Behn and the Canon

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The publication of a book on teaching Oroonoko—the present volume—is one indication of how far Aphra Behn has traveled since the 1970s. Back then, when I was an undergraduate, she was not part of the canon of university-studied literary works. Still, universities harbored a few forward-thinking enthusiasts for her writing. None of her works was set reading for my university course in English literature, but I was introduced to her because my tutor, James Booth, included an optional lecture on her in a course on seventeenth-century literature. This was about the time that Maureen Duffy’s biography sparked new interest in Behn, fostered by the growth of women’s literature courses. Over the next few decades, Behn had a remarkable revival on the stage, in print, and in the academy, where she was increasingly taught, usually as a pioneering female writer: the first woman professional writer, an early woman dramatist, an early woman novelist. In 1986, Mary Ann O’Donnell, introducing the first edition of her Behn bibliography, urged us to study her “not because she is a woman writer, but because she is an important writer” (Aphra Behn 11). How have we responded?

Behn is certainly a major presence in the more diverse and dispersed canon of early-twenty-first-century university courses. A brief survey of Web sites indicates that in the academic year 2009–10, undergraduates were studying her in many places and under many headings. At the University of Pennsylvania, they might read her alongside Rochester, Wycherley, Cleland, and Boswell in Literary Erotics in the Eighteenth Century or with Rowe, Richardson, and Burney as part of Epistolary Fiction; at Loughborough University, they might choose an optional module devoted to her. At McGill University, they would encounter her first in an introductory Survey of English Literature I; then, represented by Oroonoko, in the intermediate course titled The Earlier Eighteenth-Century Novel; then, represented by The Rover, in the advanced course Studies in Drama: Comedy; and again in the advanced undergraduate or master’s course Literary Forms: Travel and the Transformation of Knowledge. She is taught at Miami University, Ohio, as the culminating writer in the course British Women Writers: Medieval, Renaissance; and Restoration Women and as the inaugural writer of English fiction in English Fiction before 1832 at Toronto. She is taught in courses devoted to women’s writing, to drama, to fiction, to early modern writing, to Restoration writing, to travel writing, to race and literature. At the University of Exeter, The Rover figured for some years in an introductory undergraduate course, Past and Present, making Behn the first female writer our students encountered in terms of literary-historical chronology and their undergraduate classes. Oroonoko and The Rover are the Behn texts most frequently included in university courses, but her other fiction and plays along with selections of her poetry also appear on course lists. She is both canonized and
made the occasion for interrogating the canon: a long-running Open University course in the United Kingdom introduces issues of canon formation in Shakespeare, Aphra Behn and the Canon, which is also the title of an Open University book (Owens and Goodman) and of a module offered at Sim University in Singapore.

These repeated acts of inclusion in university courses along with the new editions and criticisms that accompany a place on the syllabus are, according to Barbara Herrnstein Smith's relativist theory of literary value, powerful "institutional acts" that bring "the work into the orbit of attention of a population of potential readers," making it "more likely both that the work will be experienced at all and also that it will be experienced as valuable" (46). Behn's canonical value continues to increase. We experience her, of course, in the light of our own and our time's preoccupations: "the conjunction of cultural studies and feminism," as Janet Todd puts it, has made her new critical prominence safe (Critical Fortunes 129). The feminist criticism of the 1970s and 1980s was behind the revival of Behn, and judging by her current appearance on women's studies programs and in many courses devoted to women's writing, her gender remains an important aspect of our concern, suggesting that Behn as an important writer is still entangled with Behn as a woman writer in our approaches to her. But if she entered the modern university as a woman writer, her place there has been consolidated by Oroonoko's ability to lend itself to the discussions of race, colonialism, imperialism, and slavery that have been so important a part of literary and cultural criticism over the last thirty years. This state of affairs has caused anxiety among some critics that historical understanding of Behn's most famous work might be lost in a presentist focus on issues that, however important in themselves, are arguably not central to it (D. Hughes, "Oroonoko" 154).

But Oroonoko invites plural readings. It does bear on questions of race, colonialism, imperialism, and slavery, if in a specifically seventeenth-century way, and the eighteenth century's construction of the "Oroonoko legend" (Sypher 108), whereby Behn's story fed an antislavery argument that was far removed from her intentions, is part of the novel's larger significance. At the same time, it rewards study of the occasion of its composition at a time of Stuart crisis (Guffey) and of its complex engagement with memories of the time of its setting (Todd, Gender 43-49). Indeed it serves, as many teachers have found, as a good stage for introducing debate about how we read the texts of the past.

What might Behn have made of the question of her place in today's canon? A literary canon was certainly in the process of conscious construction in her time, as writers laid claim to a place in ancient lineages and publishers brought out collected editions of significant writers complete with prefatory biographies. Behn, with her expressed hope to be remembered with Sappho, and her editors, who tried out the innovative form of a collected edition of her fiction a few years after her death, were at the forefront of this development. Behn came more and more in her later years to care about her claims on posterity. In the preface to one of her early comedies, The Dutch Lover (1673), she defended
plays as entertainments that had no need of learning: "I think a Play the best divertisement that wise men have; but I do also think them nothing so, who do discourse so formallie about the rules of it, as if 'twere the grand affair of humane life" (Works [Todd] 5: 162). But in her final years she turned not against entertainment (she was as dependent on it as ever) but toward a way of conceiving of her entertaining work as part of an ancient and honorable tradition. Defending *The Luckey Chance* (1687) against criticisms of indecency, she appealed not only to its popularity ("I found by my Receipts it was not thought so Criminal") but also to its rights to the ancient freedoms of poets: "All I ask, is the Priviledge for my Masculine Part the Poet in me, (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thriv'd in, to take those Measures that both the Ancient and Modern writers have set me, and by which they have pleas'd the World so well." Threatening (idly enough, since she could not afford to carry it out) to give up writing without proper appreciation, she continued: "I value Fame as much as if I had been born a Hero; and if you rob me of that, I can retire from the ungrateful World, and scorn its fickle Favours" (7: 217). Here she brings the concerns of heroic literature—the hero's concern for his reputation—into the question of a writer's reception. She reconceives the writer, even the modern writer working for bread, as hero.

Elsewhere Behn treats the writer, more conventionally, as the guardian of others' fame. In her later work, she repeatedly examines the idea of the writer's job of immortalizing the hero—a central theme of *Oroonoko*, with its ambiguous relation between the royal slave of the title and his eventual historian. The narrator is dazzled by Oroonoko/Caesar, considering him the heroic ideal come to life, a great warrior, great lover, and "Royal Youth" whose quality impresses itself on all beholders even in slavery: "his Eyes insensibly commanded Respect, and his Behaviour insinuated it into every Soul" (36). Her task is to record the gallantry and bravery that the world has lost with his death, with a strict adherence to the "Truth" (8) that her hero has always honored and that his enemies, from the treacherous slaving captain to Deputy Governor Byam, have always violated. But Oroonoko's heroic deeds in Coramantien have to be taken on the trust of his tale, and his actions in Surinam call his heroism into question. His fine deeds of tiger killing and of wrestling with numb eels amount to little more than diverting, and being diverted by, the deceptively friendly colonists, while his killing of Imoinda provokes open debate: is it tragic necessity or horrible example of husbandly prerogative taken too far? Meanwhile, the narrator herself, spying on her hero on behalf of the mistrustful colonists, then bewailing her inability to save him, is at least partly implicated in the faithlessness that destroys the truthful Oroonoko. Her pen is invoked at the end to solve the problems its work has revealed and to enable Oroonoko/Caesar's "Glorious Name to survive to all Ages" (65).

The parallels that have been noted between James II and Oroonoko make this examination of heroism also an ambiguous tribute and perhaps, as Todd has suggested, a warning to the king (*Secret Life* 418). In her poems, Behn treats
James more simply. Her late Pindarics take on the task of insistent celebration of the increasingly unpopular Stuart monarchy. In her *Congratulatory Poem to the King's Most Sacred Majesty, on the Happy Birth of the Prince of Wales* (1688), she claims the role of loyal and successful prophet: "Long with *Prophetick Fire, Resolv'd and Bold, / Your Glorious FATE and FORTUNE* I foretold" (Works [Todd] 1: 297 [lines 7–8]), but her rhetorically necessary poetic humility ("'My Pleasure's too Extream for Thought or Wit" [line 62]) also seems consistent with the clichés and hyperboles of the verse. More poetically interesting is her response to political reversal shortly afterward, when James fled, William and Mary arrived, and the Williamite Gilbert Burnet apparently asked her to turn her hand to celebrating the new regime. A *Pindaric Poem to the Reverend Doctor Burnet on the Honour He Did Me of Enquiring after Me and My Muse* refuses the request with great care. At first, the poet appears about to agree to it. Claiming to have been nothing but an unambitious pastoral poet before, she is roused by Burnet's praise to aspire to the "more exalted" thoughts of heroes and kings (308 [line 40]). But then her "stubborn Muse" refuses to obey:

My Muse that would endeavour fain to glide  
With the fair prosperous Gale, and the full driving Tide  
But Loyalty commands with Pious Force,  
That stops me in the thriving Course.  
The Breeze that wafts the Crowding Nations o're,  
Leaves me unpity'd far behind  
On the Forsaken Barren Shore,  
To sigh with Echo, and the Murmuring Wind.  
(lines 49–56)

The image of the lonely loyalist replaces that of the triumphant poet. In the light of James's exile, the role of the successful writer whose claim to immortality rests on celebrating the fame of others has been rejected. In this context, praise of Burnet's powerful writing becomes slyly ironic:

'Tis to your Pen, Great Sir, the Nation owes  
For all the Good this Mighty Change has wrought;  
'Twas that the wondrous Method did dispose,  
E're the vast Work was to Perfection brought.  
Oh strange Effect of a Seraphick Quill!  
That can by unperceptable degrees  
Change every Notion, every Principle  
To any Form, its Great Dictator please.  
(lines 66–73)

She accuses him, politely, of twisting the truth in support of the new king and queen. The ending dismisses while pretending to praise both William
and Burnet: “And great NASSAU shall in your Annals live / To all Futurity” (lines 100–01). In Burnet’s annals—not in Behn’s.

At the end of her life, Behn could see plenty of reason for the fame she valued to fall into obscurity. She had seen her plays attacked for indecency, and, in her preface to The Luckey Chance, she had complained about a lack of support from her “Brothers of the Pen” (7: 217). She was convinced that her reputation as a writer of comedy would have stood much higher had her plays come out under a man’s name (216–17). She was on the losing side in what the Whiggish thinkers she despised were to call the Glorious Revolution, and she had no intention of joining “[t]he Man that chang’d his Note, / And he who has turn’d his Coat” (1: 359 [lines 12–13 of “The Complaint of the Poor Cavaliars”]). In her late poems, she took a longer view, looking to a poetic immortality that she hoped to be granted when the political wheel turned again. In her 1688 elegy on Edmund Waller’s death, she entered—yet again—that had been a mainly male tradition, that of forging one’s place in the literary line by honoring a dead fellow poet: “Eternal, as thy own Almighty Verse,/ Should be those Trophies that adorn thy Hearse” (289 [lines 16–17]). Under the conventional self-deprecation that names her verses “Transitory Flowers” (line 21) is the equally conventional claim to have inherited the dead poet’s mantle: “Such Tributes are, like Tenures, only fit / To shew from whom we hold our Right to Wit” (23–24).

Waller, Behn claims, first “Nurst” her “Infant Muse” (26), and he taught poets “how to Love, and how to Write” (45), that combination for which Behn herself was famous. When she portrays him as neglected in his late years, “Scorning th’untinking Crowd” (63), and quitting “the Stage,” the parallel with her position holds. Implicitly, the poem expresses a hope that the “Circulary Course” (52) of the sun, with whose beams Waller’s poetic power is compared, will bring a renewal of his fame and her own.

Among Behn’s contemporaries, it was not Waller but John Milton whose sun was to rise decisively in the next century, but neither in politics nor in style could Behn have been one of Milton’s daughters. She placed herself, always, with royalists. Translating the sixth book of Abraham Cowley’s Of Plants, she followed Cowley to claim the bays only in secondary position, “after Monarchs,” who have first title to their garlands (1: 325 [line 586]). But when “The Translatress in her own Person speaks,” she adds the bolder and now famous claim that she has a “double right” to those bays because she shares Daphne’s sex and Apollo’s power, and she places herself in a female line “with Sappho and Orinda,” claiming immortality for her verses along with theirs (590–94). Her association with these two famous women poets was to be strengthened in eighteenth-century discussions of women’s writing. It was not a connection that necessarily helped her in the age of feminine delicacy: she was tainted with Sappho’s reputation for warmth and looseness and compared unfavorably to the pure and matchless Orinda. But a later age would rediscover her, partly because of a feminist fascination with the female lines of the past. We have learned, as
this volume among many others shows, to find her important for other reasons too, if not always the ones she would have expected.

Behn would have been glad to know that her comedies received the praise she always thought they deserved. She probably expected her poetry, especially her translation of Cowley and her Stuart panegyrics, to carry her fame forward rather than a short piece of rapidly written fiction like Oroonoko. "I writ it in a few Hours" she explains in her "Epistle Dedicatory" to Lord Maitland, excusing its "Faults of Connexion; for I never rested my Pen a Moment for Thought" (7). She exaggerates her carelessness, perhaps, but the fact remains that what she presents as a lightweight piece has become her most canonical, its "Faults of Connexion" carefully pondered by a generation of critics who have used it to forge connections of their own.

If Behn hoped that a further restoration of the Stuarts would one day bring honor to their loyal poet, she was of course wrong. But our abiding interest in other aspects of the literary world she belonged to—its tentative moves toward freethinking, its experiments with fiction, its command of the stage, its fascination with the new world of the colonies, and its response to the growing slave trade—provides many other reasons for reading and remembering her work. She would no doubt have been startled, but I am sure she would have been pleased to know that 320 years after her death at least one university (Waterloo, Ontario) would be inviting students to encounter writers such as Dryden, Etherege, Rochester, and Wycherley by enrolling in a course entitled The Age of Aphra Behn: Restoration Literature.