

Aphra Behn's Depiction of Gender Roles in Restoration Literature
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Background:

Since I was a child, my favorite literary genre has always been historical fiction, and my interest within this genre has always been in England. I have read extensively about different dynasties and historical events, and one period that has always stood out to me was the Restoration, when Charles II regained the English throne from the Protectorate of England, established by Oliver Cromwell. During his time in power, Cromwell forbade everything that provided entertainment; there were no theaters, dancing, or music under his dour rule. Once Charles II was offered the crown following the death of Oliver and the failure of his son Richard, he was determined to lead an extremely merry, frivolous, and scandalous court. From this time period emerges "restoration literature," most of which is bawdy and daring and altogether entertaining. However, I had only heard about this literature through the historical fiction novels I had read, so when I got the chance to read some of it firsthand I jumped at the chance.

During the fall of 2010, I took Professor Stephan Flores' course ENGL 456: Restoration Literature. This class explored a wide range of literature, from plays to novels to short narratives. Though each piece we read was different from the rest, with different plots, settings (England, France, Italy), and themes, one overriding feature of each was the difference between the gender roles of males and females. We read both female and male authors, and both consistently, if indirectly, emphasized the differences in gender roles.

For English majors, the ability to analyze literature is the skill we spend most of our time cultivating. Literary analysis can tell us volumes about a particular piece; by looking at how the author writes, we can tell a lot about the story itself, but also the author, the time period in which the piece is being written, and any social issues of said time. For me, the most interesting author of this time period is Aphra Behn, perhaps the first influential female restoration author.

Current Project:

During 456, in addition to reading Restoration literature, we also read extensive criticisms/essays on the pieces we discussed in class. These essays made it clear that there is a substantial body of work out there regarding gender roles in Restoration literature. To avoid the broad, clichéd topic, I thought it would be interesting to look specifically at Behn and her writing, which encompasses prose, comedic dramas, and poetry. Gender roles are a major focus of her writing, so I would like to explore how she addresses the gender issues of the time period. Was she influenced by her own upbringing, her own place in society? What was she trying to say; what did she want women's roles to be? How does the way Behn portrays the 1660's relate to gender roles today? Do her opinions/positions differ in her various works? Does her prose say the same thing as her plays?

While Behn will be my focus, I will also draw upon the works of other authors of the time period to compare and contrast to Behn's work. For example, did other female writers (i.e. Eliza Haywood) portray gender roles the same that Behn did? What are the similarities/differences between gender roles as portrayed by female and male authors?

Some of the main questions I will address include:

To what extent can female writers

 Create/recreate identities?

 Take control of their lives?

 Question value systems? Do they agree/go along with the patriarchal system in place?

Plan for the next two months:

The first thing I need to do is revisit the literature I have already read, and read these pieces again with this new goal in mind; I will have done this by October 1st. By this date, I will also have read some of Behn's other work, including (but not limited to) *The Fair Jilt*; *The Rover*, Part II; and various poetry. Other possible pieces to read are *Oroonoko* and *The History of the Nun*.

Once I have read the actual literature, I will begin to read more about Behn herself, as well as secondary sources regarding her work, in the form of both essays and books. Also important to this research will be historical information regarding the time period; I will need to find out how women were actually treated, what roles they actually played in society. I hope to be finished with this part of the work by October 17th, when I will begin writing.

I will have a rough draft of my paper (hopefully about 25 pages) by October 24th, when I will begin working on my presentation. Throughout the week of the 24th to the 30th, I will continue to work on my paper.

Ideas about how to present this work:

Since this project is an analysis of literature, I feel like the 20 page paper that is the norm for this project will work perfectly. I have a few short papers already written from ENGL 456 that may be helpful to revisit, rework, and expand to combine with the new work I will be developing throughout the semester.

My presentation will likely include a brief biography of Behn's life as well as a summary of what I learn from this topic, which will include examples from the literature. These can be presented by either reading excerpts or finding clips of plays. This is an idea I will have to develop as I go along, once I get a better idea of what I am going to find out/how my final paper will look.

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