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write a one act

submission deadline? january 14, 2011 at 5pm

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Aphra Behn (née Johnson) was born near Canterbury, England in July of 1640. She spent much of her early life traveling with her father who had been appointed governor to Surinam, an English sugar colony on the east coast of Venezuela. It is believed that during her time in Venezuela she was introduced to an African slave leader who was later the inspiration for her most popular novel, Oroonoko. In The Secret Life of Aphra Behn, Janet Todd, notes that this and other encounters in the life of Behn address the idea that she did not believe that class or race was proper reason to highlight any group as superior to another. Evidence also suggests that Behn was likely raised a Catholic. This is supported by the dedication of her play, The Rover, Part II, to the Catholic Duke of York who, in the anti-Catholic fervor of the 1670’s and 80’s, was exiled more than once. Having been raised under the Catholic denomination during a time when the Puritan Church was in power and also having had a greater opportunity to travel than many women of her time meant Behn was granted the experiences needed to formulate her own opinions on a wide variety of ideas, such as race and politics. Behn had strong public opinions on politics, something uncommon for 17th century women. She participated unusually actively in this sphere. A division of political parties emerged in England around the time of Behn’s birth in 1640. This would grow to play a large part in the extensive bouts of revolution that lasted throughout the reign of Charles I and into the early years of Charles II’s reign. This division was centered on a conflict between whether Parliament or the Crown should hold the dominant hand in ruling the country. From this debate two distinct political groups arose: the Tories and the Whigs. Behn found her sympathies with the Tories, who believed that the king held the divine right to govern and, as a result, they practiced absolute allegiance to him. Tories very much desired that monarchical power should surpass parliamentary power. It was this devotion to the king that would later lead her to work as an English spy.

In 1664 Behn married her husband Johan, an English-born merchant of Dutch descent about whom very little is known. Mr. Behn died within a few years. Following his death, Aphra began working as a spy for Charles II during the Second Anglo-Dutch War. It is thought that her work included acting as a courtesan to leading Dutch politicians in order to gain secret intelligence concerning warfare. Unfortunately this endeavor wound up being unpaid work for Behn and, after borrowing money to return home to England, she fell into debt and was threatened with, or possibly placed in a debtors’ prison. It was there that she began writing; her literary beginnings stemming from her need for a sustainable income. Throughout the rest of her life, Behn published poetry, essays, novels, and plays. Today she is credited as being the first professional female writer in England. Certainly, she was the only female playwright writing during the early years of the Restoration. Much of what is known about Behn can only be gleaned from her writing. There, certain thematic concerns, including the mental and sexual empowerment of women and the dissolving of gender expectations, predominate. The few institutions that did keep historical records at the time excluded women, and the male-dominated literary world worked to limit the influence of female writers, making substantial efforts to discredit Behn’s work. One author, Ernest Bernbaum, wrote a work entitled Mrs. Behn’s Biography: a Fiction, in which he first outlined the history of the “supposed” Aphra Behn and then went on to deny the reality of all he had presented. Aphra Behn died on April 16, 1689. She is buried in Westminster Abbey, and is recognized as being the first women buried there in recognition of her own achievements. Her gravestone reads: Here lies a Proof that Wit can never be Defense enough against Mortality.
An Aphra Behn Timeline

1640 – Aphra Johnson born in Kent.
1663 – Returns to Surinam.
1665 – Probable death of, or separation from husband.
1666 – Travels to England; probably marries Mr. Behn.
1667 – The Forced Marriage, Lincoln’s Inn Fields.
1668 – The Amorous Prince, Lincoln’s Inn Fields.
1669 – The Dutch Lover, Dorset Garden.
1670 – Abdelazer or The Moor’s Revenge, Dorset Garden.
1671 – The Town Fop or Sir Timothy Tawdry, Dorset Garden.
1672 – The Rover, Dorset Garden.
1673 – The Young King, Dorset Garden.
1674 – The Play-Boy of the Western World, Dorset Garden.
1675 – The Rover, Part II, Dorset Garden.
1676 – Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave.
1677 – The False Count, Dorset Garden.
1678 – The Luck Chance, Drury Lane.
1679 – The Window Ranter, Drury Lane.
1680 – The Younger Brother, Drury Lane.
Like Don Quixote—Gervanter's hero—famous for being taken in by chivalric romance. Dr. Ballard has taken fiction for truth; in his case books of fantastic travels have deceived him.

A DISCOURSE OF THE WORLD IN THE MOON: A moon-voyage written by Cyrano de Bergerac. English versions of which were published in 1659 and 1687.

HE THAT KNEW ALL ... KNEW NOTHING YET: From a saying attributed to Socrates: 'I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance.'

DIALOGUE OF ICAROMENIPPUS: A dialogue by Lucian in which Menippus tells of his trip to the moon. Various ideas mentioned in later fantastic voyages, including the possibility of the moon being inhabited, are aired here. The name Icaromenippus indicates that Menippus is like Icarus in flying up into the heavens.

PREMIUM MOBILE: The "first mover," in Ptolemaic astronomy; the sphere that moves all the others. Figuratively applied to Mopsophil as the machine that moves Scaramouch's feelings.

THE ROSICRUCIAN ORDER is a Christian society of mystics (originally a secret society) that are believed to hold knowledge of nature, the physical universe, and the spiritual realm that is otherwise concealed from most of humanity. In the early 17th century, esoteric Rosicrucian manifestoes posited a secret order of alchemists and scholars who were to revolutionize the arts and sciences of Western Europe. This developed into a network of mathematicians, astronomers, scholars, natural philosophers and scientists which would later form the Royal Society—a learned society of science and the oldest such body in the world.

BURN ALL MY BOOKS: Like Don Quixote, the doctor rejects his books when he learns how they have deceived him.

FOOTNOTES, QUOTES & OTHER ADDENDA

CHEVALIER ... CANNONS (SONG): Fair haired cavalier, No more patches, no more powder, No more ribbons and lace. Bellemante is reciting a list of young men's ornaments.

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THE MAN IN THE MOON: The title of a fantastic voyage by the supposed Spaniard, Domingo Gonsales, the Speedy Messenger, who travelled to the moon in a flying machine drawn by large geese called 'gansas.'

THE EBULA: In Godwin's The Man in the Moone. Gonsales is given various magic stones; one, the Ebula, helps him rise and descend through the air at will.

MAY CAESAR LIVE: The epilogue's eulogy of James II as Caesar is mixed with strong hints that he should patronize the stage more. Royal patronage had been declining since the later part of Charles II's reign.

MOON-CALFS: Idiots, so called because their birth was once thought to have been affected by the moon; in the context of The Emperor of the Moon, it also anticipates the suitors' later pretence to have been born on the moon.

FOOTNOTES, QUOTES & OTHER ADDENDA

Love ceases to be a pleasure when it ceases to be a secret. Aphra Behn

She was a writer who not only insisted on being heard but successfully forced the men who dominated the jealous literary world of Restoration England to recognize her as an equal. Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn by Angeline Goreau

That perfect tranquility of life, which is nowhere to be found but in retreat, a faithful friend, and a good library. Aphra Behn

These lines would lose half their mordancy if the playwright were not Aphra Behn, the poetess-punk. Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820 by Catherine Gallagher

Each moment of a happy lover's hour is worth an age of dull and common life. Aphra Behn

All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn. For it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. A Room Of One's Own by Virginia Woolf

SALAMANDERS: Medieval mystics believed Salamanders to be spirits of fire who live in the invisible spiritual ether. It was thought that without them fire could not exist. The mysterious nature of the Salamander was rooted in the fact that humans were unable to detect their presence visually because all evidence of their existence quickly turned to ash. A Room Of One's Own by Virginia Woolf

Charles I's overthrow was due, in part, to the desire of Parliament for more power. Many undercover gatherings were held in order to plot the King's overthrow and to keep revolutionary plans secret. This secrecy eventually led England into a period of nearly 20 years of instability without a properly representative government.

With the monarchy's restoration, measures were put in place to regain the trust of the people. Decrees were made limiting Parliament and the Ministers of the Court from acting in secrecy. The public was led to believe that the men who had been in office during Charles I and Cromwell's rule had been removed. However some of those men were kept on to act as ministers, including Sir Thomas Clifford, Lord Arlington, the Duke of Buckingham, Lord Ashley, and Lord Lauderdale. These scholars were believed to be allied closely to the king but were also thought to be loyal to Parliament. This led people to believe that a new secret society was being formed, aimed at undermining the government. (At the time it was noted that the names of these men spelled out the acronym CABAL, and they were referred to by this name for the remainder of time they held office.) Today the term is still used to refer to a group of secret conspirators or advisors.
The Puritan sect of Protestantism began as a reform movement within the Anglican Church of England during the late sixteenth century. It was not initially an attempt to split the church, but to continue to reform the Protestant faith towards a more devoutly biblical and morally centered religion. The Puritans believed that the Protestant church, more specifically the Church of England, was still too much like the Roman Catholic Church and that, in order to transcend the ideologies and practices of Catholicism, society should have more rigorously defined behaviors and customs. This impulse for reform quickly became a means by which the Puritans condemned various groups and behaviors antithetical to their credo, and when the King and his Church did not follow reform practices they too were condemned. One activity that was actively discouraged (and later forbidden) was the participation in and attendance of the theatre. The Puritan view of theatre was that it encouraged people to partake in activities for pleasure or leisure. To succumb to worldly pleasures such as this was sinful, and in violation of biblical doctrine. Puritans felt that in order for Protestantism to be a devout religion people must rediscover the idea that the Bible was "all-sufficient". Therefore the sensual pleasures of theatre, music, and dancing, were considered unnecessary and even unholy.

In 1642, King Charles I was dethroned by the New Model Army, led by Oliver Cromwell. He was beheaded seven years later. Cromwell, who was closely associated with Parliament and the Puritan movement, became leader of the Republic Commonwealth and began to issue a long series of decrees aimed at constraining the intellectual and social growth of the country. On the 6th of September 1642, all theaters across the country were closed by ordinance. Following this, performances were held in secrecy for many years, but as a consequence of such infractions a second order was issued in 1647. This order threatened with imprisonment and punishment all that broke its enactments. Further constraints on theatre and all its players followed thereafter. A third ordinance, declaring all actors to be rogues, and ordering that theatres be demolished soon followed the second. Should an actor be discovered performing, they were to be whipped and degraded; any audience member was to be fined.

In 1660, Charles II, King of Scotland (who had fled England in 1651) reclaimed the English throne, restored the monarchy, and reopened English theatres. It had been an hiatus of eighteen years. This period when the monarchy was restored is known as the Restoration, and it brought with it an entirely new order of things dramatic. Theaters began to revive, plays were openly performed once more, and women, for the first time, were allowed to perform onstage as actors.

Restoration drama is frequently defined by its comedies (rather than its serious works) which are justly celebrated for their wit and humor, and which are categorized by satirically rakish, and effete characters, extravagant mannerisms, and sexual innuendo, outrageousness, and licentiousness. They are generally farces, satires and comedies of manners. The "top"—a foolish man obsessed with fashion, his appearance and clothing, became a staple of the genre.

THE COMPANY

Doctor Baliardo ................................................................. Miss Lydia Jimenez
Scaramouch (his man) ....................................................... Miss Christine Rose
Pedro (his boy) ................................................................. Miss Esty Thomas
Don Cinthio ........................................................................ Mr William Vezinaw
Don Charmante ................................................................ Miss Melissa Martin
(Both nephews to the viceroy, and lovers of Elaria and Bellemante)
Harlequin (Cinthio’s man) ...................................................... Miss Kelsey Burritt
Elaria (daughter to the doctor) ............................................. Mr Sullivan Kidder
Bellemante (niece to the doctor) ........................................... Mr Andrew Polec
Mopsophil (governante to the young ladies) .................... Mr John Amir-Fazli

Twelve persons representing the figures of the twelve signs of the zodiac (in alphabetical order)

Mr David Bang
Mr Greg Corrado
Miss Nina Desoi
Miss Grace Interlichia
Miss Sarah Joseph
Mr Amory Kisch
Mr Matt Myers
Miss Jacqueline O’Donnell
Miss Elizabeth O’Neil
Mr Mohammad Seraji
Mr Paul Vergara
Mr Doug Zeppenfeld

THE SCENE

Naples

MUSICAL NUMBERS

A curse upon that faithless maid ................................. Miss Elaria
Chevalier ................................................................. Miss Bellemante
When maidens are young ............................... Mr Sararamouch
Song of the Zodiac (Hark! Hark, the music of the spheres) .......... Persons of the Moon
All joy to mortals ................................. The Company
Doctor Baliardo, we are told, has become “Don Quick-sottish”—infected with “reading fool-ish books.” Like Don Quixote before him, Baliardo has replaced his own reality with an alternative one. He has done so with the help of a relatively new technology: print had of course been made possible by the advent of movable type in the fifteenth century, but by the time Don Quixote was published (the early seventeenth century) it had only recently become widespread, as paper became less expensive, and literacy rates rose. In addition to print, of course, Baliardo avails himself of another technology, the telescope (invented in the early seventeenth century but steadily perfected in the years following). Through the combination of these two then—the book and the optic lens—Baliardo is able to “see” so clearly into other spheres that he becomes increasingly untethered from his own terrestrial world. Rather, he is “transported” by his visions of the lunar inhabitants: he is “ecstasied” (from “ex”-“stasis,” put out of place), “ravished” (from the Old French “ravir,” to snatch, to seize). But if Baliardo’s imagination has been transported elsewhere, the bodily results of this process are all too physical: he leaps, jumps, and skips for joy; he kneels in prayer, falls on his face. The effects of his inward, private obsession is all too outward, all too public. Baliardo’s literal lunacy seems an allegory, then, for several different kinds of phenomena: absorptive reading, the raptures of erotic love, or any process whereby fantasy both “replaces” material reality but also manifests itself on the material body—any process whereby one’s most inward, private experiences ultimately play themselves out in the public sphere. Indeed, this relationship of mind to body and public to private is one that our own historical juncture seems particularly concerned with: what are the consequences of the fact that so much of our lives are now lived not “on earth,” but in “the ether”—that for many, an event might not feel fully real until it has been registered via a blog entry, a Facebook posting, a Tweet? of the fact that “Second Life” might threaten to be more primary to many people than their “first” life? Are our bodies and minds becoming increasingly detached from one another or are our bodies in the process of being transformed by these new technologies of sight and imagination? Are these new interfaces replacing public forums, or creating new ones? And what does it mean to explore these questions via another sphere in which the relationship between inner and outer is constantly being renegotiated—the theatre?

Q: How does Doctor Baliardo’s experience of literature separate him from the real world?

A: Doctor Baliardo, we are told, has become “Don Quick-sottish”—infected with “reading fool-ish books.” Like Don Quixote before him, Baliardo has replaced his own reality with an alternative one. He has done so with the help of a relatively new technology: print had of course been made possible by the advent of movable type in the fifteenth century, but by the time Don Quixote was published (the early seventeenth century) it had only recently become widespread, as paper became less expensive, and literacy rates rose. In addition to print, of course, Baliardo avails himself of another technology, the telescope (invented in the early seventeenth century but steadily perfected in the years following). Through the combination of these two then—the book and the optic lens—Baliardo is able to “see” so clearly into other spheres that he becomes increasingly untethered from his own terrestrial world. Rather, he is “transported” by his visions of the lunar inhabitants: he is “ecstasied” (from “ex”-“stasis,” put out of place), “ravished” (from the Old French “ravir,” to snatch, to seize). But if Baliardo’s imagination has been transported elsewhere, the bodily results of this process are all too physical: he leaps, jumps, and skips for joy; he kneels in prayer, falls on his face. The effects of his inward, private obsession is all too outward, all too public.

Q: Why do you think Behn chose to center her play around a character like Baliardo? Is he a representation of her, or of her time?

A: This is really fascinating. I guess my “simple” answer would be that in many ways he is exemplary of a certain “type” in Restoration comedy: the patriarch who stands in the way of sexual freedom, the liberation of women, and the passing of power from one generation to the next, but with whom, ultimately, a series of clever stratagems can easily dispatch. We see this figure everywhere in comedy of the time: the father who guards his daughters/nieces like a hawk, who opposes this or that marriage, or who keeps his wife under lock and key. This figure always provides the starting-point for comedy, because the other characters must figure out a way to outwit him in order to free up the flow of sexual energies and inheritances. Baliardo provides a particularly great version of this figure because (a) he’s already blind to what’s going on around him, allowing for greater license among the other characters: (b) he arrives onstage complete with his own set of secondary characters and scenarios—the lunar inhabitants and their “love-fits”—which provide extra spectacular material for Behn.