

Early Modern Women Poets

(1520-1700)

An Anthology

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and may my soule (o God) so happie bee
as whome I saw in paine in bliss to see.

A. Cr.

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6 *death's sting*: 1 Corinthians 15: 55

APHRA BEHN (née JOHNSON)

(?1640–1689)

ALMOST everything about the life of Aphra Behn is controversial. However, some probabilities have recently begun to emerge, mostly thanks to the work of Maureen Duffy, who first uncovered the parish registers, and more recently, Janet Todd. She was probably from Kent, the daughter of Bartholomew Johnson, described at his marriage on 25 August 1638 as a yeoman of Bishopsbourne, and Elizabeth Denham, of Smeeth, near Wye. Their first daughter Frances was baptized at Wye a mere five months later—it was customary for a couple to return to the bride's home parish for the baptism of the first child—and on 14 December 1640, at Harbledown just outside Canterbury, they baptized another daughter, 'Eaffry'. This squares with Sir Thomas Colepeper's statement in his *Adversaria* that 'Mrs Been . . . had also a fayer sister . . . their names were Franck and Aphra.' Aphra is a name quite common in early modern Kent, but there is a certain irony in the fact that Aphra Behn was put under her patronage, since the original St Afra of Augsburg is probably the only brothel-keeper to have been raised to the altars of the Church (her life is in the *Acta Sanctorum*, under 5 August). Bartholomew Johnson was a barber, and a freeman of Canterbury, who in 1654, became Overseer of the Poor for St Margaret's, an inner-city Canterbury parish. Elizabeth Johnson was employed as nurse to Sir Thomas Colepeper, and the children seem to have spent time with her in the Colepeper household, since he records Aphra's precocious talent: 'from infancy she wrote the prettiest softest engaging verses in the world.' Her origins were lowly but offered her a number of opportunities: she may have learned French from the Huguenot refugees who thronged Canterbury, and Dutch from the exiled colony in nearby Sandwich, and due to her mother's ties with the household, she had the patronage of the Colepepers. She was associated with members of this family throughout her life.

In the early 1660s, she seems to have visited Surinam, where 'Astraea' (Behn's codename and *nom de plume*) was mentioned by the deputy governor, William Byam, in his reports in 1663 and 1664. On her return, she married a Mr Behn (usually described as Dutch, though the name is German) about whom nothing whatever is known, although it is hypothesized that he died in the plague of 1665. In 1666, she was sent on a spying mission to Antwerp by Thomas Killigrew to contact William Scot (an old flame from Surinam), the eldest son of the regicide Thomas Scot, who had volunteered to betray his fellow republicans. Her coded intelligence reports, preserved in the Public Records Office, are her earliest extant writings. The enterprise was financially disastrous: by 1668, to keep out of debtor's prison, she was petitioning the king and sending begging letters to Killigrew. From 1667 to 1670 there is very little record of her activities, and then she suddenly appears as the author of *The Forc'd Marriage*, staged in 1670 by the Duke's Company, one of the two theatre companies in London. At about this time she may have been living with a lawyer by the name of John Hoyle. Bulstrode White-

locke summed him up as 'an Atheist, a Sodomite professed, a corrupter of youth, & a Blasphemer of Christ'. She made a reasonable living as a dramatist until 1682, when the two companies amalgamated into the United Company, halving the demand for new plays. Thereafter she augmented her income with translations from French and Latin (the latter from intermediate English versions), as well as poetry. She also received a royal subsidy for producing 'Tory doggerell': satires, squibs, and songs, which were circulated anonymously in manuscript and are no longer identifiable as her work. Her interest in this type of verse is shown by her personal miscellany, 'Astrea's Book for Songs and Satyrs—1686', now in the Bodleian Library (Firth MS c. 16). She was continually ill from 1686 until her death in 1689, but continued to write at prolific speed as an economic necessity.

She died on 16 April 1689, five days after the coronation of William and Mary, which, as a loyal supporter of the Stuarts, and possibly a secret Catholic, she had had difficulty in accepting. She was buried in Westminster Abbey, where her name appears in the register as 'Astrea Behn'. Behn's literary reputation seemed assured at the time of her death. Defoe ranked her with Milton and Rochester as among the 'great wits' of that era, an interesting triumvirate. Already, however, her *risqué* poems and novels, and reputedly loose morals, had provoked a censorious reaction (e.g. 'The Female Laureat, 1687, in London, National Art Library Dyce MS 25 f 37, fos. 607^r–609^r'), and she was held up as a negative example for aspiring women poets (e.g. poem to Anne Wharton in Edward Young's *The Idea of Christian Love* (1688), pp. vii–viii). However, as many of the subsequent poems in this selection will show, her importance as inspiration and example to women writers of the next generation is incalculable.

The poems selected here are intended to give an impression of the range of her writing. She was a notable translator from French ('The Disappointment' is a version of a French original), and, though she probably did not read Latin, she engaged with Latin literature via English and French translations, so we include her 'Oenone to Paris'. The 'Pindaric'—a loosely structured, rhymed poem with variable line-length—was a fashionable metre of the time, only tangentially related to the poems of Pindar. 'Silvio's Complaint' is interesting for a variety of reasons. It is a political poem on the fall of James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, illegitimate son of Charles II, in eclogue form: a vehicle for discreet political comment since Virgil. It is also interesting linguistically, as an internally consistent, but obviously artificial representation of Lowland Scots: signalled by forms such as 'au' for 'all', and by actual Scotticisms such as 'weys me' (i.e. 'wae's me'), and 'muckle'. The poem to Anne Wharton is a testimony to Behn's increasingly desperate search for patronage; as a response from an established poet to a young admirer, it is extraordinary, but as a reflection of Behn's economic realities, it is revealing. In a somewhat similar fashion, the poem on Queen Mary seeks to reconcile her political loyalties with her need to establish a strategy for survival: she does so by ignoring William, and focusing on Mary as the daughter of James II.

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The Disappointment

I.

One day the Amorous *Lysander*,
By an impatient Passion sway'd,
Supriz'd fair *Cloris*, that lov'd Maid,

200 *On the Death of the late Earl of Rochester.*

Mourn, Mourn, ye Muses, all your loss deplore,
 The Young, the Noble *Strephon* is no more.
 Yes, Yes, he fled quick as departing Light,
 And ne're shall rise from Deaths eternal Night,
 So rich a Prize the *Stygian* Gods ne're bore, 5
 Such Wit, such Beauty, never grac'd their Shore.
 He was but lent this duller World t'improve
 In all the charms of Poetry, and Love;
 Both were his gift, which feely he bestow'd,
 And like a God, dealt to the wond'ring Crowd. 10
 Scorning the little Vanity of Fame,
 Spight of himself attain'd a Glorious name.
 But oh! in vain was all his peevish Pride,
 The Sun as soon might his vast Lustre hide,
 As piercing, pointed, and more lasting bright, 15
 As suffering no viscissitudes of Night.
 Mourn, Mourn, ye Muses, all your loss deplore,
 The Young, the Noble *Strephon* is no more.

Now uninspir'd upon your Banks we lye,
 Unless when we wou'd mourn his Elegie; 20
 His name's a Genius that wou'd Wit dispense,
 And give the Theme a Soul, the Words a Sense.
 But all fine thought that Ravisht when it spoke,
 With the soft Youth eternal leave has took;
 Uncommon Wit that did the soul o'recome, 25
 Is buried all in *Strephon's* Worship'd Tomb;
 Satyr has lost its Art, its Sting is gone,
 The Fop and Cully now may be undone;
 That dear instructing Rage is now allay'd,
 And no sharp Pen dares tell 'em how they've stray'd; 30
 Bold as a God was ev'ry lash he took,
 But kind and gentle the chastising stroke.
 Mourn, Mourn, ye Youths, whom Fortune has betray'd,
 The last Reproacher of your Vice is dead.

Mourn, all ye Beauties, put your *Cyprus* on, 35
 The truest Swain that e're Ador'd you's gone;
 Think how he lov'd, and writ, and sigh'd, and spoke,
 Recall his Meen, his Fashion, and his Look.
 By what dear Arts the Soul he did surprize,
 Soft as his Voice, and charming as his Eyes. 40
 Bring Garlands all of never-dying Flow'rs,
 Bedew'd with everlasting falling Show'rs;
 Fix your fair eyes upon your victim'd Slave,

Sent Gay and Young to his untimely Grave.
 See where the Noble Swain Extended lies, 45
 Too sad a Triumph of your Victories;
 Adorn'd with all the Graces Heav'n e're lent,
 All that was Great, Soft, Lovely, Excellent
 You've laid into his early Monument. }

Mourn, Mourn, ye Beauties, your sad loss deplore, 50
 The Young, the Charming *Strephon* is no more.

Mourn, all ye little Gods of Love, whose Darts
 Have lost their wonted power of piercing hearts;
 Lay by the gilded Quiver and the Bow,
 The useless Toys can do no Mischief now, 55
 Those Eyes that all your Arrows points inspir'd,
 Those Lights that gave ye fire are now retir'd,
 Cold as his Tomb, pale as your Mothers Doves;
 Bewail him them oh all ye little Loves,
 For you the humblest Votary have lost 60
 That ever your Divinities could boast;
 Upon your hands your weeping Heads decline,
 And let your wings encompass round his Shrine;
 In stead of Flow'rs your broken Arrows strow,
 And at his feet lay the neglected Bow. 65

Mourn, all ye little Gods, your loss deplore,
 The soft, the Charming *Strephon* is no more.

Large was his Fame, but short his Glorious Race,
 Like young *Lucretius* liv'd and dy'd apace.
 So early Roses face, so over all 70
 They cast their fragrant scents, then softly fall,
 While all the scatter'd perfum'd leaves declare,
 How lovely 'twas when whole, how sweet, how fair.
 Had he been to the *Roman* Empire known,
 When great *Augustus* fill'd the peaceful Throne; 75
 Had he the noble wond'rous Poet seen,
 And known his Genius, and survey'd his Meen,
 (When Wits, and Heroes grac'd Divine abodes.)
 He had increas'd the number of their Gods;
 The Royal Judge had Temples rear'd to's name, 80
 And made him as Immortal as his Fame;
 In Love and Verse his *Ovid* he'ad out-done,
 And all his Laurels, and his *Julia* won.

Mourn, Mourn, unhappy World, his loss deplore,
 The great, the charming *Strephon* is no more. 85

1680

5 *Stygian*: the gods of the underworld 35 *Cyprus*: the cypress was a plant associated classically with mourning, but 'cypress', or 'cypress lawn' was a light, transparent fabric

used for mourning garments. Behn intends both senses 58 *Doves*: Venus, mother of Cupid, and of cupids in general, was accompanied by doves 69 *Lucretius*: took his own life at the age of 44 80 *Royal Judge*: Augustus 82 *Ovid*: Ovid's poetry, like Rochester's, was cynical and sexually explicit. He was thought to have fallen in love with Augustus's daughter Julia, and to have been exiled for that reason

201 *On Desire A Pindarick. By Mrs. A.B.*

What Art thou, oh! thou new-found pain?
 From what infection dost thou spring?
 Tell me—oh! tell me, thou enchanting thing,
 Thy nature and thy name;
 Inform me by what subtil Art, 5
 What powerful Influence,
 You got such vast Dominion in a part
 Of my unheeded, and unguarded, heart
 That fame and Honour cannot drive yee thence.
 Oh! mischievous usurper of my Peace; 10
 Oh! soft Intruder on my solitude,
 Charming disturber of my ease,
 That hast my nobler fate persu'd,
 And all the Glorys of my life subdu'd.

Thou haunt'st my inconvenient hours; 15
 The business of the Day, nor silence of the night,
 That shou'd to cares and sleep invite,
 Can bid defiance to thy conquering powers.
 Where hast thou been this live-long Age
 That from my Birth till now, 20
 Thou never cou'd'st one thought engage,
 Or charm my soul with the uneasy rage
 That made it all its humble feebles know?

Where wert thou, oh, malicious spright,
 When shining Honour did invite? 25
 When interest call'd, then thou wert shy,
 Nor to my aid one kind propension brought,
 Nor wou'd'st inspire one tender thought,
 When Princes at my feet did lye.
 When thou cou'd'st mix ambition with my joy, 30
 Then peevish *Phantom* thou wer't nice and coy,
 Not Beauty cou'd invite thee then,
 Nor all the Arts of lavish Men!
 Not all the powerful Rhetorick of the Tongue
 Not sacred Wit cou'd charm thee on; 35
 Not the soft play that lovers make,
 Nor sigh cou'd fan thee to a fire,