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Aphra Behn and the Performance of Alternative Worlds*

Christa Knellwolf

The World of Aphra Behn

The life of Aphra Behn is surrounded by scandals, although few facts about her are known with certainty.¹ What we know is that she was a paradoxical personality who self-confidently presented herself as a public figure while she also held on to naively old-fashioned attitudes. The Restoration provided her with an opportunity to vent liberal views about a woman's proper role, since its staging conventions offered possibilities of redefining norms and expectations. Maureen Duffy describes this innovative potential when she argues that "in the seventeenth century literature was passionately public and political" (Duffy 11; also Payne).

The stage not only focused on the habits of dress and make-up, the most conspicuous items concerning social appearance, but it also exaggerated the already extreme developments of contemporary fashion and let the spectators indulge in an experience of sensual excess (Styer 102-107). Contemporary dramas were full of scenes in which characters were presented in a private atmosphere: they were either sitting at their morning toilette or were about to retire to bed. When it thus closely zoomed in on the daily habits of upper-class society, the dramatic inversion between private and public made it necessary to reflect social concerns at an intimate level. The claim that all the world's a stage was certainly no new idea. What was new was that the dramatic spectacle could, to a large extent, be used as an experimental ground for defining the self and its social setting. This playground for new conceptions of the self could take advantage of a style of performance which

* I want to thank Kathleen Giblin and Beat Affentranger for their invaluable comments on a draft version of this article.

¹ In spite of the scarcity of information about her life, several attempts at writing her biography have been made; cf. Duffy, Goreau and Todd.

made extensive use of improvisation. It was only a logical consequence that the self became an effect of presentation and was perceived at several removes from the idea of natural essence.

Behn unquestionably lived in precarious times and had to make compromises in more than one respect. Her plays are uncomfortably enmeshed in conservative attitudes: a figure such as Willmore, the Rover, who spends his life gambling, drinking and wenching only to march off with the virgin heiress at the end of *The Rover* is a disconcerting factor in our understanding of her work. Both in fictional and personal terms she created, and lived in, a world of her own which is often at odds with her age's expectations. How she reconciled her unconventional public role with sometimes very conservative views is not easy to understand, although the Restoration court obviously attracted her because of its spirit of sexual openness and the fact that it allowed female wits to play a significant social role (Spencer's introduction to *The Rover* ix-x; Gallagher 24-39).

Although her plays advertise an unorthodox view about a woman's proper behaviour, her foundation for the definition of the female intellectual, or female wit, were more conservative than twentieth-century scholars would like to imagine. What she did, above all, was not to overthrow conventional standards but to formulate new interpretations of general truths, and thus seek to define public and private identity in new terms. A particularly interesting instance of this is to be found in her engagement with scientific thought. I argue that reading her plays in the light of her interest in science helps us understand the conflict between political conservatism and radical claims concerning the redefinition of social roles.

Even when she questions the most basic assumptions about objectivity and human identity, she maintains a firm belief that there is such a thing as an objective and irrefutable text.² Relativity only appears in interpretation. That she insists on an objective standpoint, while maintaining that meanings can be redefined, contested and negotiated is a sign of her ambivalent attitude: her mind is firmly embedded in the seventeenth-century rationalistic tradition, but she uses it as a basis to imagine social utopias. In this context, engaging with science via her translation of Fontenelle provided her with a forum in which to think about different possibilities of interpretation. While the human position was stable in the old Ptolemaic system, the new Coperni-

² In the preface to her translation of Fontenelle, Behn engages with the topic of biblical exegesis so as to refute the charge of heresy. It has to be noted here that she is an experienced biblical scholar for whom biblical hermeneutics was a familiar topic; cf. 79-80. On the significance of biblical interpretations during her period, see Markley, *Fallen Languages*.

can theory described by Fontenelle challenged the human perspective and enforced a self-conscious attitude. Recognising that the earth was neither the centre of the universe nor provided the absolute standard for life forms was an immense challenge for the imagination. On the one hand, it provided an opportunity for conceiving of more liberated social systems and, on the other, threatened the loss of any kind of social order and interpretative stability. The new science produced many liberating ideas but, for the most part, they had to remain flights of the imagination so as not to endanger conventional beliefs.

I will focus on two of Behn's late plays, *The Emperor of the Moon* and *The Lucky Chance* approaching them in relation to her interest in translation, interpretation and the appeal to scientific ideas towards the end of her life. Through comparing these different intellectual activities, I want to explore a new dimension of her dramatic imagination. I particularly want to illustrate the liberating dimension that is located between a text's literal meaning and its performative potential. In order to highlight the tensions between Behn's appeal to conventional assumptions and her social thought experiments, I want to look at what happens when her ideas are translated onto the stage. Although science does not figure as a dominant topic, it exerts its impact through one of its opposites: the carnivalesque elements structuring the plots of these plays are noticeably opposed to reason, and they not only introduce a discussion of objectivity and its logical implications but also engage in an analysis of society.

Behn's Translation of Fontenelle

Towards the end of her life, Behn shifted her interest from drama to prose and translated several scientific treatises. Like other dramatists of the period, she had to search for new fields of activity after the two theatres in London were reduced to one in 1682. But then, her translations also mark the beginning of quite a different career. Janet Todd argues that "translated prose provided an opportunity for a woman to enter into controversies on science, religion and philosophy which, as an unlearned female, she apparently had to eschew in her poetry" (*The Works of Aphra Behn*, vol.4, ix). For example, Margaret Cavendish had already produced popularisations of science. But while Cavendish's idiosyncratic style gave her the reputation of being de-

ranged and weird, Behn was widely acclaimed as an intelligent and elegant translator.³

Behn concludes the preface to her translation of Fontenelle's "Entre-tiens sur la pluralité des mondes" by saying that she did not have the opportunity to immerse herself in the matter deeply enough to present her own view of things:

*I resolv'd either to give you the French Book into English, or to give you the subject quite changed and made my own; but having neither health nor leisure for the last I offer you the first such as it is. [author emphasises the whole sentence]*⁴

Here she implies that she might have been a female scientist but, for reasons of preference, became an intellectual of a different orientation. While it is important to note how she sketches a portrait of herself as a public figure and literary personality, we should not forget that she also disguises the obstacles put in the way of a female scientist.

Fontenelle's popularisation of Descartes's Copernican view of the cosmos represents the most significant scientific piece among her translations, and it in fact renders the French original in close detail.⁵ It contains a female intellectual as the interlocutor of the quasi-professional astronomer who is also the I-narrator. The female lay figure fluctuates between a stance of naive ignorance and a demonstration of the most acute intelligence. Hilda L. Smith emphasises those moments in Fontenelle which slight her intellectual capacities:

Bernard de Fontenelle's *Plurality of Worlds*, which popularised Copernican ideas under the guise of making it possible for women to gain a smattering of scientific knowledge without requiring them to tax their intellectual powers, was condescending to women's abilities in ways that offended seventeenth-century English feminists. Fontenelle's translator, Aphra Behn, admitted that "the author's introducing a woman as one of the speakers" attracted her to the work, but she remained unhappy with Fontenelle's description of the Marchioness, the

³ The tradition of female translators includes, among others, Margaret Roper, Thomas More's daughter who translated Erasmus's *Treatise on the Lord's Prayer* in 1524, Mary Sidney, who translated the psalms, and Lucy Hutchinson, who translated Epicurus's *De rerum natura* around 1650.

⁴ Behn, "A Discovery of New Worlds" 86. Behn was soon well known for her skill at turning certain mainly French originals into English; cf. Spearing 156ff.

⁵ Cf. the original version by Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1667–1757), *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* 17–18.

charming young pupil to whom the wise and witty narrator-philosopher explained astronomy. (62-63)

Of course it is deplorable that Fontenelle portrays the female participant in the scientific dialogue as naive and ignorant of the existence of (natural) philosophy. But then, she also demonstrates a sharp wit and a quick intelligence. The Marquioness is never really stupid but just insufficiently informed, which reflects the fact that women were excluded from the universities.

At this point, it is important to remember that women constituted a significant audience for philosophical and natural philosophical topics, and that they also figured as a special type of the amateur (Perry 472-493). Women were an almost ideal audience because they could not attain to the status of the professional or the specialist. If a text appealed to women as the general lay audience, it also apologised for the use of a vocabulary that was generally comprehensible though scientifically inaccurate. In that sense, women figured as the ideal lay audience for a science whose terminology and mathematical computations were becoming increasingly arcane. The female listener or reader of a scientific argument is not simply the one who is excluded from its formulation; she is also frequently the reason why specialised knowledge has to make use of a common-sensical explanation. This suggests that we may, to a significant extent, owe the wide-spread propagation of scientific knowledge in the late seventeenth century to the keen interest of a large number of women who were asking for information about the new cosmic theories, rather than about new trends in fashion.

Behn's "A Discovery of New Worlds" presents itself as a popularising account of Descartes's version of the Copernican cosmological theory. This work encapsulates some problems which were characteristic of the late seventeenth century. Some of its intellectual tensions are not only important for our understanding of that age, but they also help us come to terms with certain ambiguities in Behn's own career. The scientific debate is triggered off by the philosopher-narrator's following remark:

I am sorry that I must confess I have imagined to my self, that every Star may perchance be another World, yet I would not swear that it is so; but I will believe it to be true, because that Opinion is so pleasant to me . . . (95).

The scientific dimension is far less important than the capacity to imagine remote corners of the universe, which is also reflected by the conversational style.

Questions concerning the relationships between being and appearance are central. This can already be noticed in her initial discussion of philosophy's object of enquiry and the lengthy comparison between nature and theatrical representation:

. . . the true Philosophers spend their time in not believing what they see, and in endeavouring to guess at the knowledge of what they see not; . . . I fancy still to my self that Nature is a great Scene, or Representation, much like one of our *Opera's*; for, from the place where you sit to behold the *Opera*, you do not see the Stage, as really it is . . . ; but that which makes the difficulty incomparably greater to Philosophers, is, that the Ropes, Pullies, Wheels and Weights, which give motion to the different Scenes represented to us by Nature, are so well hid both from our sight and understanding, that it was a long time before mankind could so much as guess at the Causes that moved the vast Frame of the Universe. (96-97)

The idea that nature, or its study, is an interpretation of a representation recalls the old metaphor of "the book of nature": it cannot be grasped in its own terms and needs to be read and interpreted. By means of a complex theatrical metaphor, nature is described as a stage on which God, as the implied playwright, presents his ideas. While the image of the book of nature may imply that its interpretation is an act of distortion, the image of the theatre not only suggests deception but also talks of a gratification of the senses. In this, the subjective understanding produced by an individual imagination is centrally important. If our perception of reality is indeed no more than "different Scenes represented to us by Nature," as the above passage formulates it, no universally accepted sense of objectivity can exist.

The cosmic system of "A Discovery of New Worlds" is extremely mechanical; so much so that the narrator says that "some would have the Universe no other thing in Great, than a Watch is in Little" (98).⁶ The accuracy and predictability which accompanies the metaphor of the watch is in conflict with the scenery of operatic delusions and deceptions. The comparison to the theatre is initially introduced so as to discuss the circumstances attendant on the perception of a spectacle. The "Ropes, Pullies, Wheels and Weights" discuss the apparatus required for dramatic representation. But they are not simply part of the representational mechanism and have specific associations with make-believe and deception. When a brief history of natural philosophical enquiry begins with the narrator's remark that he "need

⁶ The mechanical view of the cosmos dominated seventeenth-century science; cf. Jacob; see also Teeter Dobbs and Jacob, e.g. 34-46. For an analysis of the metaphor of the world as machine, see Dear 151-179.

only draw the Curtain, and shew you the world" (98), he is confusing presentation with representation and implies that he is capable of revealing a core truth about reality.

It is precisely this conflict between the metaphor of the watch and that of the theatre in Fontenelle's piece "A Discovery of New Worlds" which explains some conflicts in Behn's dramatic work. The watch and the theatre represent two competing hermeneutic theories, although both are mechanical images for the representation of knowledge: the watch refers to the existence of a method of rendering data in which they are not influenced by the form of representation – it makes no difference whether it is a small or big, decorated or plain watch. But the metaphor of the theatre highlights the problems with the medium of representation. The divergences between the performative and literal levels of the drama open a dimension for a certain play on meaning. The creative potential depends on the unpredictable features of every particular performance which relativise the claims of the scripted play. Or rather, the script of a good dramatist takes account of the performative dimension and provides a space in which the potential of the text is left to develop its own dynamics. It is, therefore, almost as important *how* something is represented as *what* is represented.

The conflicting views implicit in the two images of the watch and the theatre recall the tension between Behn's affiliation with conservative royalist politics and the social utopias presented in her dramatic work. In whatever shape it demonstrates itself, I claim that it is more important to recognise what creates the conflicts than to attempt to align Behn unambiguously either with the glorious radicals or the nasty conservatives. Reviewing the background to Behn's perspective on the discussion of objectivity and analysing her role as a seventeenth-century woman involved in abstract philosophical problems will, therefore, shed new light on the understanding of her plays.

Dramatic Expressions of Otherness

Behn's work displays a serious treatment of scientific matters even if it is embedded in the genre of popularised scientific questions. It is indeed the popularisation that permits the application of the new scientific theories, and their methodology of logical argument, to an analysis of society. The focal point of Behn's work is human identity in a decentred world: this is an issue that is shown to be as important in the cosmic system as the drawing-room cosmos of her contemporary society.

The literary genres which put disorientation at their centre are the masquerade, carnival and *comedia dell'arte*, and Behn uses them very effectively in *The Emperor of the Moon*. This play casts the theme of works, such as Ben Jonson's masque "News from the New World Discovered in the Moon," which she may have known, or of Jonson's play *The Alchemist*, which she certainly knew, into the guise of Italian carnivalesque comedy. While in Jonson's play, Subtle and his servant Face practice deceit for financial gain, Behn's play uses deception to get the deluded father and guardian of two bright young women to assent to their socially advantageous marriage partners. In order to even gain the hearing of the thoroughly besotted dabbler in science, whose highest aspiration is to enter into communication with the inhabitants of the moon, the plotting young lovers present themselves as royalty descended from the moon.

In this play, it is the father who believes in the existence of other worlds, and his credulity becomes the object of comedy. Jane Spencer points out that "[t]he play teems with visual tricks, from the nymph placed in the glass of the telescope, and the cart that turns into a calash, to the tapestry made of real people, each effect contributing to the point that all the doctor's 'scopes' don't allow him to see what is going on around him" (Spencer's introduction to *The Rover* xix). It is not so much his gullibility for which he is ridiculed but, above all, his incapacity to recognise other worlds when he sees them in the shape of pretence and illusion. His blindness to deception, which is the dominant metaphor of the comedy, is a blatant lack of commonsense and a deplorable incapacity to judge human character.⁷

The intrusion of carnival into the doctor's star-gazing existence presents itself as a deceptive imitation of his expectation of what the world on the moon looks like. His studies cover astronomy, biology, medicine, alchemy and spiritualism and, like Shadwell's *Virtuoso*, he is ridiculed for being unable to understand human nature because his mind is too preoccupied with scientific questions. His enquiries boil down to a projection of his day-dreams. The make-believe world, as he encounters it in his own house, therefore, closely resembles Fontenelle's description of the moon as a refuge for all things lost, improbable, deceitful and unrealistic (Behn, "A Discovery" 119).

The folkloristic view of the lunar world serves as a psychological account of otherness. Behn insists that the loony lunar world exists here and now. It

⁷ The argument that the scientists, the "virtuosi," are simply engaging in a misguided task which weakens their commonsensical understanding is expressed with full vigour in Samuel Butler's piece "The Elephant in the Moon."

is not the opposite of sober academic study but is in many ways its precondition and consequence. Drawing the connection between the moon and madness makes use of a pun that investigates the structures of illusion. What the father wants, of course, is the power that belongs to the lunar royalty, and his attraction to the moon is strongly motivated by his wish to elevate himself over his fellow mortals. Since this could only be achieved by means of deception, the joke of the play is that, when he is deceived, he gets exactly what he wants. But of course he wanted to be an active subject in the lunar realm of deception and not its helpless victim.

In *The Emperor of the Moon*, the "moon world" is staged both to disillusion the father about his escapist dreams and also to offer a practical solution for the young women to escape from his authority. The farcical presentation of the lunar monarch questions the stability of the very concepts of authority. As always in a farce, comic subversion undermines the appeal to conventional standards and beliefs. It is this ironic dimension which creates the space for the expression of unorthodox views. William Empson analyses the psychological complexity of the metaphor of the alternative world in detail, and he claims that it serves as an emancipatory image which early modern fiction readily borrows from science when the static and single-minded Ptolemaic model is pushed out by the Copernican. In the Copernican theory, self-consciousness about one's own position in the universe demands that the self and its relation to the rest of the universe be redefined. Empson argues that the imaginary space of the alternative world functions as a psychological liberation, because "on the new planet, having got there by recognising a mystery, you can thumb your nose at the old earth and express your personality or your unconscious desires" (76-77). The term "mystery" implies an impossibility as much as it asserts the unrealistic and impossible nature of this other place. The alternative world, hence, functions as a metaphor for an identity that is independent from the constrictive definitions of contemporary authority. In the imagination of the contemporary intellectuals, scientific speculations were not primarily directed at finding possibilities of mapping, or even travelling to, this alternative site. Speculations concerning the precise shape and structure of the universe primarily harboured the possibility of imagining forms of existence that were different from the conventional ones.

Figures of Unreason

In *The Emperor of the Moon*, irrationality and excess, in terms of plot and presentation, figure as the prime instances of otherness. In contrast to this, *The Lucky Chance* is structured by a more conventional "problem" of comedy: an old husband who tricked his young bride to marry him is forced to dissolve the not yet consummated marriage and to let her return to her original youthful lover. Against this background, the topic of sexual attraction and general compatibility and equality between the married partners is discussed. This unequal couple is mirrored by another similarly unequal couple which the drama attacks for its injustice towards the young lovers even more strongly when the old husband is shown to gamble over, and lose, his "matrimonial rights" to his wife's old lover. By explicitly treating his wife's sexuality as an object for financial negotiations, the miserly old husband exposes the fact that women figure as property. Although the young wife had also been plotting to liaise with her original lover, "the lucky chance," for her, is a no-win game because both men treat her as chattel and neither respect her right to an independent decision.

The Lucky Chance discusses the reality of desire in explicit terms. This was by no means unusual for Restoration plays; the only exceptional feature of the play is that it claims that female desire is as natural and as important as male desire. Behn remarks in the preface to the printed edition of the play that the chief reason for the play being accused of bawdiness was that it was written by a woman: "a devil on't, the woman damns the poet" (190). Moreover, as Jane Spencer argues, "it was the presentation, rather than the subject matter, that is at issue." Spencer shows that for female eighteenth-century playwrights Behn's work was an inspiration, but being compared to her was tantamount to being accused of prostitution (Spencer, "Adapting Aphra Behn" 226). Because the manner in which the artists presented themselves as public figures was so closely connected to their artistic production, the play's unembarrassed engagement with eroticism deals with both the meaning of sexuality and the status of women within society.

Behn's plays question stereotypes about gender: they particularly attack the stereotype of the passive woman and the active man. Her plays represent powerful female characters, which is why Edward Burns argues:

The male character is object, the female subject; in other words, it is she who presents, defines and evaluates him. The contrast to other Restoration drama is obvious. Behn tends to replace the male group, as the starting point and exposi-

tory mechanism of the play, with a group of women who perform the same function. Characters who "see" and "present" are hinges of the play's relationship to its audience. To systematically use female characters in this way is to feminize quite radically the conventional language of drama. (128)

The systematic subversion of activity and passivity is one of the play's most striking effects, and Jacqueline Pearson, therefore, claims that "[t]he happy endings of the play are achieved not only by the cleverness of the young men but by the willingness of the women to help each other" (147).

The Lucky Chance is a play which presents some key characters in the guise of the devil, and its farcical passages parody the Faust *topos*. It is primarily the women who engage in ploys with the devil: Bredwell, the apprentice in the Fulbank household, dresses up as the devil who, as messenger, carries the money from Lady Fulbank to pay Gayman's debts, and he guides Gayman to her apartment on her directions. He appears to be the agent of the plot, but it is Lady Fulbank who tells him to don "some disguise" (1.2.105), and when fearing that Gayman should be discovered in Lady Fulbank's house at night he says, "What, is my lady's innocent intrigue found out?" (3.5.5). The play does not reveal whether Lady Fulbank herself invented the particular disguise, but the illusionary quality of the "devilish scenes" certainly provides a counterpart to the miserly materialistic haggling over her body.

Although the play's ghosts and devils appear as ludicrous pranksters who can only frighten the ridiculous Sir Feeble and Sir Cautious, they have the potential to make the play into a dark comedy. To be frightened by a figure in a white sheet shows the men to be whimsical cowards, and Lady Fulbank has a right to mock them when she says, "I'm ashamed to see wise men so weak: the phantoms of the night, or your own shadows, the whimsies of the brain for want of rest . . . played you this trick to fright you both to bed" (3.5. 170-172). At the same time, the nightly intrusion of the young men is threatening in a different respect, if the ghosts are understood as visualisations of the young women's desires. Part of what frightens Sir Feeble is realising that he may have had the power to trick his Leticia into marriage but could not even keep Belmour away from her if he was dead.

Black humour may replace any concrete possibility of transforming social utopia into practice, but the masquerading passages make strong statements nevertheless. It has to be noted that the devil is a kind of lord of misrule and that the uncanny carnivalesque power is used to expose social ills. What is more, the devil is strongly feminised, which is illustrated by Gayman talking about "the amorous devil, the old Proserpine" (4.1.75). Bredwell as

devil, moreover, acts in the service of a woman who wants to be involved in determining the plot.

According to orthodox views, the devil figures as an intrusion of an evil world into everyday reality. Behn's devils, however, are primarily plotters whose goal it is to expose the evil aspects of conventional order. Their metaphorical dimension is ambivalent, and they are treacherously suspended between slightly mischievous jesters and dark powers which point at the sinister foundations of social order. Because of their carnivalesque nature, neither their ontological status nor the motivation for their actions can clearly be grasped. What is more, their ambiguous quality is a means of questioning assumptions about the real world. Their energy is based upon a representation of women who are determined to pursue their own interest, which is why Markley says: "Behn's comedies savage the Puritan ideology of self-denial that both historically and conceptually underlies the construction of the gendered self" ("Behn's Tory Comedies" 116). He claims that, for Behn, desire is defined in "non-Oedipal terms: not as lack, not as symbolic castration, but as the striving of the individual against the constraints of internalized morality and feminized virtue" (116).

The play's devils are unpredictable forces whose behaviour cannot be scripted either in psychological or dramatic terms. They are figures which work extremely well on the Restoration stage, where much of the effect of a play depended on improvisation. When Behn is presenting the dark alternative view of her society, she keeps the uncanny powers within the precincts of comedy. At the end of the play the two old men conclude that "the young knaves will be too hard for us" (5.7.146), and they yield to the claims of the young men. The solution for one of the young women is acceptable, but Lady Fulbank, the object of the bet, ends up in the uncomfortable position of having to live chastely while her husband is alive and then being passed on to her original lover. Part of the play's subversive potential statement, however, depends on the impossibility of such an ending. All sense of dramatic justice is blighted, and yet this is a comedy in which all the characters troop off – seemingly – reconciled to their share of happiness.

How Radical is Aphra Behn?

It is the awareness of the rhetorical dimension of identity which permits Behn to imagine an identity that forms a world of its own. This recalls Judith Butler's famous claim that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; . . . identity is performatively constituted by the very "ex-

pressions" that are said to be its results" (25). The mode of presentation is far more important than the object of the presentation. With reference to Behn's earlier and most enduringly successful play, *The Rover*, Jane Spencer claims that its "boldness is not simply a matter of what is said but who says it; Behn is giving lines designed for rakish men and serving-women to her high-born heroine" ("*The Rover* and the Eighteenth Century" 94). The representation of a female character who expresses her ego across class and gender boundaries radically questions existing assumptions about women's role in society.

Viewing identity as an effect of representation is doubly relevant for the understanding of Behn's work because she keeps returning to the idea of representation as illusion. Her use of irony involves juggling with multiple possibilities of interpreting what is happening. That her plays frequently focus on illusion and analyse its structures in detail does not mean that there is nothing beneath appearances. Illusion itself is too much of a concrete substance for such a conclusion, and it is the structures of illusion, in the sense of "relative point of view," which become the object of her enquiry.

Behn's plays demonstrate a complex pattern of irony: a second level of irony, which largely depends on a particular perspective, underpins the plays' overt comic structure. Her seeming conservatism is frequently undercut by subtle clues about the interpretation of her characters. Concerning the figure of the Rover and his objectionable rakish-royalist behaviour, Spencer claims that this play "gently mocks its rake-hero in several places; and mockery of heroes can be seen as a distinctive feature of the 'covert' feminism of early women playwrights" ("*The Rover* and the Eighteenth Century" 101). Spencer continues to describe the figure of the Rover as "a woman's affectionate but telling undercutting of male pretensions," and she claims that "[t]he challenge of a woman entering the male preserve of sex-comedy was evident in *The Rover* in Behn's mocking treatment of male characters and her unusually strong treatment of female ones" (101-102; also Pearson 254). In other words, her plays possess ambivalent messages. Although they harbour a remarkable feminist potential, which is above all contained in the carnivalesque passages, they do not go as far as we might want them to go. Behn's plays, therefore, demand to be read as descriptions of problems which Markley sums up as follows: "[they] bring us face to face with our complicity in the economies of sociosexual repression that she satirizes and seeks to transcend" ("Behn's Tory Comedies" 137).

Behn was suspended between different competing political and religious camps, but none of them had an openly feminist agenda which supported her

uncompromising claims about “women’s rights to sexual freedom equal to that of men” (Pearson 143). She subscribed to what Markley calls “an idealized vision of monarchical and paternalistic order that paradoxically frees women, in particular, from the demands of the patrilineal ideology on which it ultimately depends” (“Behn’s Tory Comedies” 115). Even though she never abandoned her royalist loyalties, she used that social context as a backdrop to her radical claims for female rights and sexual difference. Her chief goal of attack was the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard, and she demanded that the spurious logic of its reasoning was recognised.

Through writing plays, rather than explicit critiques of social practices, Behn highlights the discrepancy between being and appearance. In her plays, she demonstrates that different positions vis-à-vis power make it impossible for there to be a generally accepted consensus about how life should be organised. Such a consensus is frequently created by force and is no more than make-believe. When the carnivalesque elements dissect appearances, they serve to analyse the machinery of power. Pearson observes that “disguise, misunderstandings and masquerades are [Behn’s] stock in trade. [The plays] repeat words like ‘feign,’ ‘dissemble,’ ‘counterfeit’ and ‘act’ to depict a world where nothing is what it seems” (145). The scrutiny of appearances, therefore, not only exposes the falseness of so many commonly accepted assumptions, but also points in the direction of accepting a plurality of views. Just as the different climates on the countless planets and moons in Fontenelle’s cosmos produce different living conditions for their respective inhabitants, different people have different needs and should have the freedom to fulfil them.⁸ When we consider this potential, we must be careful not to view the situation through the ahistorical glasses of imagining Behn to have anticipated the twentieth century’s most liberated and advanced attitudes. Relativism is present in her texts, but it is a threat as much as a playground for a utopian imagination. In her analysis of appearances she expresses the view that conventions are socially constructed. But she also holds on to the view that there are essences under the appearances, and it is her sometimes rather conservative understanding of those essences which adds a disagreeable touch to her otherwise challenging dramatic portrayals of society.

Understanding nature, specifically with reference to human nature and social conventions, pivots on the metaphorical tension between the image of

⁸ Cf. Behn, “A Discovery of New Worlds,” particularly “The Fourth Night”; e.g. the discussion of the living conditions of the inhabitants on the ring of Saturn and the comparison to Greenland, 151.

the watch and that of the theatre. They sum up the intrinsic conflict in Behn's plays between adherence to a conventional understanding of human character and the bold exposure of social conventions as hypocrisy and pretence. That her pattern of irony is used to depict psychologically complex characters is a result of the theatrical metaphor being used to test the solidity of social mechanisms. When we deal with her work, we should hence be more than aware that the understanding of irony depends on the relative historical and gender perspective of the viewer. In any case, the performative dimension of irony makes it impossible to treat it like a watch that tells the same time of day to everybody who looks at it. This also means that irony cannot be used as a basis for a concrete political agenda: the ironies and illusions belonging to theatre can serve to question and subvert existing conventions, but they cannot introduce a concretely realisable alternative society. The most radical claims are part of a half devilish, half angelic utopia – and that stands in a marked contrast to a frequently bleak daylight reality which cannot easily be changed for the better.

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