drawn up in 1642 with heavy penalties attached to its

violation. But it appears that threats of mutilation and flogging, - which were in some cases actually carried out, - did not altogether prevent the private and clandestine exhibition of plays. At any rate the ordinance of 1642 was not strictly adhered to, for it had to be renewed in 1647 and again in 1648. By 1660, however, when the Stuarts were restored, the ban against drama had been removed, and in the same year three dramatic companies were formed. The first, under the management of a book-seller named Rhodes, played at the "Cockpit" in Drury Lane, where the leading man seems to have been Betterton, who was to take leading parts in many of Mrs Behn's plays later in the century. The second, rivalling the Rhodes company, was composed of pre-Commonwealth actors, and the third, organised by William Beeston, appeared at the renovated Salisbury Court Theatre.

These three companies were, however, destined to be short-lived, for on August 21, 1660, a monopoly to produce plays was granted by Charles II to Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant, whose companies, under the distinguished patronage of the King and the Duke of York, were known respectively as "The King's" and "The Duke's". The King's company played for three days at the Red Bull theatre, until the theatre at Vere Street, where they moved next, was ready for them. But the Vere Street theatre, which was in reality a converted tennis court, does not seem to have been altogether satisfactory, for in 1663 they moved again to the Theatre

Royal in Drury Lane, which had been under construction meanwhile.

Davenant's company began playing about a week after the King's company at the Salisbury Court theatre. In the next year they also moved, and settled at the new theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields, which had the special merit of accommodating scenery.

No change was made in this arrangement until 1671, when the Duke's company moved again to a magnificent new theatre, designed by Christopher Wren, and erected on the site of the Salisbury Court theatre in Dorset Gardens. In the same year the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane was destroyed by fire, and in 1674 Killigrew's company moved into the new Theatre Royal, a much smaller and less pretentious building than the one in Dorset Gardens, - having spent the intervening time at the Old Duke's House in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The new Duke's theatre, however, for all its magnificence, proved a burden on the finances of the company. The select theatre-going public of the time was too small to make it pay, and in 1682 the Duke's company was obliged to amalgamate with the King's. The Dorset Garden theatre was then abandoned, and by 1703 it was demolished.

The united companies, known as the King's company, opened at Drury Lane on November 16 under the management of Rich, and for thirteen years this one theatre provided dramatic

entertainment for the whole of London. But in 1695 trouble arose. Receipts were small, and as Rich curtailed the salaries, a number of actors headed by Betterton, being dissatisfied with Rich's terms, seceded from the company, secured a grant from the King to erect a theatre of their own, and shortly afterwards established themselves in the New Theatre, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

One of the most lamentable features of Restoration Drama, which Davenant encouraged, was the growing popularity of painted scenery. In Elizabethan times the play had indeed been the thing, since there was nothing else; but the jaded appetite of the Restoration courtier required something more than mere literature for his entertainment. His life was spent in artificial surroundings amongst artificial people with artificial ideas, and so it is not surprising that the theatre was affected by the prevalent artificiality.

The Restoration scenery designer, chief of whom was John Webb, successfully attempted scenes and effects, which, in the light of his materials seem impossible. Despite the fact that all his lighting was done by candles, he could produce a thunderstorm. He also brought ships on to the stage with undulating waves to bear them up; he made clouds to float upon the air, which could if necessary be filled with a number of cherubim or other celestial creatures. Either the theatre-goers were extremely gullible, or else with his candles and his machines the Restoration producer knew as much about sets

and scenes as does the modern producer with"spots"and flood-lights to help him. But though he was unquestionably a brilliant mechanic, it would be difficult to commend him as an artist.

Hazelton Spencer, speaking of Restoration scenery, remarks: "Scenes and lights became an end in themselves . . . . The public flocked to Davenant's theatre as to a new toy, and from that day to this the spoken drama has had to contend with a meretricious interest engendered by its mere setting."(1)

This is only too true as every theatre-goer of this generation knows, whose attention has wandered from the actors to the extravagant inventions of an over zealous scenery designer. But as in our day, so in Restoration times. Elaborate scenery attracted people, and so scenery was most elaborately made.

In Elizabethan drama most of the dialogue was spoken out on the "apron" of the stage, and in Restoration times the apron,though modified, had not disappeared. It jutted out sometimes as much as seventeen feet into the auditorium, so that the side seats, or what would correspond to box seats, were actually at the side of the stage. But this does not seem to have been an unmixed blessing, for the proximity of the actors to the audience, seems to have bred

(1) Shakespeare Improved by Hazelton Spencer; (Cambridge, (The Harvard University Press, 1927)
Page 53.

in the latter a bold familiarity, which apparently led them sometimes to mount the stage themselves and parade their fine clothes and manners before their fellows. The actors, of course, resented this encroachment of their domain, and a plea against this kind of conduct often added to the advertisements of plays was: "No person to stand on the Stage."

The proscenium immediately behind the apron stage was furnished with four (or two - authorities differ on the question)[1] doors opening in front, by which the actors made their exits and entrances regardless of the scene behind. Above the doors on each side was a window, used in casement or balcony scenes, such as the orchard scene in Romeo and Juliet. Mrs Behn used this device not infrequently as in the first scene of the second act of The Rover (Part I); the stage direction reads: "Enter Angelica and Moretta in the Balcony" etc. All action of this kind would be played before the proscenium on the apron.

It is behind the proscenium that the Restoration stage

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(1) Mr Lowe in "Thomas Betterton" (page 50) argues that there were four. Mr W.J. Lawrence in "Elizabethan Play-house and other Studies" (1. 164) that there were two. Mr Allardyce Nicoll in "Restoration Drama" (page 5) that there were four, and Mr Odell in "Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving" (page 102) leaves the question more or less open.

changed so much from the Elizabethan. The "arras" has developed from a single curtain to a series of painted flats, which have given the name of the"picture stage" to this period. These flats were run in grooves from either side of the stage and the halves were clamped together in the middle. The properly equipped stage of the time would have three or four grooves so that there could be two or three changes of scenery by simply unclamping the flat at the end of each scene and running it off into the wings. A good example of the use of this is seen in Mrs Behn's The Dutch Lover, which incidentally shows that she was fully aware of the possibilities of her stage. In the first act the scene direction reads "A Street". The groove immediately behind the proscenium would be used for this. For the second scene, "Ambrosio's House", the street scene would be unclamped and withdrawn to either side in full view of the audience - for the curtain was used only on rare occasions - revealing Ambrosio's House represented on the flat in the second groove. The third scene, "A Grove", would necessitate a panorama of trees placed in the last groove at the back of the stage and would be discovered in the same way as Ambrosio's House. The opening scene of the second act returns to the street, which would be run in to start the series over again. This device would naturally quicken the action of the play and avoid tedious intervals, - the bug-bear of the modern theatre-goer, - in between the scenes or acts.

Some of these flats were most elaborate. Rows of houses were sometimes painted in perspective to give the effect of looking down a street some hundreds of yards long; woods, palaces, castles, whether near at hand or in the misty distance were common sights; the Restoration scenery designer stopped at nothing.

While the curtain was barely ever used, it was nevertheless there. Mrs Behn makes use of it only twice in her plays; in The Young King and more particularly in The Forc'd Marriage, where a tableau is staged just before the second act. The scene represents the wedding of Alcippus and Erminia, a climactic incident in the plot. Detailed directions are given:

"The Curtain must be let down and soft Musick must play: The Curtain being drawn up discovers a scene of a Temple: The King sitting on a Throne" . . . (here the position of each character is given) . . . "all remaining without motion, whilst the Musick softly plays; this continues awhile till the Curtain falls; and then the Musick plays aloud till the Act begins."

It is evident from this that dramatists were not blind to the dramatic value of the curtain; the surprising thing is that, realising this, they did not make more frequent use of it.

The problem of lighting in Restoration drama has never

been completely elucidated. The powers of candles seem to have been taxed to their utmost with direct and indirect radiation; but the real question is : how was darkness produced on the stage? Mrs Behn's plays are - mercifully in some cases - full of scenes which, judging from the stage directions, are to be acted in the dark. Candlesticks are melodramatically extinguished or coquettishly overturned; sinister characters meet in the ever recurring street and weave plots in the darkness of night. But was the stage really dark?

The only really plausible solution is that the darkness was not actual but merely implied. It would have been an impossibility to snuff out all the foot-lights and side-lights simultaneously when a candle or torch in the play was put out. And besides the theatre itself was lit, - according to contemporary diagrams, - by two hanging chandeliers which probably remained alight during the whole performance, and which would therefore have kept the apron stage constantly illuminated - however dimly. The convention probably was that if one entered with a candle or a torch, then it must of necessity be night time, and should this candle or torch be extinguished, then the stage was to be supposed darkened.

The "Musick" which Mrs Behn demands in many of her stage directions, besides those for the tableau already mentioned,

was supplied by an orchestra arranged in the Musick Room, which in Davenant's theatre was placed either at the side of or above the projecting stage, but in Killigrew's in the same position as that occupied by the orchestra in the modern theatre. Many plays called for songs which would be sung to the accompaniment of this orchestra, which also performed between the acts.

The designing of costumes was a part of stage technique at this time very far from perfect. Little or no attention was paid to chronological accuracy or artistic effect. Had they played, as did the Elizabethans, entirely in the dress of their own time, the ridiculous blunders into which they fell might have been avoided. But sometimes they played in traditional Elizabethan costumes; sometimes, as in the case of Roman plays, in ludicrous and absurd attempts to copy the conventional idea of a toga or Roman armour; and in Oriental plays their imagination ran quite out of control and produced "creations" which even Restoration audiences must have had difficulty in stomaching. An excellent example of this is seen in the contemporary portrait of Mrs Bracegirdle as the Indian Queen in Howard and Dryden's play of that name. She is represented as wearing a gown made of a heavy carpet-like material. A halo of multi-coloured ostrich feathers adorns her brow, and she has also a fan of feathers in her hand. About her forehead, throat and arm are necklaces made of tremendous

beads almost as thick as her wrist, and behind her trot two little nigger-boys, briefly clad in feathers, one of whom with difficulty supports her train, while the other holds a huge parasol above her head.

In more important productions where regal finery was required Charles and the Duke of York would sometimes lend their state robes to the players. In Shakespearean plays there appears to have been no standard of dress. Some of the players wore clothes of their own period, while historical characters who had acquired a traditional association with Elizabethan drama, such as Falstaff, Richard III and Henry VIII, preserved their original Elizabethan costumes.

Pepys makes a naïve observation on the clothes of the time, having been allowed on one occasion entrance to the tiring rooms behind stage. He found them very shabby seen in the unromantic light of day, but adds that they looked very much finer by candle-light. Candle-light, no doubt, covered a multitude of sins.

It would be unkind to lay all the blame for the immorality of the Restoration stage on Charles II, but so inextricably was he bound up with the drama and the theatre, that he was actually largely responsible for its quality. Charles symbolised the revolt against the inhibitions of Puritanism that had oppressed the people during the Commonwealth. His return meant a new freedom for the

kingdom, a return to the merry customs of England; to Maypole dancing (an ungodly superstition in Cromwellian eyes), to the eating of mince pies at Christmas, (a popish practice), to bear and bull baiting, to cock fighting, and of course to plays. But the pendulum swung too far; the reaction that the people so desired carried them away. John Richard Green effectively describes the consequent disorder:

"All that was noblest and best in Puritanism was whirled away with its pettiness and tyranny in the current of the nation's hate. . . Godliness became a byword of scorn; sobriety in dress, in speech, in manners was flouted as a mark of the detested Puritanism. . . Duelling and raking became the marks of a fine gentleman; and grave divines winked at the follies of "honest fellows", who fought, gambled, swore, drank, and ended a day of debauchery by a night in the gutter. Life among men of fashion vibrated between frivolity and excess. One of the comedies of the time tells the courtier that he must dress well, dance well, fence well, have a talent for love-letters, an agreeable voice, be amorous and discreet - but not too constant. To such graces as these the rakes of the Restoration added a shamelessness and a brutality which passes belief." And further he adds, "and in mere love of what was vile, in contempt of virtue and disbelief in purity and honesty, the King himself stood ahead of any of

his subjects."(1)

Green has been describing, of course, not the everyday man, but the courtiers and fops, the fine gentlemen of the time. Fortunately there were plenty of fairly respectable people like Pepys - though he was no Puritan - to save the race from utter destruction. But the average man did not go to the theatre. It was too expensive for one thing, (the entrance fee was sometimes as much as half a guinea), and besides he would have felt out of place amongst the noblemen, beaux and wits, the courtezans and depraved women of the court, who comprised the audience. The antics of the fashionable set were by no means emulated by the common people who formed the majority of the population.

It was then for the fashionable set that the Restoration dramatist had to write. He had to pander to the feeling of rebellion, which had heralded the return of the King, against the moral strictures of the Commonwealth. And so he exaggerated this reaction, exploited it for the purposes of comedy and pictured it as being much more violent than it actually was. In consequence Restoration plays are filled with the most brutal and bare-faced obscenities. Impurity was its most important subject. A pair of witty and cynical lovers indulge in bouts of brilliant repartee, diffusing an atmosphere of immodesty and vice, tempered with

(1) A Short History of the English People; (London, Macmillan and Co.); page 607.

culture and fine airs. No plot was necessary, and any real emotion in the more typical dramas was studiously avoided. Writers of this kind of drama sprang up on every hand, each trying to outdo the other in grossness. With Dryden, Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, Farquhar and Vanbrugh, Restoration Comedy reached its zenith.

Historically the most important commentators on the morality of Restoration plays during the nineteenth century were Lamb and Macaulay. Lamb in his essay on the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century adopts an ingenuous but rather evasive attitude to the question, by admitting that he regards the comedies of that day as being quite disassociated from the world and reality. He does not attempt to judge their unmoral world by the strictly moral ideas of his own century, since their world is, he thinks, a mere fairyland, where the consequences of unconventional actions do not follow. "We are not to judge them," he says,

"We are not to judge them by our own usages. No reverend institutions are insulted by their proceedings, - for they have none among them. No peace of families is violated, - for no family ties exist among them. No purity of the marriage bed is stained, - for none is supposed to have any being. No deep affections are disquieted, - no holy wedlock bands are snapped asunder, - for affection's depth and wedded faith are not the growth of that soil.

There is neither right nor wrong, - gratitude or its opposite, - claim or duty, - paternity or sonship." (1)

Now for a dilettante this is a very pleasant point of view, but for anyone who probes more inquisitively into the history of the times and its theatre, the problem is not so easily brushed aside. Macaulay in his review of Leigh Hunt's Comic Dramatists of the Restoration regards Lamb's essay as altogether sophistical. Adopting the attitude of the realist, he cannot think of the characters as unreal because of all the contemporary associations of manner and place, and points out that the lewdness of that time can be found in the lower dens and haunts of his own London. Macaulay's nineteenth century Grundyism is horribly outraged:

"For in truth this part of our literature is a disgrace to our language and our national character. It is clever indeed and entertaining, but it is in the most emphatic sense of the words, 'earthly, sensual, devilish.' Its indecency, though perpetually such as is condemned not less by the rules of good taste than by those of morality, is not in our opinion so disgraceful a fault as its singularly inhuman spirit . . . . We find ourselves in a world in which the ladies are like very profligate, impudent and unfeeling men, and in which the men are too bad for any place but Pandae-

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(1) The Oxford edition of The Works in Prose and Verse of Charles and Mary Lamb; vol. 1, page 651.

monium or Norfolk Island. We are surrounded by foreheads of bronze, hearts like the nether millstone, and tomgues set on fire of hell."(1)

Parts of this outburst bear some resemblance to Jeremy Collier's Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage, published in 1699. So paltry is Collier's view as far as criticism is concerned, that it might easily be overlooked, had it not been so influential in hurrying the Comedy of Manners to the block and setting up in its stead Sentimental Comedy. Collier voiced the sentiments of the common people, who had by no means followed the example of their betters in their rejection of moral and religious scruples.

As a piece of criticism it is, however, futile. He begins in his preface by declaring that, "nothing has gone farther in Debauching the Age than the Stage and Play-House," a palpable absurdity, and goes on in the introduction to observe that, "the business of plays is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice." With these two ridiculous suppositions he embarks on a tedious homily filled with firstlies and secondlies and thirdlies and introducing one nonsensical contention after another. The book is , in Mr John Palmer's words, "a literary exercise in illustration of a foregone conclusion."(2) Collier was a fanatic fundamentally

(1) Critical and Historical Essays; Everyman, vol 2, page 414.
(2) The Comedy of Manners;(G.Bell and Sons, London 1913) page 277.

opposed to art of any kind. He assumes that the playwrights of this time had dirty minds and deliberately evil intentions. It would have been difficult for him under the circumstances to arrive at any but the conclusion he reached.

It is foolish to judge art by morality. "To say that poetry is moral or immoral," says Spingarn, "is as meaningless as to say that an equilateral triangle is moral and an isosceles triangle immoral."(1) That is the opinion of the other extreme, but whatever attitude is taken, clearly it is absurd to condemn Restoration comedy solely on account of its immorality, just as it would be absurd to refuse to read Oscar Wilde because the man was a social outcast. Above all it must be remembered that the plays of the Restoration with which we are dealing were comedies, and comedy is rarely if ever an exact representation of contemporary life. Comedy distorts life, exaggerates it and turns what in actual life might be tragic into a laughing matter. "Comedy," says Mr Lytton Strachey, "exists in a conventional world in which human nature and human actions are revealed, but whose consequences are suspended."(2)

Restoration plays are not then, as Mr E. Stoll points out,(3) relentless studies of reality, which is what Mr Palmer would have us believe. They do not show us the

(1) Creative Criticism; page 32; (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company)
(2) The New Republic; November, 1923.
(3) Shakespeare Studies; chapter 2. (Macmillan & Co. N.Y. 1927.)

morals of the period, but rather the spirit of rebellion against those morals. They are examples of the kind of amusement the bored Restoration wit delighted in, a reflection not of the morality but of the immorality of the day.

It is not to be supposed that everybody was as heartless as the "Rover", any more than it is to be supposed that now-a-days everybody behaves like the characters in a detective play. The majority of us do not go about killing our fellows and escaping the clutches of the law.

The interest in the much maligned Restoration comedy is not in its immorality, - and this is particularly true of Mrs Behn who is comparitively respectable, - but in its exemplification of the comic spirit. It justifies itself thus in many ways; in the witty badinage, the sophisticated drollery, that flows from the cultured lips of its characters; in the countless absurd situations in which they become apparently inextricably involved, and the ease with which all turns out for the good in the end. It has to be read to be appreciated; and if it be read in the right spirit and not as by a censor, then the laughter that comes with its perusal, if nothing else, will surely be sufficient justification. It would be hopeless to investigate Mrs Behn's, or any other Restoration dramatist's plays with the attitude of a police constable. From the strictly moral

point of view they are often disgraceful, but from the dramatic and comic point of view, and from the point of view of the relation of literature to life, there is very definitely something to be said for them.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAYS

Mrs Behn's plays may be generally classed under the category of Intrigue Comedy, for the popularity of which she was mainly responsible. Many of her plots are laid in Spain rather than in London, and she pays more attention to intricacy of plot than to brilliancy of dialogue and character study. We do not look so much for wit in her plays as for rapidity of movement, comic situations, and a predominating air of vivacious fun. It seems that she did not regard the making of plays in a very serious light, in fact, it must be confessed that her aim was more than likely to make money rather than to create great works of art. But the Restoration play-goers cared not so much for works of art as for the enjoyment of the moment. Theirs was a search for pleasure; hedonism was their philosophy and certainly there were very few of the qualities of the hedonist that Mrs Behn did not possess. It is not surprising therefore to find that she was popular. She realised what the contemporary stage wanted, and she did not hesitate to fall in with its demands.

This fact is responsible for the worst feature of her plays, that she made little or no attempt to write about contemporary London life. Whenever possible she lays the

scene in Spain, and though one or two of the plays, as The Roundheads, Sir Timothy Treatall, and others have their scenes in London, it is only rarely that we find a character that rings true to life. Had there only been more Mrs. Clacketts, another Betty Flauntit, more of the delightful mould of Gayman's patient landlady. But Mrs Behn was a professional playwright. She probably depended for a large part of her income on her plays, and so she was obliged to write plays to suit the tastes of the time. In many ways, however, it is a relief to turn to her plays after Wycherley, Etherege and the others. She is not always strictly proper, to be sure, and there are scenes when she is distinctly unpleasant, but throughout the plays there are often charming, naïve characters, Celindas and Clorises, Albertos and Bellmours, who have all the good qualities and little or none of the bad ones.

Mrs Behn's dramatic career opened in 1670 with the production at the Duke's Theatre, Lincoln's Inn Fields, of The Forc'd Marriage; or, the Jealous Bridegroom, and in the next nineteen years, besides her other work, she wrote no less than eighteen plays more. In 1671, The Amorous Prince; The Dutch Lover in 1673; The Town Fop; or, Sir Timothy Tawdrey, 1676; in 1677 she wrote two adaptations of other plays: The Debauchee, from Brome's "The Mad Couple Well Matched" and The Defeated Widow from Middleton's "No Wit, No Help like a Woman's"; in this year she also wrote Abdelazer; or, the

Moor's Revenge, and also The Rover (Part I). In 1678, Sir Patient Fancy; in 1679 The Young King; or, the Mistake, and also The Feign'd Curtezans; or, A Night's Intrigue. 1681 saw the production of The Rover (Part II), and in 1682, The Roundheads; or, the Good Old Cause, The City Heiress; or, Sir Timothy Treatall, and The False Count; or, A New Way to Play an Old Game. For four years she then devoted herself to stories and poems and then in 1686 came The Lucky Chance, - one of her best plays, and in 1687 The Emperor of the Moon. She died in 1689. In 1690 The Widow Ranter, and in 1696 The Younger Brother appeared posthumously.

Mrs Behn's plays have been conveniently subdivided by Mr Allardyce Nicoll into three kinds.(1) First those plays of pure intrigue; secondly "moral" or "problem" plays, and lastly those in which farce predominates. The best examples of the first class are The Rover, The Feign'd Curtezans and Sir Patient Fancy. The Amorous Prince and The Young King are of a moral character, while The Town Fop, The Lucky Chance and The Forc'd Marriage are problem plays. Farce is found in The False Count and The Emperor of the Moon.

There does not seem to be any very definite opinion as to which of the plays is the "best", though there has been much speculation on this point. Commentators either dismiss

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(1) A History of Restoration Drama, 1660-1700. (Cambridge University Press - 1923) page 210.

her plays with a righteous disgust, or else mention The Rover as being outstanding, with perhpas some cursory reference to The Feign'd Curtezans. If the term "best" is to be applied to that play which corresponds most closely to Restoration Intrigue Comedy, then The Rover might be regarded as noteworthy, but if we are to choose first that play which represents Mrs Behn and not merely the sedulous ape in her, then clearly The Rover may be discarded immediately. In The Rover and Sir Patient Fancy the influence of Dryden is very noticeable. We find the witty pair of lovers which Dryden's Celadon and Florimel had popularised.(1) We find Restoration indecency and obscenity. But there is no sign of the Mrs Behn who followed the later tendency towards the improvement of the morality of the drama, and who actually raised her voice against bawdiness. In these typical intrigue plays she was writing entirely to suit the times; to gain popularity and to make money. The Rover is a good intrigue play, but it by no means displays that lightness of touch and élan which were Mrs Behn's, nor does it introduce any of the more naïve and attractive characters which she was so fond of portraying. For those plays in which she reveals her true self a little more, when she was not being entirely conventional, we must turn to the moral and problem plays. Thus the play most logically worthy of preeminence is The Town Fop; or, Sir

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(1) Celadon and Florimel were the hero and heroine of Dryden's play Secret Love.

Timothy Tawdrey.

The theatrical history of The Town Fop is rather obscure. Beyond the fact that it was produced in 1676 there is no definite information as to the performance or the names of the actors who took parts. The plot was taken from another play, - as many of Mrs Behn's were, -"The Miseries of Enforced Marriage" by Wilkins, an early seventeenth century dramatist. The story is of two friends, Bellmour (a most popular name in Restoration Comedy) and Friendlove, who have just returned from a visit to Italy. Bellmour is very much in love with Celinda, who returns his affection, but unfortunately Sir Timothy Tawdrey, a direputable coxcomb, has been settled to marry Celinda by the mutual consent of their respective parents. Meanwhile Lord Plotwell, - a gentleman of very definite opinions, - who is Bellmour's uncle, has decided to marry his nephew to his niece Diana, to whose graces Friendlove aspires. The possibilities of such a situation are immense; a hundred solutions could be worked out. Mrs Behn does it thus:

Bellmour decides to comply with his uncle's wishes, - he will lose his estate if he does not, - and writes to Celinda informing her that their marriage is impossible. His wedding to Diana takes place, and at the nuptial feast Friendlove, who is naturally furious, enters and fights with Bellmour. Fortunately nothing comes of the scuffle. Later

Bellmour reveals to Diana the fact that he does not love her, and she, utterly mortified with shame and disappointment, engages Friendlove to challenge him. Bellmour meanwhile is trying to drown his misery in debauchery and excess. Charles, Bellmour's brotner, and Phyllis his sister are also under the protection of Lord Plotwell, who, hearing of Bellmour's disgraceful behaviour, resolves to desert them. This he does, at the same time procuring a divorce for Diana.

Sir Timothy all this time has been storing up vengeance against Bellmour for depriving him of Celinda's affection, and he now determines to debauch Phyllis by way of venting his anger. Finally he finds himself married to her; Diana, giving up all claim to Bellmour, marries Friendlove, while Bellmour is happily united to Celinda.

The various strands of the plot are beautifully interwoven with that skill of which Mrs Behn is such a past-mistress. First there is the friendship of Bellmour and Friendlove; then Bellmour's love for Celinda, complicated by Sir Timothy's affection for her; Friendlove's love for Diana, involved with the fact that Lord Plotwell, who controls Bellmour's fortune, wants Diana to marry Bellmour; then there are also Charles and Phyllis to be accounted for; Sir Timothy's resolution to debauch Phyllis, and Charles' anger at Bellmour's

misdeeds. But besides all this there is a complete underplot in Sir Timothy's dealings with his mistress Betty Flauntit, and the notorious Mrs. Driver.

As far as plotting is concerned it is an excellent piece of work. But the play has more in it than this merely. There is some good character study in it, and one of those gems taken from life, - all the more valuable because of their scarcity, - is found in the character of the Nurse. She is a sound, honest body , if ever there was one. The second scene of the first act shows her contrasted with the innocent, languishing Celinda:

"Cel(inda). I wonder my brother stays so long: sure Mr Bellmour is not yet arrived, yet he sent us word he would be here today. Lord how impatient I grow!

Nur(se). Ay, so methinks, if I had the hopes of enjoying so sweet a Gentleman as Mr Bellmour, I shou'd be so too - but I am past it - Well, I have had my Pantings, and Heavings, my Impatience, and Qualms, my Heats, and my Colds, and my I know not whats - But I thank my Stars I have done with all those Fooleries."

"Stuff and Nonsense," she probably mutters under her breath, and pats down her apron. Yes, maybe, but she cannot help remembering, - Lord, was it thirty years ago . . ? And Celinda does not see her smile.

She is seen at her best though, when the odious Sir Timothy comes in to pay court to Celinda, and the Nurse proceeds in all good faith in defence of her mistress, to give Sir Timothy a piece of her mind, which lasts for three pages. Solidly planted there like a battleship, she fairly bristles, with her chubby arms akimbo, and poor, wretched Sir Timothy can barely get a word in edgeways, much less speak to Celinda.

Betty Flauntit, Sir Timothy's mistress, is also probably a typical London type with whom Mrs Behn was not entirely unfamiliar, and through whom in this case, she chides the age for its lax morality, by bringing Bellmour (on his jaunt in the fourth act) and her together. Bellmour is thoroughly disgusted.

In Bellmour we see the first signs of the approach of Sentimental Comedy, which with Addison and Steele, became so popular in the beginning of the eighteenth century. He is honest and a gentleman, so different from the rakes of the more popular Restoration dramas.

There is only one character in the play that fails to equal the others in clarity. That is Phyllis, Bellmour's sister. She seems at first meeting a lady with high ideals and scruples, yet she finally allows herself to be married to Sir Timothy because she feared to be left destitute by the

withdrawal of her uncle's protection. But she is not an important character and does not really mar the symmetry of the play.

We have no hesitation in placing The Town Fop at the head of the list as far as merit is concerned. Of its kind it is a thoroughly good example and it shows Mrs Behn at her very best.

The Lucky Chance; or, An Alderman's Bargain is another characteristic problem play written ten years after The Town Fop, and just three years before Mrs Behn's death. In this piece Mrs Behn, returning to drama after four years rest, seems to have recaptured the old style of the seventies, which in the plays immediately before this one, The Roundheads, The City Heiress and The False Count, is sadly lacking. All her freshness and allégresse are here again, and we have a play full of wit and liveliness, if falling a little short of strict propriety. The Lucky Chance enjoyed an enormous popularity after its first production at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in 1687. Its vogue lasted for ten years, a remarkable success for any play. There is actually on record a note of its performance at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1718.

Again the two leading male characters are friends, Harry Bellmour (again!) and Gayman. The plot concerns the love of Bellmour for Leticia, and that of Gayman for Julia,

the wife of Sir Cautious Fulbank, - a very wealthy man, as his name suggests. Bellmour is hindered in his designs upon Leticia by Sir Feeble Fainwou'd, the odious alderman. But everything turns out happily in the end, as it usually does in Mrs Behn's plays, and Sir Feeble and Sir Cautious are obliged to surrender the ladies to Bellmour and Gayman.

An excellent character study is found in Gayman's Landlady in the second act. Gayman at the beginning of the play is in very straitened circumstances, and is obliged to live in a slum lodging-house under the assumed name of Wasteall. His landlady, like the Nurse in The Town Fop, can be a regular termagant when she chooses, but at heart she is a kind soul and as patient as Job, - particularly after a glass of wine, - where Gayman's debts are concerned. Here she is in one of her termagant moods demanding the rent.

"Land(lady). More of your Money and less of your Civility, good Mr Wasteall.

Gay(man). Dear Landlady -

Land. Dear me no Dears, sir, but let me have my Money - Eight Weeks Rent last Friday; besides Taverns, Ale-houses, Chandlers, Landresses' Scores, and ready Money out of my Purse; you know it, sir.

Gay. Ay but your Husband don't; speak softly.

Land. My Husband! what! do you think to fright me with my Husband? I'd have you to know I'm an honest woman and care not for this - for my Husband. Is this all the thanks I have

for my kindness, for patching, borrowing and shifting for you; 'twas but last week I pawn'd my best Petticoat, as I hope to wear it again, it cost me six and twenty shillings besides Making; then this morning my new Norwich Mantua followed, and two postle spoons, I had the whole dozen when you came first; but they dropt,and dropt, till I had only Judas left for my Husband.

Gay. Hear me, Good Landlady.

Land. Then I've past my word at the George Tavern, for forty Shillings for you, ten Shillings at my Neighbour Squabs for Ale, besides seven Shillings to Mother Suds for Washing; and do you fob me off with my Husband?"

But hark to her after a glass of wine:

"Land. I am a little hasty sometimes, but you know my good Nature.

Gay. I do, and therefore trust my little wants with you. I shall be rich again - and then, my dearest Landlady -

Land. Wou'd this Wine might ne'er go through me, if I wou'd not go, as they say, through Fire and Water - by Night or by Day for you. (She drinks.

Gay. And as this is Wine I do believe thee.(He drinks.

Land. Well - you have no Money in your Pocket now, I'll warrant you - here - here's ten Shillings for you old Greg'ry knows not of."

Scenes like this are worthy of Shakespeare, and the

firm, sure hand with which Mrs Behn draws such characters only goes to prove how infinitely better she might have been as a playwright had she confined her attention to London types and classes.

Sir Feeble Fainwou'd and Sir Cautious Fulbank are common types in Restoration Comedy. The Restoration was an age in which theoretically it was almost a sin not to be youthful, or at least apparently so, and the elderly husband and the amorous but over-ripe bachelor were much satirized. In Sir Cautious we have the elderly uxorious husband, and in Sir Feeble the amorous old bachelor. There is an excellent farcical scene where Sir Feeble, having been decoyed away by Bellmour from Leticia, his newly wedded bride, under pretext of an urgent message from Sir Cautious (concocted by Bellmour) about some impending riot in the city, calls upon Sir Cautious in the dead of night in a great state of fear, and the two sit opposite one another each wondering at the other's disturbed appearance. Finally they are thoroughly scared by the apparition of Gayman, who is escaping from the house after an interview with Julia, escorted by Bredwell (Leticia's brother) both dressed as ghosts. In scenes of this kind Mrs Behn follows the fashion of Dryden and Wycherley. She is playing, as it were, to the gallery.

It might be preferable to devote the whole of this chapter to the moral and problem plays, since these are the

most attractive, but as it is necessary to show every side of Mrs Behn's dramatic capabilities, we turn now to the first class of plays, those in which Intrigue predominates, and choose for the best example of this kind, The Rover.

The alternative title of The Rover, The Banished Cavaliers, gives some clue as to the plot of the play, which deals with the adventures of a band of court roués in Naples during the exile of Charles II. Naturally enough this play being concerned with a life so dear to the heart of every Restoration courtier was immensely successful. It was produced first in 1677 in the Duke's House, Dorset Gardens and remained as one of the stock plays of the company. It is an example of the typical Restoration play, being replete with gilded vice, a particularly attractive courtezan, a number of duels, a woman dressed as a boy, and to crown all, The Rover finally married in the last act.

The plot is taken entire from a play by Killigrew entitled"Thomaso", but it is embellished and remodelled considerably to its improvement. The chief cavaliers are Willmore (the Rover), Belvile, Frederick, and Ned Blunt, everyone of whom appears to spend his life in the pursuit and seduction of women. Belvile is the only one of the four who shows any scruples atall, being engaged most of the time with Florinda. Willmore, however, is more generous in his attentions, and makes love promiscuously to whomsoever he

meets. Comedy is provided by Ned Blunt, an amorous but unsuccessful buffoon. The plot is briefly as follows:

Belvile has fallen love with Florinda after having rescued her at the siege of Pampluna. She also loves him, but has two other suitors, Vincentio and Antonio (the Viceroy's son). At a masquerade she meets Belvile and fixes a tryst for that night. Willmore being attracted by an advertisement for a famous courtezan called Angelica eventually wins her by reason of his compelling personality, to the disgust of Antonio and Pedro his friend. The Rover, however, shortly afterwards meets Hellena, Florinda's sister, and, being attracted by her, eagerly opens a courtship, to the dismay of Angelica. He next strays drunkenly into Florinda's garden where she is waiting for Belvile, and is roughly expelled thence by Florinda's brother after a short fight, and also earns the displeasure of Belvile for his misconduct. The Rover next fights with Antonio, whom he surprises stepping into Angelica's house, but unfortunately Belvile, who had come to the aid of his friend, is arrested by officers under Antonio's orders. Hellena and Angelica have meanwhile discovered the Rover's fickle nature, and Angelica vows to avenge herself. There is a general meeting of characters in the last act in Blunt's chamber, when Belvile is united to Florinda; Angelica is forcibly prevented from assassinating Wilmore, who, on Angelica's departure, is finally after much protest induced by Hellena to accept herself as a wife.

The plot is not a particularly subtle one and not nearly so "intriguing" as Mrs Behn's plots usually are. There are occasional displays of wit and clever conversation after the Comedy of Manners style, but Mrs Behn was evidently not writing in her favourite element. The play moves heavily in comparison with the others, and there is none of that lightness of touch or clever ingenuous portraiture which distinguishes the other plays we have mentioned.

The Emperor of the Moon cannot be said to be noteworthy as far as structure or character drawing are concerned, but it has certain remarkable qualities which differentiate it from the other comedies, and it is also a good example of Mrs Behn's farcical tendencies. This play has been described by Lowe as "one of the best pantomime farces ever seen". The play is derived from a French play current about this time called Arlequin Empereur dans la Lune, which in its turn owed many of its scenes to the Italian Impromtu comedy, the "Commedia dell' Arte all Improviso" - which was probably never committed to paper.(1)

In The Emperor of the Moon the Harlequin and Scaramouche, who also appeared in The Rover (Part II), are seen again, and

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(1) J.A. Symonds in an introduction to the Memoirs of Carlo Gozzi, declares that in the Italian Impromtu Comedy the development of the theme was left to the wit and cleverness of the various players. The manager merely sketched the plot and left the actors to work out the dialogue for themselves.

provide excellent farce in their tricks and strategies to further the amours of Elaria and Bellemante, besides in their futile efforts to engage the affections of Mopsophil, the caustic duenna. The central figure in the piece is Doctor Baliardo, a philosopher who is so bewitched by the Moon that he has planned that his daughter Elaria and his niece Bellemante shall marry noblemen of that orb. He consequently hinders the respective suits of Don Cinthio and Don Charmante, whom he looks upon as mere earthlings and quite unworthy of the hands of his daughter and niece. The problem of gaining his consent to the two marriages is ingeniously solved in the following manner.

With the aid of Harlequin and Scaramouche Cinthio and Charmante arrange to appear as Irednozor, Monarch of the Moon, and the Prince of Thunderland, with a view to fulfilling the Doctor's wishes to marry his daughter and niece to men of proper station. Harlequin first enters as an ambassador from the Moon, to announce the arrival of the lunar potentates, and in a disused gallery a pageant is performed before the Doctor and the ladies in which Cinthio and Charmante arrive in a silver chariot in the form of the moon, accompanied by various satellites. The transported Doctor consents to an immediate union, which forthwith takes place with the aid of two priests. The anticlimax comes when the Doctor discovers how he has been tricked.

The play ends rather weakly in the sudden capitulation

of Baliardo to the arguments of Cinthio and Charmante, who persuade him in two or three sentences that all his suppositions about the inhabitants of the moon are foolish and vain. He almost instantly agrees and orders that all his books shall be incontinently burned, while he himself resolves from that hour to abandon the study of philosophy altogether. But the interesting part of the play is the stage directions for the pageant showing the arrival of the Emperor and the Prince. These are worth quotation. First the setting:

"The Scene in the Front draws off, and shows the Hill of Parnassus; a noble large walk of Trees leading to it, with eight or ten Negroes upon Pedestals, rang'd on each side of the Walks. Next Keplair and Galileus descend on each side, opposite to each other in Chariots, with Perspectives in their Hands, as viewing the Machine of the Zodiack. Soft Musick plays still."

It is difficult to imagine how the Machine of the Zodiack could have been constructed; here is its descent:

"Next the Zodiack descends, a Symphony playing all the while; when it is landed, it delivers the twelve signs; then the Song, the Persons of the Zodiack being the Singers." etc.

The making of a machine to contain twelve people which could be lowered onto the stage must have been a considerable undertaking. But this is not all:

"After which the Globe of the Moon appears, first like a New Moon, as it moves forward it increases till it comes to the Full. When it is descended, it opens and shews the Emperor and the Prince. They come forth with all their Train, the Flutes playing a Symphony before them, which prepares the Song. Which ended the Dancers mingle as before."

"A very Antick Dance" follows, after which the scene draws off to disclose an altar. The marriage is performed in pantomime except for the singing of a Hymeneal song.

The expense of producing such a play must have been very large. The machines necessary for the Zodiack and the Moon would in themselves represent fortunes, besides the various other properties that would be required. It is such descriptions as these that lead the reader to wonder how any approximation to an illusion could have been arrived at with such primitive methods as they must have had behind stage. Even a modern producer would think twice before constructing a Zodiack to contain twelve people which had to be lowered on to the stage from above.

It is not possible here to deal fully with all of the plays, and so in the remainder of this chapter only those plays which have any noteworthy characteristics will be considered.

The False Count; or, A New Way to play an Old Game is

another farce full of action and movement. Most of the comedy is supplied by Guiliom, who is in ordinary life a chimney sweep, but for the purpose of ridding Isabella, a very conceited lady with an eye for "quality", of her fine airs, he is disguised as a count by the invention of Antonio and his man, Guzman, who bear a grudge against Isabella. Guiliom acts the part so convincingly that Isabella responds to his advances and eventually marries him, only to discover later on his true profession. All ends happily, however, as Guiliom comes into some money and in the last act resolves to become "as pretty a fluttering Spark as any's in Town."

Mrs Behn's plays were not always of a comic character throughout, and in The Dutch Lover a good example is given of her powers of combining tragedy and comedy. Silvio, the leading character, is supposed to be the illigitimate son of Ambrosio, a Spanish Nobleman, who has a beautiful daughter called Cleonte. Silvio falls in love with her. In the end all turns out well as Silvio is revealed in Act V as being the son of Count d'Olivarez, who has left him a fortune of two hundred crowns. Some of the scenes between Silvio and Cleonte are, however, worthy of a better position in literature than Restoration Comedy. The humour of the play is supplied by Haunce von Ezel, a fop from Holland, who is contracted to marry Euphemia, Carlo's daughter. But she, alas, is in love with Alonzo, and Haunce has finally to content himself

with one of Euphemia's maids.

The year 1682 saw the production of two plays by Mrs Behn of a political nature. The first of these, The Roundheads; or, The Good Old Cause satirizes the Rump Parliament rather unfairly, showing all its members as cowards and debauchees. While Mrs Behn does not always keep strictly to historical fact this does not detract from the farcical merits of the play. The plot of The City Heiress, the second of these, centres about Sir Timothy Treatall, a staunch Protestant sho has disinherited his son Wilding for leaning towards Toryism. Needless to say, Sir Timothy is finally made a fool of, while Wilding marries a rich and attractive heiress.

The Young King and The Amorous Prince are plays which may be classed as"moral", since they both show the advantages of purity. The Young King tells the story of the love of Thersander for Cleomena, which has in a sense the same motif as Romeo and Juliet, as Thersander is a Scythian and Cleomena a Dacian, Scythia and Dacia being at war. Again the play ends happily with the marriage of Thersander and Cleomena and the reconciliation of the two countries. The Amorous Prince concerns the love of Cloris, one of Mrs Behn's really charming ladies, who, a simple country girl, yields to the advances of Frederick, the amorous Prince, under promise of marriage. Frederick, however, proves unfaithful and poor

Cloris, disguised as a boy, follows him about as his page, and is finally, - in virtue of her constancy, - married to him.

The Forc'd Marriage is classed by Mr Nicoll as a "problem" play. The marriage forced was that of Erminia to Alcippus, a favourite of the King of France. But Erminia loves Philander, the dauphin, and besides this Alcippus is beloved by Galatea the princess. The problem is to reconcile the two affairs, and in the end each is united to his own love

Some mention should be made before leaving the plays, of Abdelazar; or, The Moor's Revenge. This piece stands quite apart from the rest, as it is tragic and horrible with little or no comic relief. The Moor, Abdelazar, vows vengeance on the King of Spain, who had killed his father in battle and adopted the son, promoting him to a high military position. But ever at his heart Abdelazar, despite the King's subsequent kindnesses, cherishes the thought of revenge for the death of his father. First he seduces the Queen and then with her help poisons the King. King Ferdinand, who succeeds his father and who has designs on the Moor's wife Florella, is also murdered and civil war ensues. Abdelazar sets himself up as Protector of Spain in opposition to Philip, the legitimate heir. The Moor's forces are at first successful, but when Philip is captured, Abdelazar is betrayed by his officer Osmin, who sets Philip and his friends free, and so brings about the death of Abdelazar. No more

villainous character even amongst the typical debauchees, who always had some redeeming feature, appears in Mrs Behn's plays. Abdelazar represents vice and cruelty carried to the uttermost extreme.

The characters in Mrs Behn's plays taken broadly may be divided into three classes. The heroic, the immoral, and the real. Such a division needs perhaps some explanation, but I venture that almost everyone of her characters with very few exceptions could be placed in one of these divisions. I do not suggest that the categories are exact, or that some of the characters might not be placed in two of the classes, but speaking generally they serve to show the three sorts of her puppets.

To the heroic class belong the very perfect heroines, which are also abundant in her novels. Leonora in Abdelazar, Olympia in The Young King, Cloris in The Amorous Prince are examples. An occasional heroic man also appears, as for instance Bellmour in Sir Timothy Tawdrey. These improve the moral tone of the plays. They are examples of the ideal hero and heroine, but they are a little too ideal, a little too inhuman.

The immoral class is a large one. It contains the many rakes, the amorous old gentlemen, and the multifarious ladies of easy virtue. The third class, which I call the

real, are few and far between. Gayman's Landlady and the Nurse already mentioned are typical. Betty Flauntit in Sir Timothy Tawdrey might belong to the immoral class as well, but she is nevertheless a very real and living character. It is curious that all the members of the third class should be of a lower social order. They are almost all London types. Shall we infer then that this was the class that Aphra knew the best? It is not really a pity either. From a moral point of view it was no doubt better in Restoration times to be of humble birth than to be born a courtier.

The heroic characters are the result of the tradition of the times. The immoral ones of convention of the times. The real ones of Mrs Behn's own experience. Consequently it is only in the third class that Mrs Behn is convincingly emotional. We can sympathise with the heroic heroines a little, but they are too heroic to transfer their feelings to us entirely; and the immoral characters are as a rule too bestial for our tastes, though probably the Restoration theatre fan felt more sympathy for them than does the modern reader. But it is the landladies and the nurses that we feel that we really know.

Rarely did Mrs Behn write an original play. There is only one, The Feign'd Curtezans, that is wholly without a source, and it is closely followed by The Lucky Chance which is her own except for one incident derived from

Shirley's The Lady of Pleasure. In her other dramas she borrows promiscuously from her predecessors and contemporaries in England and also in France. The Rover is taken from Killigrew's Thomaso. Sir Timothy Tawdrey from Wilkins popular play The Miseries of Enforced Marriage published in 1607. Sir Patient Fancy is an extraordinary example of one which owes its origin to France. Its incidents were taken from three of Moliere's plays, Le Malade Imaginaire, L'Amour Médecin, and Les Femmes Savantes, besides Brome's The Damoiselle. Sometimes she turned a novel or a romance into a play. For example The Young King is taken from La Calprenedes romance Cléopâtre, and The Dutch Lover from a pseudo-Spanish novel The History of Don Fenise by an imaginary Spanish author Don Francisco de las Coveras.

But the fact that Mrs Behn borrowed does not in the least detract from the value of her plays. Better dramatists than herself had done it before her.

As a playwright then Mrs Behn has been shown to possess versatility. To argue in which of her roles she is most effective might take up another chapter, but if The Town Fop or The Lucky Chance be compared with The Rover or The Feign'd Curtezans, there is little doubt that it was when she was writing after her own fashion rather than according to the convention of the time that she is most satisfactory.

In drama she had a hard struggle to overcome the

prejudices against the idea of a female dramatist, and the prologues and epilogues of her comedies are filled with resentful allusions to this fact. But Aphra Behn was made of stern stuff, and the objections of the critics did not prevent her from making her way and gaining, in fact, an immense popularity.

CHAPTER IV

THE NOVELS

It is a relief to turn from Mrs Behn's plays, which require a defence as well as a recommendation, to her novels, or perhaps, more correctly, her novelettes, which can by their own merits both defend and recommend themselves. In her plays she did little or nothing beyond a slight mitigation of its indelicacy to develop English drama, but in her novels she marks a definite step in the development of the novel, the step between the unwieldy heroic romances of the seventeenth century and the novels of the beginning of the eighteenth. Perhaps it would be stretching the point too far to say that Mrs Behn was a great novelist, for there are noticeable faults in the construction and style of some of her stories, but that she was a valuable novelist there can be no question.

During the early seventeenth century French Romances with their faultless heroes and heroines were very popular among the leisured classes, and English imitators of this style consequently became numerous later in the century. The earliest of these imitators, Roger Boyle, published in 1654 his celebrated Parthenissa, a work of

some eight hundred pages, which the author never completed. Others were Aretina by Sir George Mackenzie, published in 1661, and in 1665 John Crowne's Pandion and Amphigenia. But it is clear that this form, written rather for the "salons", was not universally popular, and in 1692 we find Congreve complaining about their ineffectiveness.(1) This kind of literature "was never," Sir Walter Raleigh says, "thoroughly naturalised in England; it remained a literature of the polite coteries."(2)

The next development of the novel was to make its subject more natural, to make it less cumbersome and more readable, and to introduce a realism, or some definite relation to life, which has characterised the novel ever since. Mrs Behn admirably accomplished this task. She introduced the attributes of the Italian novella, - unity of plot and a certain historic or personal background, -

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(1) In the "Preface to the Reader" prefixed to his novel Incognita Congreve says: "Romances are generally composed of the Constant Loves and invincible Courages of Hero's, Heroins, Kings and Queens, Mortals of the first Rank, and so forth; where lofty language, miraculous Contingencies and impossible Performances, elevate and surprize the Reader into a giddy Delight, which leaves him flat upon the Ground whenever he gives of . . . . Novels are of a more familiar nature; Come near us and represent to us Intrigues in practice, delight us with Accidents and odd Events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unpresidented, such which not being so distant from our Belief bring also the pleasure nearer us."

(2) The English Novel,(London; John Murray), page 105.

and she stoutly declared that her stories were true. "I do not pretend to entertain you here with a feigned story," she begins more than once, and we settle down to enjoy ourselves. But Mrs Behn does not break with convention entirely. Her heroines, each more beautiful than the last, each with a thousand admirers at her feet, have still the artificiality of the romance upon them. They are not quite real; but the important thing is that they are more credible than Parthenissa or Amphigenia. She was beginning to show that novels and actual contemporary life could be more closely related.

This bold assertion of truth is rather a curious stratagem, and one which has led in Mrs Behn, as we have shown, to a great deal of uncertainty as to the facts of her biography. She introduces circumstantial evidence to support her assertions, and constantly interpolates pseudo-autobiographical details as though she herself had played a part in the atory. So in Oroonoko it appears that she was a personal friend of the Royal Slave, in The Fair Jilt Prince Tarquin's name is not concealed because of its familiarity, and in The Unfortunate Bride the authoress herself enters into the plot, professing "some small acquaintance" with the villainess of the piece, and a "Particularly Intimate acquaintance" with the lovely heroine.

Mrs Behn, then, was a liar, and we shall see later on

whether there is not some justification for her mendacity.

While the heroic romances may be the cause of the unreality of some of Mrs Behn's characters, they are on the other hand responsible for the moral tone of the novels which is so much higher than the plays. It was not necessary in stories as it was on the stage to season the dialogue with indelicacy, and it is a pleasant thought that as the novels are better examples of her art than the plays, which few will deny from any standpoint, Mrs Behn's _metier_ is story-telling rather than play-writing. In the novels it is the Mrs Behn who deplored ... the bawdiness and obscenity of the stage that takes a fresh quill in her hand and writes unhampered by the unpleasant dramatic conventions.

Her stories like her plays are excellently plotted. Each is perfectly self-contained; and while one or two of the plots are somewhat similar in character, - (the conclusion of _The Nun; or, The Perjur'd Beauty_ and _The Unfortunate Bride_ are identical) - and while she sometimes does not sufficiently develop the situations into which she leads her characters, nevertheless there is a light familiar manner about her style that makes up for other deficiences. Mrs Behn is a very intimate writer; after reading her short tales one has the sense of having made her acquaintance.

Without exception the thirteen novels may be classed under one head. They are all stories of intrigue. All have

at least one delightful heroine and an equally charming hero, and the joys and pains of love make up the theme. Mrs Behn was a thoroughly amorous and pleasure-loving person, and in everyone of her stories some aspect of love is treated. Its pleasures and its pains, or its sad and fatal consequences. And judging from the legends and stories that surround her name she was probably well qualified to deal with affairs of the heart.

Critics are agreed as to Mrs Behn's prose masterpiece, and indeed so far does Oroonoko stand out from the others that it would be absurd to doubt their opinion. In Oroonoko, which was written or rather completed, - for she probably had it in mind ever since her return from Surinam, - in 1688, the year before her death, she reaches the zenith of her career as a writer. It is a beautiful and moving tale, but it is filled with the horrors of slavery and oppression. Commentators have called it the first emancipation novel, but there is no reason to suppose that she had any didactic intention in writing it. Didacticism is evident in some of the novels, but not particularly in Oroonoko.

At the time of its publication the novel was very successful, and Southerne, the playwright, seeing its dramatic possibilities wrote in 1696 a tragedy founded upon Mrs Behn's

plot.(1) Others imitated Southerne's dramatisation, in fact there were altogether six bastards (the term is the Rev. Mr Summers') of the original.

As Mrs Behn was herself "an eye-witness to a great Part of what you will find here set down", we have a very exact account of the history of Oroonoko. A most elaborate description of him is given:

"The most famous Statuary could not form the Figure of a Man more admirably turned from Head to Foot. His face was not of that brown rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony or polished Jet. His Eyes were the most aweful that could be seen, and very piercing; the White of 'em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His Nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat: His Mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so nobly and exactly form'd, that bating his Colour there could be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome. There was no one Grace wanting, that bears the Standard of true Beauty. His Hair came down to his Shoulders, by the Aids of Art, which was by pulling it out with a Quill, and keeping it comb'd; of which he took particular Care. Nor did the Perfections of his Mind come short of

(1) It is interesting to note that Southerne's reputation rests on this play and The Fatal Marriage, for the plot of which he is also indebted to Mrs Behn.

those of his Person . . . "

This remarkable man is the grandson of the King of Coramantien, an old man of about a hundred years. Oroonoko is skilled in every military exercise and proves himself so excellent a soldier that he soon rises to the position of general. His trouble begins when he meets Imoinda, the daughter of the former general, who had incidentally saved his life. Mrs Behn's pen fails her when she comes to the description of Imoinda so that she can only say that she was a"beautiful Black Venus," and that, "I have seen a hundred White Men sighing after her, and making a thousand Vows at her Feet, all in vain and unsuccessful. And she was indeed too great for any but a Prince of her own Nation to adore."

Oroonoko going to visit this lady falls passionately in love with her, and eventually, "After a thousand Assurances of his lasting Flame, and her eternal Empire over him", they become engaged. But unfortunately the King, to whom the virtues of monogamy are unknown, hears of Imoinda's charms and sends her the royal veil, thus obliging her to become one of his wives. The Prince is furious, and by much dissembling and plotting he finally manages , with the aid of a former member of the King's harem, to achieve a midnight interview with Imoinda. But they are disturbed by the King, whose spies had informed him of the whole business, and while Oroonoko escapes to the wars, the King sells

Imoinda into slavery and informs Oroonoko that she is dead.

On his return to the court Oroonoko entertains the Captain of an English ship, a man to whom he had often sold prisoners of war for slaves. The captain is a treacherous creature and luring Oroonoko and some of his companions on board his vessel, he claps them under hatches and sails off with them to Surinam where they are sold to while traders as slaves. Oroonoko falls into the hands of Trefry, a Cornishman, who, hearing Oroonoko's pathetic story, becomes his friend. Trefry gives him the name of Caesar and holds a banquet in his honour with several other English gentlemen. It is at this feast that he tells Oroonoko of the charms and graces of a certain slave-girl who had recently fallen into his hands. This, of course, turns out to be none other than Imoinda, to whom Oroonoko is immediately united. Soon Imoinda promises her husband a child, and Oroonoko, who has all this time been chafing at his confinement, resolves to make a desperate effort to escape that their child may not become a slave also. He organises a meeting of all the slaves of that and the neighbouring plantation, and they set off into the woods. But the governor, who is a brutal and cruel person, pursues them, and, after promising amicable terms, he no sooner gets Oroonoko into his hands than he orders him to be whipped in the most barbarous manner, and further has cayenne rubbed

into his wounds. Trefry was not aware of this outrage, and when he hears about it he has Caesar released and brings him back again to his own plantation, Parham, where he recovers. Oroonoko now resolves to kill Imoinda, as he no longer trusts the governor, in order that she may not have a worse fate. He accomplishes his design and himself subsequently almost dies of grief. But in Trefry's absence the governor again captures him and he is tortured at the stake until he dies. We have the satisfaction of knowing that his persecutors, who are described elsewhere as being too bad even for Newgate, after paid dear enough for their insolence.

The bare plot of the tale has only been sketched here. The story is besides filled with amusing personal anecdotes connected with the Indians and their customs, and also descriptions of Surinam and its surroundings probably from first hand knowledge, if we accept the fact that Mrs Behn went to Surinam. The characters are well drawn, especially that of Trefry and the unscrupulous governor, and while Oroonoko and Imoinda are perhaps a little too far-fetched, it must be remembered that they belong to the distinctly heroic and romantic part of the story, where we must not expect to find a very strict adhesion to realism. Oroonoko remains with all its faults a moving tragedy, by which, - if by nothing else, - Mrs Behn deserves to be remembered.

In the fifth volume of Mrs Behn's collected works,

amongst the other novels Mr Summers includes one tale called The History of the Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker. This tale has never before been ascribed to Mrs Behn's pen, but Mr Summers defends its addition to her stories on a remark of Southerne's. In 1694 Southerne published a play entitled The Fatal Marriage; or, The Innocent Adultery, and in a dedication to Antony Hammond, Esq., he says, "I took the Hint of the Tragical part of this Play from a novel of Mrs Behn's, called The Fair Vow-Breaker." Ever since it has been supposed that this was merely another title for The Nun; or, The Perjur'd Beauty, but Summers contends that there is no similarity of plot between Southerne's play and that story. It seems, however, that he discovered a book called "The History of the Nun; or, the Fair Vow-Breaker, published in 1689, and found that the plot of this was the evident source of Southerne's tragedy. On these grounds, therefore, he includes it in his collection. And besides, the style alone, the same tricks and turns of phrase, the same detached, inconsequential air of narration stamp it as indubitably her work.

For two and a half centuries then Mrs Behn has not been credited with one of her most thrilling tales. Indeed there are certain points in which The Fair Vow-Breaker is superior even to Oroonoko. It has a better plot for

one thing, but then it is perhaps a little too heroic, and unfortunately a note of didacticism appears now and then.

"Of all the sins, incident to Human Nature," it begins, "there is none, of which Heaven has took so particular , visible and frequent Notice, and Revenge, as on that of Violated Vows, which never go unpunished."

But after the prologue is done and the real story begins its moral question is forgotten. Count Henrick de Vallary sends his beautiful daughter Isabella, - two years old at the beginning of the story, - to a nunnery, his wife having died, under the stipulation that if by the time she is thirteen her mind is not bound to the veil, she shall be at liberty to leave the nunnery and live with a comfortable income, (the Count being a man of Fortune), in the everyday world. When she does arrive at this age she comes out for a while and is introduced to all the pleasures of wealth and civilisation, and incidentally gathers about herself a host of lovers completely undone by her ravishing beauty. But she cares for none of them, or for anything that the world has to offer, and returns to the monastery. There was one man, however, Villenoys, for whom, while she did not of course love him, she had some regard. Villenoys falls sick for love of her and almost dies, but he recovers and in the siege of Candia conducts himself with great courage.

Isabella's particular friend at the monastery is one Katteriena. Katteriena has a brother, Bernardo Henault, who is very much devoted to her and who comes occasionally to see her. Unluckily for him he sees the lovely Isabella and falls in love with her. But worse for Isabella, she returns his passion, though she endeavours at first by every kind of self-mortification to banish his image from her mind. Finally in an interview at the grate, through which they were obliged to converse, they confess their mutual passion. Matters go from bad to worse and at last she yields to his importunity and consents to elope with him.

Under the name of Beroone they live together on a farm. At first all goes well, but soon it appears that Providence is against them. Every kind of misfortune descends upon their cattle and grain, so that they fall into great poverty. Henault has been disinherited by his father for marrying without his consent, but his father declares that if Henault will leave his wife and go to the wars he will give him money. As this is the only escape from penury, Henault complies with his father's wishes. He goes to the wars and is soon afterwards reported killed.

For five years Isabella remains stricken with grief, but at the end of this time she marries Villenoys, who has returned meanwhile from Candia, and has been suing for

her hand ever since the disappearance of Henault. Villenoys is rich and Isabella is very happy with him and forgets her former husband.

But Henault is not dead, and one night, while Villenoys is away, he returns. Isabella is completely distracted and in order to avoid the shame and crime of adultery, she secretly murders him. When Villenoys comes back Isabella tells him of Henault's visit, and adds that he had quietly died of grief on being told that she was married to another. Villenoys decides to throw the body into the river. But now Isabella, thinking that she can never again resume her conjugal happiness with Villenoys, determines to rid herself of him also. So, as he is arranging on his back the sack containing the body of Henault, she sews the top of it on to his coat collar. When he comes to the bridge and heaves the sack over he naturally falls in after it and is drowned.

For a while the two murders are not discovered, but later a friend of Henault's returns to Flanders looking for him, and as he does not find him, describes him, and it is discovered that his is one of the bodies salvaged from the river. Isabella is accused, tried and condemned. But she goes bravely to her death, and on the scaffold addresses the mob for half an hour on the evil consequences of breaking vows.

The tale of the long lost husband returning to find his wife wedded to another is familiar to all readers of later fiction, but in Mrs Behn's time it was unfamiliar and practically original. She handles the plot skilfully, and the atmosphere of impending doom is vividly stressed.

Miranda, the heroine and villainess combined of The Fair Jilt is the most vigorously drawn character in any of the novels, and may be compared in devilment with the unscrupulous Abdelazer. Utterly self-centred she spares no one to gain her own ends, and her revenge against those that cross her is terrible. A harmless friar, once a Prince of Germany, whom she tries unsuccessfully to seduce, is confined for years in a prison pending death, merely on the strength of Miranda's word. She bewitches an innocent page-boy into attempting murder for her sake and without emotion sees him hanged. Finally she marries Prince Tarquin and leads him also into an attempted assassination. Fate always seems to be on her side; she commits every kind of atrocity and yet escapes judgement and in the end she confesses all her crimes and retires to Flanders to the arms of her still adoring husband.

This is one of the stories which Mrs Behn strongly asserts is true. " . . . every Circumstance , to a Tittle, is Truth. To a great part of the Main I myself was an Eye-Witness; and what I did not see, I was confirmed of by Actors in the Intrigue, Holy Men of the Order of St Francis;"

"Not 'holy men' merely;" comments Miss Sackville-West,(1) "not vague holy men; she was very thorough; even the order to which they belonged is specified."

But it is the license of novelists to tell untruths, and it is ridiculous to censure Mrs Behn, as Dr Bernbaum does, for this harmless declaration of authenticity. The very fact that she does give the story an air of reality shows, as Mr Summers remarks,(2) what a consummate artist she was.

Oroonoko, The Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker and The Fair Jilt are Mrs Behn's finest novels, but there are certain points and incidents in the other ten that are worthy of mention. None, however, have the same completeness, nor show to fullest advantage her powers of narration and of character drawing.

Many novels and plays have been written upon the story of the life of Ines de Castro, the beautiful Spanish lady and the mistress of Pedro, Prince of Portugal. Mrs Behn bases her version on that of Mlle de Brillac, who published in 1688 Agnes de Castro, nouvelle portugaise. Mrs Behn's Agnes de Castro appeared in the same year and earned an extensive popularity, and later formed the basis of an indifferent play by Catherine Trotter produced in 1696.

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(1) Aphra Behn by V. Sackville-West. Page 46.
(2) The Works of Aphra Behn; vol 5, page 69.

Agnes de Castro is the maid of honour to Constantia (who is as devoted as her name suggests) the second wife of Don Pedro, who, never having loved his wife to any great extent, falls victim to Agnes' charms. Don Pedro's rival is Alvaro, a favourite of Alphonso the king, who aids Alvaro in every way to win Agnes' heart. But Agnes detests the King's favourite, and positively loathes him after he attempts unsuccessfully to kidnap her; but she entertains more generous sentiments for the Prince her rescuer. Eventually Constantia dies, and the Prince, who has all this time remained faithful to his wife, secretly marries Agnes. The tragedy reaches its climax when the King and Alvaro discover the marriage and bring about the murder of Agnes.

It is a strictly moral tale this and it is slightly marred by the introduction of certain observations of an ethical character on the part of the authoress. It is a fine story though, and not unworthy of Mrs Behn's pen.

The Unfortunate Happy Lady, A True History is a sentimental story concerning the virtuous Philadelphia, sister to Sir William Wilding, a rake who endeavours to rid himself of her that he may secure the money that she would rightly inherit. Sir William, however, falls upon evil days, and Philadelphia, as a proof of her magnanimous disposition, heaps coals of fire on his head by paying off all his debts, and thus retrieving him forever from the

paths of evil, while she herself marries the heroic Gracelove.

In the dedication to George Greenviel, Esq., which precedes The Lucky Mistake, Mrs Behn says that this "little amour" is "not Translation but an Original, that has more of reality than fiction." Its plot is similar to that of The Wandering Beauty, both dealing with the misery inflicted on children by the interference of their parents with regard to their love affairs. Both stories also end happily, love proving the stronger in each case. The Unhappy Mistake; or, The Impious Vow Punish'd is also on the same theme, but this time the interfering parent, Sir Henry Hardyman, who disapproves of the addresses of his son Miles to Madam Diana Constance, comes to an untimely death. Miles vows he will never see his father again and his departure so upsets Sir Henry that he dies as a result of it. Though the title lends a serious note to the story, there is actually a happy ending with the return of Miles from his wanderings abroad and his marriage to Diana. Here again, as was noticed in the plays, Mrs Behn mixes comedy and tragedy.

The Nun; or, the Perjur'd Beauty and The Unfortunate Bride; or, the Blind Lady a Beauty are, on the other hand, both of a purely tragic nature, and both also have almost identical plots. In each case two friends adore

the same lady, and in each case there is a final meeting of the three in which there is a duel between the two friends which results in the death of the lady by an ill-directed thrust of one of her lovers. The Unfortunate Bride is the better of the two, as in The Nun the conclusion is rather strained and unnatural, resulting as it does in the deaths of all three characters. But in The Unfortunate Bride one of the lovers survives.

The Dumb Virgin; or, the Force of Imagination is reminiscent of The Dutch Lover, both dealing with the love of a man for his sister. In the novel, however, the consanguinity is not discovered until the end when the brother and sister are guilty of incest, whereas in the play the consanguinity is merely supposed from the first and in the end is found to be non-existent. The Dumb Virgin is a sad tale in which the hero, having been lost in a sea voyage and being in consequence ignorant of his parentage, not only ravishes his sister but kills his father as well.

To complete the list The Adventure of the Black Lady and The Court of the King of Bantam are short light pieces which add nothing to Mrs Behn's reputation. Their plots are feeble and their composition betrays haste and carelessness. Both written in the same year (1683) they were probably more in the nature of pot-boilers than serious attempts at novel writing.

It has been suggested that Mrs Behn's novels are better examples of her art than her plays, and this might lead to the conclusion that she was writing entirely for art's sake. But this is obviously not the case. Mrs Behn was a professional writer and in order to be successful it is necessary to be popular. Clearly she had an eye for her public, even though she did break away from the romance tradition a little. Oroonoko is without question an artistic piece of work, but there are incidents in it which, from a purely artistic point of view, show that she was thinking of the taste of her readers, and writing in accordance with that taste.

The idea of the Noble Savage, the idea of virtuousness in an uncivilised man as opposed to the decadence and vices of supposedly civilised human beings was one which at this time was growing in popular interest. Explorers brought back credible and specious reports about the natives of the countries they had explored, and the tendency was to compare them with civilised people. This popular interest called for stories and plays on the subject and so we find Moors, Persians, Indians and Africans creeping into English literature.

So Mrs Behn in writing a story with an African savage as the central figure was not doing anything particularly original, and it might be argued that she was distinctly pandering to the tastes of her public.

Then again in the story of Oroonoko we have the theme of"Love and Honour" presented. The picture of a man torn between duty to his father and love for a girl, and again all through the tale Oroonoko's love for Imoinda leads to a continual struggle between his affection and other influences. It comes again in the story of Agnes de Castro. Don Pedro is torn between the honour due to his wife and the King, and his love for Agnes. Over and over again throughout the novels daughters and sons are compelled to choose between their duty to their parents and their love for someone else. Now the "Love and Honour" theme was popular at this time. Then was Mrs Behn writing for the sake of art, or for the sake of several editions?

Restoration novel readers also liked to be thrilled. Their tastes were not so delicate and refined as ours and they would have revelled in the fact that Oroonoko disembowelled himself, besides the detailed and impossibly far-fetched description of his whipping and final execution at the stake. Again the lurid description of Prince Tarquin's execution is a good example of the type of horror that would appeal to them.

Aphra's devices to "put across" her stories have already been touched upon, but it might be well to reflect why she was so insistent about their veracity, how much of her insistency was necessary and how much merely naïve. It is

always interesting to know that a story is actually true, but with Mrs Behn's stories it was almost essential that she declare that they were true, otherwise they might have been liable to be thrown aside as idle romancing. If we assume that Mrs Behn was writing entirely that her novels should sell, then there were two things that she had to do. First to write about things that appealed to popular taste, and secondly to make the story convincing. She had to write about Love and Honour, (neither of which were very common in the Restoration) about horrible and ghastly occurrences to satisfy baser natures, and she had to make both these apparently credible.

As a popular novelist then, she goes to great pains at the beginning of her stories to insist that she is merely recording the facts and not romancing, that each story is more in the nature of a history than a novel. So The Unfortunate Happy Lady is "A True History" and begins: "I cannot omit giving the World an account, of the uncommon Villainy of a Gentleman of a good Family in England practis'd upon his Sister, which was attested to me by one who liv'd in the Family, and from whom I had the whole Truth of the Story." The second paragraph of Agnes de Castro opens thus: "Many examples of past Ages render this Maxim" (that the consequences of love are often sad

and fatal)"certain; but the Reign of Don Alphonso the IVth, King of Portugal, furnishes us with one, the most extraordinary that History can produce." Or again The Wandering Beauty: "I was not above twelve Years old, as near as I can remember, when a Lady of my Acquaintance, who was particularly concern'd in many of the Passages, very pleasantly entertain'd me with the Relation of the young Lady Arabella's Adventures, who was eldest Daughter to Sir Francis Fairname, a Gentleman of a noble Family, and of a very large Estate in the West of England . . . "(1)

But these facts do not really prove anything against Mrs Behn's artistic reputation, because they are not sufficiently numerous to show that she always wrote in order to appeal to the public. She had one eye on her reader and the other on her art, and after all to have had both eyes on one or the other would have been a much more conclusive proof against her artistry.

And if we are believers in art for the sake of art, then we must be lenient towards Aphra, for she was a lady, who, while loving her art, loved also the good things of the world, which the possession of money - however much we despise it - makes so much more accessible.

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(1) The quotations on this and the preceding page are copied from the fifth volume of Summers' edition of The Works of Aphra Behn.

CHAPTER V

THE POEMS

It is a curious thing that Mrs Behn, who always styled herself a poet, should now-a-days be remembered almost entirely by her plays and novels. Occasionally one or two of her poems appear tucked away in an anthology with a brief and rather derogatory preface; or someone remembers the line "Love in fantastick triumph satt," or even, "Athousand martyrs I have made", but that is as far as her poetical reputation goes.

But poetically Mrs Behn has not been slighted. Her three hundred verses will never make her a poet; her crocodile tears and sighs will never be mistaken for genuine sentiment or emotion. Her poetry is almost entirely conventional. Pastoral for the most part, it is replete with ardent shepherds and languishing shepherdesses, who seem to spend their days entirely in the contemplation of love. Occasionally she introduces a line of description, and we feel that perhaps she was not entirely blind to the beauties of nature, but most of her poetry, except

for a line or two here and there, is valueless. Sometimes, however, she seems to forget that she is the incomparable, the divine Astraea, the chair-woman of a select coterie, whose faculty of criticism seems to have been numbed by an extravagant sense of its own importance, and then she rises above herself and her time, and poetry is produced. But how rare are these occasions. In the poems there is hardly a single sentiment that is not conventionalised. Mrs Behn had lovers, no doubt, and she writes poems to them, to Lycidas, Amintas, Alexis, Lysander and Philaster. But who were they? John Hoyle, who is supposed to have been her lover, usually appears as Amintas, but in Our Cabal he is evidently Lycidas. How can we be certain of the others; and how can we tell from her poems how she felt towards them when she writes in so orthodox a manner?

No, the poems are on the whole a disappointment. The Restoration, it is true, did not rise to any great poetical heights, and Mrs Behn was not poet enough to rise above the standards of her time. So that looking on the poems collectively we should say in answer to her confident: "Poetry (my Talent) has so greatly the ascendant over me . . "(1) that alas she was no poet, but if, like Wordsworth, her best poems could be picked out and the others forgotten, we should feel inclined to reconsider our decision.

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(1) In the dedication to The Fair Jilt. Summers' edition of the works of Aphra Behn; vol 5, page 70.

The reign of Charles II was not a very propitious one poetically. There were a few genuine poets to redeem the age, but, for the most part, during the Restoration, poetry served as a vehicle for epigram and wit. The Earl of Rochester, Sedley and Buckingham displayed their audacious impudence in lampoons and love songs, and they were copied and imitated by inferiors. But their work, with a few exceptions, can scarcely be called poetry at all, chiefly because they were not trying to write poetry, but merely witty verses such as the King loved. Charles delighted in satire especially to the depreciation of anything Puritanical, and so it was not a difficult matter to win literary favour with him. But Mrs Behn did not write satirical verse. She was indignant sometimes, especially in one or two of the epilogues of her plays, where she anticipates the criticism levelled against her as a female writer, but she was never satirical. She tried to be witty sometimes too; but here as in the plays she was not on very sure ground. Occasionally she tries unsuccessfully - for she had not the necessary grace - to compete with Rochesterian obscenity, for which we can only forgive her.

The year 1684 was the first to see the publication of any of her poetry, her first attempts being, Poems on Several Occasions containing A Voyage to the Isle of Love. The volume was dedicated to the Earl of Salisbury, and is prefixed with several laudatory verses addressed to the

authoress herself by friends and admirers. Such as: To Astraea on her Poems; To the excellent Madam Behn, on her Poems; To the Lovely Witty Astraea, on her Excellent Poems; Upon these and other Excellent Works of the Incomparable Astraea; and so on.

The book is a curious medley of verses and songs. "When Jemmy first began to love" is typical of several of the songs, which are supposedly written in the Scottish dialect, and are to be sung to "a New Scotch Tune", or "to a fine Scotch Tune". The introduction of an occasional "muckle" or "noo" and certain other curious forms serves to show the intention if not the success of the endeavour. But "When Jemmy first began to love" is a pretty enough ballad. The element is pastoral, and Jemmy the shepherd, whom the singer of the song apparently loves, must away to the "Warrs",

"His Bag-pipe into war-like Sounds
Must now Exchanged bee;
Instead of Bracelets, fearful Wounds
Then what becomes of me?"

But this is by no means poetry.

It is in this volume that the celebrated song from Abdelazar is included under the title of Love Arm'd. This is perhaps the piece by which Mrs Behn will always be remembered as a poetess, and it is practically the only

piece of hers that can claim that distinction. Critics have compared it with some of Shakespeare's songs, and indeed it has a certain Shakespearean ring about it. But like any real poem it can best recommend itself:

Love in Fantastique Triumph satt,
Whilst Bleeding Hearts a round him flow'd
For Whom Fresh paines he did Create,
And strange Tyranick power he show'd;
From thy Bright Eyes he took his fire,
Which round about in sport he hurl'd;
And 'twas from mine he took desire,
Enough to undo the Amorous World.

From me he took his sighs and tears,
From thee his Pride and Cruelty;
From me his Languishments and Feares,
And every Killing Dart from thee;
Thus thou and I, the God have arm'd,
And sett him up a Deity;
But my poor heart alone is harm'd,
Whilst thine the Victor is, and free.

Beyond this there are very few snatches that have any poetic inspiration in them; only now and then a couplet or a stanza stands out beyond the others. A Farewell to

Celladon has in the sixth stanza the line:

"Mixt with the rushing of the wind-blown leaves,"

And again The Dream - a Song has two or three rather charming lines in it:

"I slept and saw a piteous sight
Cupid a weeping lay
Till both his little stars of light
Had wept themselves away."

That is pretty if nothing else. But the gems are hard to find, and their brilliancy is often due to the dullness of their surroundings.

A Voyage to the Isle of Love, which is also included in the volume of 1684, is a translation of Tallemant's Le Voyage de l'Isle d'Amour. The Voyage, which sprawls over some fifty pages, is a description, sent by Lysander to Lycidas, of his expedition to and exploration of the Isle of Love; his mistress Aminta, whom he met there; his pursuit of her through the island, and all that occurred; then his winning of her, and finally her death and his inconsolable grief.

It is a very slight piece of work, filled with allegories that mean very little and which would perhaps have been better expressed in prose instead of verse. "Verse" is used intentionally, because in the whole work there is hardly a line of poetry, and certainly not a line of good poetry. Its wantonness and fantastic conceits

would no doubt appeal to the courtier, but it has no lasting qualities to appeal to the modern reader.

In the next year (1685) Mrs Behn published her Miscellany, dedicated to Sir William Clifton. It contains an ode On the Death of the Late Earl of Rochester, divided by a couple of songs from A Paraphrase on the Lord's Prayer. Two pastoral dialogues, A Pindaric to Mr P. who sings finely, and a ludicrous Epitaph on the Tombstone of a Child, the last of seven that died before, complete the volume.

There is really nothing in it to note, nothing even worthy of quotation. Beyond a certain feeling of sincerity about the death of the Earl of Rochester, the book is without any literary value.

La Monstre; The Lover's Watch: or the Art of Making Love was published in 1686 with a dedication to Peter Weston, Esq. The idea of the piece, which is a mixture of prose and verse, was taken from La Montre of Balthazar de Bonnecorse, published in 1666.

Damon, - (a name that appears frequently in the poems), - is separated from his mistress Iris, and so she sends him a Watch which allots to every hour of the day some employment for him during her absence. It starts at eight in the morning, proceeds hour by hour through the day and

the ensuing night, and ends at seven o'clock the next morning. She gives him advice of every kind as to how a lover should conduct himself while his mistress is away. So at nine a.m. she demands: "Remember that I am absent, therefore do not take too much pains in dressing yourself, and setting your person off." And again at five in the afternoon he is bidden particularly to take care whom he visits lest his heart turn aside from the path of constancy.

The poems which are scattered through the Lover's Watch not being intended as serious but rather as serio-comical are excellent of their kind. Mrs Behn was not a great poet, and so this style of writing suited her talents very well. She could write rimes or verses with a jingle to them, and that is all that the composition of The Lover's Watch required. As a work of art it is more successful than most of her poems; she has gauged her powers to a nicety.

In 1688 she published Lycidus: or the Lover in Fashion, with a Miscellany of poems appended to it. Lycidus appears to be the same person as Lycidas to whom Lysander sent The Voyage to the Isle of Love, because The Lover in Fashion is an answer to that. Lycidus is the exact antithesis of his sentimental friend , who was so broken hearted at the death of his Aminta,

for after his unfortunate affair with Sylvia who jilted him, he declares himself a cynic and quite impervious to the wiles of love. "Love's Pleasures only toucht my Heart", he says, and resolves to be a philanderer.

The rest of Lycidus, which is almost entirely in prose interspersed here and there with a pretty song, tells the story of his philanderings in the Isle of Love and his final departure thence after he had been brought to his senses by Glory, who led him away from its pleasures. In The Voyage to the Isle of Love Aphra the sentimentalist was revealed, but in Lycidus we see all the cynical and careless side of her character. Her sentimentalism is summed up in "Love in fantastic triumph sat", and on the other hand her cynicism is contained in "A thousand martyrs I have made", the best of the poems that come in Lycidus. It is worth quoting if only for comparison with the other more famous poem:

"A thousand Martyrs I have made,
All sacrific'd to my desire;
A thousand Beauties have betrayed
That languish in resistless Fire.
The untam'd Heart to hand I brought,
And fixt the wild and wandring Thought.

I never vow'd nor sigh'd in vain
But both, tho false, were well receiv'd.
The Fair are pleas'd to give us pain,
And what they wish is soon believ'd.
And though I talk'd of Wounds and Smart,
Love's Pleasures only toucht my Heart.

Alone the Glory and the Spoil
I always Laughing bore away;
The Triumphs, without Pain or Toil,
Without the Hell, the Heav'n of Joy.
And while I thus at random rove
Despise the Fools that whine for Love.

The Poems appended to Lycidus contain two heavy Pindaricks amongst other odes, and in one poem "On the first discovery of falseness in Amintas" a stanza that by some chance stands out from the rest:

By the sad purling of some Rivulet
O're which the bending Yew and Willow grow,
That scarce the glimmerings of the day permit,
To view the melancholy Banks below,
Where dwells no noyse but what the murmurs make,
When the unwilling stream the shade forsakes.

Throughout the plays are scattered songs and verses which can be passed over in a word. They are for the most

part pastoral and as a rule better so. There are no pieces of noticeable poetic merit, and they are probably introduced merely as an excuse for some music during the act. Many of them are bawdy drinking songs, and are better unresurrected.

As a poet Mrs Behn has proved rather a failure. Her age did not rise to poetry and she found it hard to rise above her age in that way. It is the same story as the plays over again, only on a lesser scale. She wrote her plays for the court, and her poems for the select members of her own little coterie. She could not forget in either case that she was writing for certain particular people, and so she fails to produce great art.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The last volume of the collected works of Mrs Aphra Behn has been closed and put back on the shelf beside its five companions. There they stand, rather plain and rather forbidding, and it must be confessed that it is not without relief that we see them once more marshalled together. And who now will take them down again? Who but the student or the antiquary, who pore among old things either because they must or because they are old, and not always because they are great? Of what value are these six volumes? we ask; for what do they stand?

For Mrs Behn, it must be conceded, is not, even we dare say, never will be regarded as a truly great authoress. She will never be ranked among the Shakespeares or the Miltons or the Defoes of literature; she was not of the immortal breed. What then has been found by this perusal of her work? A number of plays that are interesting

because they belong to Restoration drama; because they belong to that strange era, so conceited that it thought it could trim and alter Shakespeare to his improvement; that loved polish and wit and fine manners, all skin deep though they did not know it. Plays that are interesting, perhaps, because they are opposed to Puritanism, which is so rare in these care-free, modern days of ours. And yet is there one of these volumes that we would care to seek out again? Is there any play that we would turn to again in some quiet hour, as we turn sometimes to our favourite speeches in Macbeth or Romeo and Juliet? We cannot say that there is.

We have found some stories too. Strange fantastic creations filled with unreal characters that strike us as bizarre and ludicrous because they are so unlike the characters in later books, and from which we turn with a smile to novels that come nearer to our own idea of humanity and life. We like Oroonoko maybe, or The History of the Nun, but it is rather because of their strangeness that we like them than because they have any merit that is intrinsically their own.

We have found too verses galore, but only two or three that held our fancy, and they merely pointed to Shakespeare and we saw how much better a poet he was than

their author. We might read again "Love in fantastic triumph sat," but it would only be to hurry afterwards to "Come away, come away, death," to catch the sentiment that Aphra half felt a thousand times better expressed.

They are interesting these works of hers; they are not, we venture, "a disgrace to our language",(1) while they do not exactly enhance it. They are worthy of notice as we suggested in the introduction, and now and again they are worthy of praise, but they have been of more value as reflections on a certain class than as works of art in themselves.

And so now we must turn, as do those others who read Mrs Behn, we must turn from the plays, the novels and the poems to Aphra herself, and ask ourselves, if her works are not great, what then of the woman herself? It is true this essay is ostensibly about her work, but it would be unjust, we opine, to forget the author of those works, especially as she stands for so much more than they do.

And first let us say that Mrs Behn was above all things courageous. She was a woman, and it was not "done" for women to write; and yet she wrote. In defiance of con-

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(1) See page twenty two of this essay.

vention and precedent she had her plays produced, and though at first they were hooted and hissed simply because "Rot it - 'tis a Woman's Comedy:"(1) she kept on and the coxcombs who derided were obliged to give in. It was a daring thing to make this declaration of independence. She was not going to ensnare someone into a convenient marriage whereby she might sit back and idle, and she might easily have done so by all the evidence; instead she faced the world herself and proved that a woman could earn her living by her pen.

This is, of course, the paramount circumstance about Mrs Aphra Behn. "The fact that she wrote is much more important than the quality of what she wrote," says Miss West.(2) She blazed the trail for succeeding generations of women; she blew the first blast for female emancipation, against the constricting conventions that have driven desperate women to lunacy, witchcraft and the stake.

"All women together," says Virginia Woolf, "ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds."(3) It is impossible to over-emphasize this side of Mrs Behn.

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(1) In the epilogue to Sir Patient Fancy; vol 4, page 115.
(2) Aphra Behn; page 16.
(3) A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf; (Harcourt, Brace and Co. New York; 1929.) page 114.

She was the first lady novelist, that is, the first woman who wrote that her books might be published and universally read.

That is all that need be said in taking leave of her, and it is a great thing to hand down to posterity. Her plays may never be resurrected again; her novels may fade into the limbo of forgotten books; only here and there some scholar will murmur "Love in fantastic triumph sat." But one thing that ought to be remembered by everybody, the one thing that should familiarise the name of Aphra Behn to all those that speak English, is that she paved the way for all subsequent authoresses.

If Aphra had not sipped her milk punch and cracked jokes with her disreputable cronies, and then gone home to write and write that tomorrow she might sip milk punch again, then perhaps we should never have had Pride and Prejudice, not Wuthering Heights, or - to come nearer our own time - perhaps not even Bliss and The Garden Party.

THE END

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