

MEMOIR OF MRS. BEHN

by Montague Summers

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THE personal history of Aphra Behn, the first Englishwoman to earn her livelihood by authorship, is unusually interesting but very difficult to unravel and relate. In dealing with her biography writers at different periods have rushed headlong to extremes, and we now find that the pendulum has swung to its fullest stretch. On the one hand, we have prefixed to a collection of the Histories and Novels, published in 1696, 'The Life of Mrs. Behn written by one of the Fair Sex', a frequently reprinted (and even expanded) compilation crowded with romantic incidents that savour all too strongly of the Italian novella, with sentimental epistolography and details which can but be accepted cautiously and in part. On the other there have recently appeared two revolutionary essays by Dr. Ernest Bernbaum of Harvard, 'Mrs. Behn's Oroonoko', first printed in Kittredge Anniversary Papers, 1913; and- what is even more particularly pertinent- 'Mrs. Behn's Biography a Fiction,' Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, xxviii, 3: both afterwards issued as separate pamphlets, 1913. In these, the keen critical sense of the writer has apparently been so jarred by the patent incongruities, the baseless fiction, nay, the very fantasies (such as the fairy pavilion seen floating upon the Channel), which, imaginative and invented flotsam that they are, accumulated and were heaped about the memory of Aphra Behn, that he is apt to regard almost every record outside those of her residence at Antwerp* with a suspicion which is in many cases surely unwarranted and undue. Having energetically cleared away the more peccant rubbish, Dr. Bernbaum became, it appears to us, a little too drastic, and had he then discriminated rather than swept clean, we were better able wholly to follow the conclusions at which he arrives. He even says that after '1671'*(2) when 'she began to write for the stage... such meagre contemporary notices as we find of her are critical rather than biographical'. This is a very partial truth; from extant letters,*(3) to which Dr. Bernbaum does not refer, we can gather much of Mrs. Behn's literary life and circumstances. She was a figure of some note, and even if we had no other evidence it seems impossible that her contemporaries should have glibly accepted the fiction of a voyage to Surinam and a Dutch husband named Behn who had never existed.

* Kalendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1666-7.- ed. Mrs. M. A. E. Green (1864).

*(2) This is inaccurate. Mrs. Behn's first play, The Forc'd Marriage, was produced in December, 1670.

*(3) e.g. to Waller's daughter-in-law; to Tonson. cf. also the Warrant of 12 August, 1682; the Pindaric to Burnet, &c.

Ayfara, or Aphara* (Aphra), Amis or Amies, the daughter of John

and Amy Amis or Amies, was baptized together with her brother Peter in the Parish Church of SS. Gregory and Martin, Wye, 10 July, 1640 presumably by Ambrose Richmore, curate of Wye at that date.*⁽²⁾ Up to this time Aphra's maiden name has been stated to be Johnson, and she is asserted to have been the daughter of a barber, John Johnson. That the name was not Johnson (an ancient error) is certain from the baptismal register, wherein, moreover, the 'Quality, Trade, or Profession' is left blank; that her father was a barber rests upon no other foundation than a MS. note of Lady Winchilsea.*⁽³⁾ Mr. Gosse, in a most valuable article (*Athenaeum*, 6 September, 1884), was the first to correct the statement repeatedly made that Mrs. Behn came from 'the City of Canterbury in Kent'. He tells how he acquired a folio volume containing the MS. poems of Anne, Countess of Winchilsea,*⁽⁴⁾ 'copied about 1695 under her eye and with innumerable notes and corrections in her autograph'. In a certain poem entitled *The Circuit of Apollo**⁽⁵⁾ the following lines occur:-

And standing where sadly he now might descry
From the banks of the Stowre the desolate Wye,
He lamented for Behn, o'er that place of her birth,
And said amongst Women there was not on the earth,
Her superior in fancy, in language, or witt,
Yet own'd that a little too loosely she writt.

To these is appended this note: 'Mrs. Behn was Daughter to a Barber, who liv'd formerly in Wye, a little Market Town (now much decay'd) in Kent. Though the account of her life before her Works pretends otherwise; some Persons now alive Do testify upon their Knowledge that to be her Original.' It is a pity that whilst the one error concerning Aphra's birthplace is thus remedied, the mistake as to the nature of her father's calling should have been initiated.

* Aphra now appears on Mrs. Behn's gravestone, and is the accepted form. This is, however, in all probability the third inscription. The *Antiquities of Westminster* (1711), quoting the inscription, gives Aphara. Sometime in the eighteenth century a certain Thomas Waine restored the inscription and added to the two lines two more:-

Great Poetess, O thy stupendous lays
The world admires and the Muses praise.

The name was then Aphara. The *Biog. Brit.*, whilst insisting on Aphara as correct and citing the stone as evidence, none the less prints Apharra. Her works usually have Mrs. A. Behn. One Quarto misprints 'Mrs. Anne Behn'. There are, of course, many variants of the name. Afara, and Afra are common. Oldys in his MS. notes on Langbaine writes Aphra or Aphora, whilst the *Muses Mercury*, September, 1707, has a special note upon a poem by Mrs. Behn to say 'this Poetess' true Name was Apharra.' Even Aphaw (Behen, in the 1682 warrant,) and Fyhare (in a petition) occur.

*⁽²⁾ He died in 1642.

*⁽³⁾ The Vicar of Wye, the Rev. Edgar Lambert, in answer to my inquiries courteously writes: 'In company with Mr. C. S. Orwin, whose book, *The History of Wye Church and College*, has just been

published, I have closely examined the register and find no mention of "Johnson", nor of the fact that Aphara Amis' father was a "barber".'

*(4) Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1660-1720), sometime Maid of Honour to Queen Mary of Modena. She had true lyric genius. For a generous appreciation see Gosse, *Gossip in a Library* (1891).

*(5) Then unprinted but now included in the very voluminous edition of *Lady Winchilsea's Poems*. ed. M. Reynolds, Chicago, 1903.

Aphra Amis, then, was born early in July, 1640, at Wye, Kent. When she was of a tender age the Amis family left England for Surinam; her father, who seems to have been a relative of Francis, Lord Willoughby of Parham, sometime administrator of several British colonies in the West Indies, having been promised a post of some importance in these dependencies. John Amis died on the voyage out, but his widow and children necessarily continued their journey, and upon their arrival were accommodated at St. John's Hill, one of the best houses in the district. Her life and adventures in Surinam Aphra has herself realistically told in that wonderfully vivid narrative, *Oroonoko*.* The writer's bent had already shown itself. She kept a journal as many girls will, she steeped herself in the interminable romances fashionable at that time, in the voluminous *Pharamond*, *Cleopatre*, *Cassandra*, *Ibrahim*, and, above all, *Le Grand Cyrus*, so loved and retailed to the annoyance of her worthy husband by Mrs. Pepys; with a piece of which Dorothy Osborne was 'hugely pleased'.

* In 'Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko*' Dr. Bernbaum elaborately endeavours to show that this story is pure fiction. His arguments, in many cases advanced with no little subtlety and precision, do not appear (to me at least) to be convincing. We have much to weigh in the contrary balance: Mrs. Behn's manifest first-hand knowledge of, and extraordinary interest in, colonial life; her reiterated asseverations that every experience detailed in this famous novel is substantially true; the assent of all her contemporaries. It must further be remembered that Aphra was writing in 1688, of a girlhood coloured by and seen through the enchanted mists of a quarter of a century. That there are light discrepancies is patent; the exaggerations, however, are not merely pardonable but perfectly natural. One of Dr. Bernbaum's most crushing arguments, when sifted, seems to resolve itself into the fact that whilst writing *Oroonoko* Mrs. Behn evidently had George Warren's little book, *An Impartial Description of Surinam* (London, 1667), at hand. Could anything be more reasonable than to suppose she would be intimately acquainted with a volume descriptive of her girlhood's home? Again, Dr. Bernbaum bases another line of argument on the assumption that Mrs. Behn's father was a barber. Hence the appointment of such a man to an official position in Surinam was impossible, and, 'if Mrs. Behn's father was not sent to Surinam, the only reason she gives for being there disappears'. We know from recent investigation that John Amis did not follow a barber's trade, but was probably of good old stock. Accordingly, the conclusions drawn by Dr. Bernbaum from this point cannot now be for a moment maintained.

It was perhaps from the reading of La Calprenede and Mlle de Scuderi Aphra gained that intimate knowledge of French which served her well and amply in after years during her literary life; at any rate she seems early to have realized her dramatic genius and to have begun a play drawn from one of the most interesting episodes in Cleopatre, the love story of the Scythian King Alcamene, scenes which when they had 'measured three thousand leagues of spacious ocean', were, nearly a quarter of a century later, to be taken out of her desk and worked up into a baroque and fanciful yet strangely pleasing tragi-comedy, the Young King

In Surinam she witnessed the fortunes and fate of the Royal Slave, Oroonoko, of whom she writes (with all due allowance for pardonable exaggeration and purely literary touches), so naturally and feelingly, that 'one of the Fair Sex' with some acerbity makes it her rather unnecessary business to clear Aphra from any suspicion of a liaison. It was Surinam which supplied the cognate material for the vivid comedy, the broad humour and early colonial life, photographic in its realism, of *The Widow Ranter*; or, *The History of Bacon in Virginia*. Mistakes there may be, errors and forgetfulness, but there are a thousand touches which only long residence and keen observation could have so deftly characterized.

We now approach a brief yet important period in Mrs. Behn's life, which unless we are content to follow (with an acknowledged diffidence and due reservations) the old Memoir and scattered tradition, we find ourselves with no sure means whatsoever of detailing. It seems probable, however, that about the close of 1663, owing no doubt to the Restoration and the subsequent changes in affairs, the Amis family returned to England, settling in London, where Aphra, meeting a merchant of Dutch extraction named Behn, so fascinated him by her wit and comeliness that he offered her his hand and fortune. During her married life she is said to have been in affluence, and even to have appeared at the gay licentious Court, attracting the notice of and amusing the King himself by her anecdotes and cleverness of repartee; but when her husband died, not improbably of the plague in the year of mortality, 1665, she found herself helpless, without friends or funds. In her distress it was to the Court she applied for assistance; and owing to her cosmopolitan experience and still more to the fact that her name was Dutch, and that she had been by her husband brought into close contact with the Dutch, she was selected as a meet political agent to visit Holland and there be employed in various secret and semi-official capacities. The circumstance that her position and work could never be openly recognized nor acknowledged by the English government was shortly to involve her in manifold difficulties, pecuniary and otherwise, which eventually led to her perforce abandoning so unstable and unsatisfactory a commission.

In the old *History of the Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn* (1696; and with additions 1698, &c.), ushered into the world by Charles Gildon, a romance full as amorous and sensational as any novel of the day, has been woven about her sojourn at Antwerp. A 'Spark whom we must call by

the name of Vander Albert of Utrecht' is given to Aphra as a fervent lover, and from him she obtains political secrets to be used to the English advantage. He has a rival, an antique yclept Van Bruin, 'a Hogen Mogen... Nestorean' admirer, and the intrigue becomes fast and furious. On one occasion Albert, imagining he is possessing his mistress, is cheated with a certain Catalina; and again when he has bribed an ancient duenna to admit him to Aphra's bed, he is surprised there by a frolicsome gallant.* There are even included five letters from Mrs. Behn and a couple of ridiculous effusions purporting to be Van Bruin's. It would seem that all this pure fiction, the sweepings of Aphra's desk, was intended by her to have been worked up into a novel; both letters and narrative are too good to be the unaided composition of Gildon himself, but possibly Mrs. Behn in her after life may have elaborated and told him these erotic episodes to conceal the squalor and misery of the real facts of her early Dutch mission. It is proved indeed in aim and circumstance to have been far other.

* Both these incidents are the common property of Italian novelle and our own stage. Although not entirely impossible, they would appear highly suspicious in any connection.

Her chief business was to establish an intimacy with William Scott, son of Thomas Scott, the regicide who had been executed 17 October, 1660. This William, who had been made a fellow of All Souls by the Parliamentary Visitors of Oxford, and graduated B.C.L. 4 August, 1648, was quite ready to become a spy in the English service and to report on the doings of the English exiles who were not only holding treasonable correspondence with traitors at home and plotting against the King, but even joining with the Dutch foe to injure their native land. Scott was extremely anxious for his own pardon and, in addition, eager to earn any money he could.

Aphra then, taking with her some forty pounds in cash, all she had, set sail with Sir Anthony Desmarces* either at the latter end of July or early in August, 1666, and on 16 August she writes from Antwerp to say she has had an interview with William Scott (dubbed in her correspondence Celadon), even having gone so far as to take coach and ride a day's journey to see him secretly. Though at first diffident, he is very ready to undertake the service, only it will be necessary for her to enter Holland itself and reside on the spot, not in Flanders, as Colonel Bampfield, who was looked upon as head of the exiled English at the Hague, watched Scott with most jealous care and a growing suspicion. Aphra, whose letters give a vivid picture of the spy's life with its risks and impecuniosity, addresses herself to two correspondents, Tom Killigrew and James Halsall, cupbearer to the King.

* He was at Margate 25 July, and at Bruges 7 August.

On 27 August she was still at Antwerp, and William Scott wrote to her there but did not venture to say much lest the epistle might miscarry. He asks for a cypher, a useful and indeed necessary precaution in so difficult circumstances. It was about this time

that Mrs. Behn began to employ the name of Astrea, which, having its inception in a political code, was later to be generally used by her and recognized throughout the literary world. Writing to Halsall, she says that she has been unable to effect anything, but she urgently demands that money be sent, and confesses she has been obliged even to pawn her ring to pay messengers. On 31 August she writes to Killigrew declaring she can get no answer from Halsall, and explaining that she has twice had to disburse Scott's expenses, amounting in all to L20, out of her own pocket, whilst her personal debts total another L25 or L30, and living itself is ten guilders a day. If she is to continue her work satisfactorily, L80 at least will be needed to pay up all her creditors; moreover, as a preliminary and a token of good faith, Scott's official pardon must be forwarded without compromise or delay. Scott himself was, it seems, playing no easy game at this juncture, for a certain Carney, resident at Antwerp, 'an unsufferable, scandalous, lying, prating fellow', piqued at not being able to ferret out the intrigue, had gone so far as to molest poor Celadon and threaten him with death, noising up and down meanwhile the fact of his clandestine rendezvous with Aphra. No money, however, was forthcoming from England, and on 4 September Mrs. Behn writing again to Killigrew tells him plainly that she is reduced to great straits, and unless funds are immediately provided all her work will be nugatory and vain. The next letter, dated 14 September, gives Halsall various naval information. On 17 September she is obliged to importune Killigrew once more on the occasion of sending him a letter from Scott dealing with political matters. Halsall, she asserts, will not return any answer, and although she is only in private lodgings she is continually being thwarted and vilipended by Carney, 'whose tongue needs clipping'. Four days later she transmits a five page letter from Scott to Halsall. On 25 September she sends under cover yet another letter from Scott with the news of De Ruyter's illness. Silence was her only answer. Capable and indeed ardent agent as she was, there can be no excuse for her shameful, nay, criminal, neglect at the hands of the government she was serving so faithfully and well. Her information* seems to have been received with inattention and disregard; whether it was that culpable carelessness which wrecked so many a fair scheme in the second Charles' days, or whether secret enemies at home steadfastly impeded her efforts remains an open question. In any case on 3 November she sends a truly piteous letter to Lord Arlington, Secretary of State, and informs him she is suffering the extremest want and penury. All her goods are pawned, Scott is in prison for debt, and she herself seems on the point of going to the common gaol. The day after Christmas Aphra wrote to Lord Arlington for the last time. She asks for a round L100 as delays have naturally doubled her expenses and she has had to obtain credit. Now she is only anxious to return home, and she declares that if she did not so well know the justness of her cause and complaint, she would be stark wild with her hard treatment. Scott, she adds, will soon be free.*⁽²⁾ Even this final appeal obtained no

response, and at length- well nigh desperate- Mrs. Behn negotiated in England, from a certain Edward Butler, a private loan of some L150 which enabled her to settle her affairs and start for home in January, 1667.

* There do not appear to be any grounds for the oft-repeated assertion that Mrs. Behn communicated the intelligence when the Dutch were planning an attack (afterwards carried out) on the Thames and Medway squadrons, and that her warning was scoffed at.

*(2) Had he been imprisoned for political reasons it is impossible that there should have been so speedy a prospect of release.

But the chapter of her troubles was by no means ended. Debt weighed like a millstone round her neck. As the weary months went by and Aphra was begging in vain for her salary, long overdue, to be paid, Butler, a harsh, dour man with heart of stone, became impatient and resorted to drastic measures, eventually flinging her into a debtor's prison. There are extant three petitions, undated indeed, but which must be referred to the early autumn of 1668, from Mrs. Behn to Charles II. Sadly complaining of two years' bitter sufferings, she prays for an order to Mr. May* or Mr. Chiffinch*(2) to satisfy Butler, who declares he will stop at nothing if he is not paid within within a week. In a second document she sets out the reasons for her urgent claim of L150. Both Mr. Halsall and Mr. Killigrew know how justly it is her due, and she is hourly threatened with an execution. To this is annexed a letter from the poor distracted woman to Killigrew, which runs as follows:-

Sr.

if you could guess at the affliction of my soule you would I am sure Pity me 'tis to morrow that I must submitt my self to a Prison the time being expird & though I indeauerd all day yesterday to get a ffew days more I can not because they say they see I am dallied wth all & so they say I shall be for euer: so I can not reuoke my doome I haue cryd myself dead & could find in my hart to break through all & get to ye king & neuer rise till he weare pleasd to pay this; but I am sick & weake & vnfitt for yt; or a Prison; I shall go to morrow: But I will send my mother to ye king wth a Pitition for I see euery body are words: & I will not perish in a Prison from whence he swears I shall not stirr till ye uttmost farthing be payd: & oh god, who considers my misery & charge too, this is my reward for all my great promises, & my indeauers. Sr if I have not the money to night you must send me som thing to keepe me in Prison for I will not starue.

A. Behn.

Endorsed:

For Mr. Killigrew this.

* Baptist May, Esq. (1629-98), Keeper of the Privy Purse.

*(2) William Chiffinch, confidential attendant and pimp to Charles II.

There was no immediate response however, even to this pathetic and heart-broken appeal, and in yet a third petition she pleads that she may not be left to suffer, but that the L150 be sent forthwith to

Edward Butler, who on Lord Arlington's declaring that neither order nor money had been transmitted, threw her straightway into gaol.

It does not seem, however, that her imprisonment was long. Whether Killigrew, of whom later she spoke in warm and admiring terms, touched at last, bestirred himself on her behalf and rescued her from want and woe, whether Mrs. Amy Amis won a way to the King, whether help came by some other path, is all uncertain. In any case the debt was duly paid, and Aphra Behn not improbably received in addition some compensation for the hardships she had undergone.

'The rest of her Life was entirely dedicated to Pleasure and Poetry; the Success in which gain'd her the Acquaintance and Friendship of the most Sensible Men of the Age, and the Love of not a few of different Characters; for tho' a Sot have no Portion of Wit of his own, he yet, like old Age, covets what he cannot enjoy.'

More than dubious and idly romancing as the early Memoirs are, nevertheless this one sentence seems to sum up the situation thenceforth pretty aptly, if in altogether too general terms. Once extricated from these main difficulties Mrs. Behn no doubt took steps to insure that she should not, if it lay in her power, be so situated again. I would suggest, indeed, that about this period, 1669, she accepted the protection of some admirer. Who he may have been at first, how many more there were than one, how long the various amours endured, it is idle to speculate. She was for her period as thoroughly unconventional as many another woman of letters has been since in relation to later times and manners, as unhampered and free as her witty successor, Mrs. de la Riviere Manley, who lived for so long as Alderman Barber's kept mistress and died in his house. Mrs. Behn has given us poetic pseudonyms for many of her lovers, Lycidas, Lysander, Philaster, Amintas, Alexis, and the rest, but these extended over many years, and attempts at identification, however interesting, are fruitless.*

* Amintas repeatedly stands for John Hoyle. In *Our Cabal*, however (vide Vol VI, p. 160), Hoyle is dubbed Lycidas.

There has been no more popular mistake, nor yet one more productive, not merely of nonsense and bad criticism but even of actual malice and evil, than the easy error of confounding an author with the characters he creates. Mrs. Behn has not been spared. Some have superficially argued from the careless levity of her heroes: the Rover, Gayman, Wittmore, Wilding, Frederick; and again from the delightful insouciance of Lady Fancy, Queen Lucy, and the genteel coquette Mirtilla or the torrid passions of Angelica Bianca, Miranda and la Nuche; that Aphra herself was little better, in fact a great deal worse, than a common prostitute, and that her works are undiluted pornography.

In her own day, probably for reasons purely political, a noisy clique assailed her on the score of impropriety; a little later came Pope with his jaded couplet

The stage how loosely does Astrea tread
Who fairly puts all characters to bed;

and the attack was reinforced by an anecdote of Sir Walter Scott and some female relative who, after having insisted upon the great novelist lending her Mrs. Behn, found the Novels and Plays too loose for her perusal, albeit in the heyday of the lady's youth they had been popular enough. As one might expect, Miss Julia Kavanagh, in the mid-Victorian era* (English Women of Letters, 1863), is sad and sorry at having to mention Mrs. Behn- 'Even if her life remained pure,*⁽²⁾ it is amply evident her mind was "tainted to the very core. Grossness was congenial to her.... Mrs. Behn's indelicacy was useless and worse than useless, the superfluous addition of a corrupt mind and vitiated taste".' One can afford to smile at and ignore these modest outbursts, but it is strange to find so sound and sane a critic as Dr. Doran writing of Aphra Behn as follows: 'No one equalled this woman in downright nastiness save Ravenscroft and Wycherley.... With Dryden she vied in indecency and was not overcome.... She was a mere harlot, who danced through uncleanness and dared them [the male dramatists] to follow.' Again, we have that she was 'a wanton hussy'; her 'trolling muse' shamefacedly 'wallowed in the mire'; but finally the historian is bound to confess 'she was never dull'.

* The Retrospective Review, however (Vol. I, November, 1852), has an article, 'Mrs. Behn's Dramatic Writings,' which warmly praises her comedies. The writer very justly observes that 'they exhibit a brilliance of conversation in the dialogue, and a skill in arranging the plot and producing striking situations, in which she has few equals.' He frequently insists upon her 'great skill in conducting the intrigue of her pieces', and with no little acumen declares that 'her comedies may be cited as the most perfect models of the drama of the latter half of the seventeenth century.'

*⁽²⁾ Which it certainly was not secundum mid-Victorian morals.

The morality of her plays is au fond that of many a comedy of to-day: that the situations and phrasing in which she presents her amorous intrigues and merry cuckoldoms do not conform with modern exposition of these themes we also show yet would not name, is but our surface gloss of verbal reticence; we hint, point, and suggest, where she spoke out broad words, frank and free; the motif is one and the same. If we judge Mrs. Behn's dramatic output in the only fair way by comparing it legitimately with the theatre of her age, we simply shall not find that superfluity of naughtiness the critics lead us to expect and deplore. There are not infrequent scenes of Dryden, of Wycherley, of Vanbrugh, Southerne, Otway, Ravenscroft, Shadwell, D'Urfey, Crowne, full as daring as anything Aphra wrote; indeed, in some instances, far more wanton. Particularizing, it has been objected that although in most Restoration comedies the hero, however vicious (even such a mad scrapegrace as Dryden's Woodall), is decently noosed up in wedlock when the curtain is about to fall, Mrs. Behn's Willmore (Rover II), Gayman (The Lucky Chance), Wittmore (Sir Patient Fancy) end up without a thought of, save it be jest at, the wedding ring. But even this freedom can be amply paralleled. In the

Duke of Buckingham's clever alteration of *The Chances* (1682), we have Don John pairing off with the second Constantia without a hint of matrimony; we have the intrigue of Bellmour and Laetitia in Congreve's *The Old Bachelor* (1693), the amours of Horner in *The Country Wife* (1675), of Florio and Artall in Crowne's *City Politics* (1683), and many another beside. As for the cavilling crew who carped at her during her life Mrs. Behn has answered them and she was thoroughly competent so to do. Indeed, as she somewhat tartly remarked to Otway on the occasion of certain prudish dames pleasing to take offence at *The Soldier's Fortune*, she wondered at the impudence of any of her sex that would pretend to understand the thing called bawdy. A clique were shocked at her; it was not her salaciousness they objected to but her success.

In December, 1670, Mrs. Behn's first play,* *The Forc'd Marriage; or, the Jealous Bridegroom*, was produced at the Duke's Theatre, Lincoln's Inn Field's, with a strong cast. It is a good tragi-comedy of the bastard Flercherian Davenant type, but she had not hit upon her happiest vein of comedy, which, however, she approached in a much better piece, *The Amorous Prince*, played in the autumn of 1671 by the same company. Both these had excellent runs for their day, and she obtained a firm footing in the theatrical world. In 1673*(2) *The Dutch Lover**(3) was ready, a comedy which has earned praise for its skilful technique. She here began to draw on her own experiences for material, and Haunce van Ezel owes not a little to her intimate knowledge of the Hollanders.

* Mr. Gosse in the *Dictionary of National Biography* basing upon the preface to *The Young King*, says that after knocking in vain for some time at the doors of the theatres with this tragi-comedy that could find neither manager nor publisher, she put it away and wrote *The Forc'd Marriage*, which proved more successful. Dr. Baker follows this, but I confess I cannot see due grounds for any such hypothesis.

*(2) The Duke's Company opened at their new theatre, Dorset Garden, 9 November, 1671.

*(3) 4to, 1673. Mrs. Behn's accurate knowledge of the theatre and technicalities theatrical as shown in the preface to this early play is certainly remarkable. It is perhaps worth noting that her allusion to the popularity of *I Henry IV* was not included in *Shakspeare Allusion-book* (ed. Furnivall and Munroe, 1909), where it should have found a place.

These three plays brought her money, friends, and reputation. She was already beginning to be a considerable figure in literary circles, and the first writers of the day were glad of the acquaintance of a woman who was both a wit and a writer. There is still retailed a vague, persistent, and entirely baseless tradition that Aphra Behn was assisted in writing her plays by Edward Ravenscroft,* the well known dramatist. Mrs. Behn often alludes in her prefaces to the prejudice a carping clique entertained against her and the strenuous efforts that were made to damn her comedies merely because they were 'writ by a woman'. Accordingly, when her plays succeeded, this same party,

unable to deny such approved and patent merit, found their excuse in spreading a report that she was not inconsiderably aided in her scenes by another hand. Edward Ravenscroft's name stands to the epilogue of Sir Timothy Tawdrey, and he was undoubtedly well acquainted with Mrs. Behn. Tom Brown (I suggest) hints at a known intrigue,*⁽²⁾ but, even if my surmise be correct, there is nothing in this to warrant the oft repeated statement that many of her scenes are actually due to his pen. On the other hand, amongst Aphra's intimates was a certain John Hoyle, a lawyer, well known about the town as a wit. John Hoyle was the son of Thomas Hoyle, Alderman and Lord Mayor of, and M.P. for York, who hanged himself*⁽³⁾ at the same hour as Charles I was beheaded. In the Gray's Inn Admission Register we have: '1659/60 Feb. 27. John Hoyle son and heir of Thomas H. late of the city of York, Esq. deceased.' Some eighteen years after he was admitted to the Inner Temple: '1678/9 Jan. 26. Order that John Hoyle formerly of Gray's Inn be admitted to this society ad eundem statum. (Inner Temple Records, iii, 131.) There are allusions not a few to him in Mrs. Behn's poems; he is the Mr. J.H. of Our Cabal; and in 'A Letter to Mr. Creech at Oxford, Written in the last great Frost,' which finds a place in the Miscellany of 1685, the following lines occur:-

To Honest H-le I shou'd have shown ye,
A Wit that wou'd be proud t' have known ye;
A Wit uncommon, and Facetious,
A great admirer of Lucretius.

There can be no doubt he was on terms of the closest familiarity*⁽⁴⁾ with Mrs. Behn, and he (if any), not Ravenscroft, assisted her (though we are not to suppose to a real extent) in her plays. There is a very plain allusion to this in Radcliffe's *The Ramble: News from Hell* (1682):-

Amongst this Heptarchy of Wit
The censuring Age have thought it fit,
To damn a Woman, cause 'tis said
The Plays she vends she never made.
But that a Greys Inn Lawyer does 'em
Who unto her was Friend in Bosom,
So not presenting Scarf and Hood
New Plays and Songs are full as good.*⁽⁵⁾

Unfortunately Hoyle was reputed to be addicted to the grossest immorality, and rumours of a sinister description were current concerning him.*⁽⁶⁾ There is, in fact, printed a letter*⁽⁷⁾ of Mrs. Behn's wherein she writes most anxiously to her friend stating that the gravest scandals have reached her ears, and begging him to clear himself from these allegations. Hoyle was murdered in a brawl 26 May, 1692, and is buried in the vault belonging to the Inner Temple, which is presumably in the ground attached to the Temple Church. The entry in the Register runs as follows: 'John Hoyle, esq., of the Inner Temple was buried in the vault May ye 29, 1692.' Narcissus Luttrell in his *Diary*, Saturday, 28 May, 1692, has the following entry: 'Mr. Hoil of the Temple on Thursday night was at a tavern with other

gentlemen, and quarrelling with Mr. Pitts' eldest son about drinking a health, as they came out Mr. Hoil was stabb'd in the belly and fell down dead, and thereon Pitts fled; and the next morning was taken in a disguise and is committed to Newgate.* (8) 30 June, 1692, the same record says: 'This day Mr. Pitts was tryed at the Old Bailey for the murder of Mr. Hoil of the Temple, and the jury found it manslaughter but the next heir has brought an appeal.'

* In view of the extremely harsh treatment Ravenscroft has met with at the hands of the critics it may be worth while emphasizing Genest's opinion that his 'merit as a dramatic writer has been vastly underrated'. Ravenscroft has a facility in writing, an ease of dialogue, a knack of evoking laughter and picturing the ludicrous, above all a vitality which many a greater name entirely lacks. As a writer of farce, and farce very nearly akin to comedy, he is capital.

*(2) Letters from the Dead to the Living: The Virgin's [Mrs. Bracegirdle] Answer to Mrs. Behn. 'You upbraid me with a great discovery you chanc'd to make by peeping into the breast of an old friend of mine; if you give yourself but the trouble of examining an old poet's conscience, who went lately off the stage, and now takes up his lodgings in your territories, and I don't question but you'll there find Mrs. Behn writ as often in black characters, and stand as thick in some places, as the names of the generation of Adam in the first of Genesis.' How far credence may be given to anything of Brown's is of course a moot point, but the above passage and much that follows would be witless and dull unless there were some real suggestion of scandal. Moreover, it cannot here be applied to Hoyle, whereas it very well fits Ravenscroft. This letter which speaks of 'the lash of Mr. C--r' must have been written no great time after the publication of Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality of the English Stage* (March, 1698), probably in 1701-2. Ravenscroft's last play, *The Italian Husband*, was produced at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1697 and he is supposed to have died a year or two later, which date exactly suits the detail given by Brown. Ravenscroft's first play, *Mamamouchi*, had been produced in 1672, and the 'an old poet' would be understood.

*(3) This occurrence is the subject of some lines in *The Rump* (1662): 'On the happy Memory of Alderman Hoyle that hang'd himself.'

*(4) *The Muses Mercury*, December, 1707, refers to verses made on Mrs. Behn 'and her very good friend, Mr. Hoyle'.

*(5) My attention was drawn to these lines by Mr. Thorn Drury, who was, indeed, the first to suggest that Hoyle is the person aimed at. I have to thank him, moreover, for much valuable information on this important point.

*(6) cf. Luttrell's *Diary*, February, 1686-7, which records that an indictment for misconduct was actually presented against him at the Old Bailey, but the Grand Jury threw out the bill and he was discharged. The person implicated in the charge against Hoyle seems to have been a poulterer. cf. *A Faithful Catalogue of our Most Eminent*

Ninnies, said to have been written by the Earl of Dorset in 1683, or (according to another edition of Rochester's works in which it occurs) 1686. In any case the verses cannot be earlier than 1687.

Which made the wiser Choice is now our Strife,
Hoyle his he-mistress, or the Prince his wife:
Those traders sure will be belov'd as well,
As all the dainty tender Birds they sell.

The 'Prince' is George Fitzroy, son of Charles II by the Duchess of Cleveland, who was created Duke of Northumberland and married Catherine, daughter of Robert Wheatley, a poulterer, of Bracknell, Berks; and relict of Robert Lucy of Charlecote, Warwickshire.

*(7) Familiar Letters of Love, Gallantry, etc. There are several editions. I have used that of 1718, 2 vols.

*(8) In his MS. Commonplace Book (now in the possession of G. Thorn Drury, Esq., K.C.), Whitelocke Bulstrode writes:-
'27 May 92.

'Mr Hoyle of ye Temple, coming this morning about two of ye Clock fro ye, Young Divel Tavern, was killed wth a sword; He died Instantly: It proceeded fro a quarrell about Drincking a Health; Killed by Mr Pitt of Graies Inne yt Dranck wth them. Mr Hoyle was an Atheist, a Sodomite professed, a corrupter of youth, & a Blasphemer of Christ.'

The Young (or Little) Devil Tavern was in Fleet Street, on the south side, near Temple Bar, adjoining Dick's Coffee House. It was called Young (or Little) to distinguish it from the more famous house, The Devil (or Old Devil) Tavern, which stood between Temple Bar and the Inner Temple Gate.

In September, 1676, The Town Fop was acted with applause, and the following year Mrs. Behn was very busy producing two comedies (of which one is a masterpiece) and one tragedy. The Debauchee, which was brought out this year at the Duke's House, a somewhat superficial though clever alteration of Brome's Mad Couple Well Match'd, is no doubt from her pen. It was published anonymously, 4to, 1677, and all the best critics with one accord ascribe it to Mrs. Behn. In the autumn of 1677 there was produced by the Duke's Company a version of Middleton's No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's, entitled, The Counterfeit Bridegroom; or, The Defeated Widow (4to, 1677); it is smart and spirited. Genest was of opinion it is Aphra's work. He is probably right, for we know that she repeatedly made use of Middleton, and internal evidence fully bears out our stage historian.* Both Abdelazer*(2) and The Town Fop evidence in a marked degree her intimate knowledge of the earlier dramatists, whilst The Rover (I) is founded on Killigrew. None the less, here she has handled her materials with rare skill, and successfully put new wine into old bottles. The critics, however, began to attack her on this point, and when The Rover (I) appeared in print (4to 1677), she found it necessary to add a postscript, defending her play from the charge of merely being 'Thomaso alter'd'. With reference to Abdelazer there is extant a very interesting letter*(3) from Mrs. Behn to her friend, Mrs. Emily Price. She writes as follows:-

My Dear,

In your last, you inform'd me, that the World treated me as a Plagiary, and, I must confess, not with Injustice: But that Mr. Otway shou'd say, my Sex wou'd not prevent my being pull'd to Pieces by the Criticks, is something odd, since whatever Mr. Otway now declares, he may very well remember when last I saw him, I receiv'd more than ordinary Encomiums on my Abdelazer. But every one knows Mr. Otway's good Nature, which will not permit him to shock any one of our Sex to their Faces. But let that pass: For being impeach'd of murdering my Moor, I am thankful, since, when I shall let the World know, whenever I take the Pains next to appear in Print, of the mighty Theft I have been guilty of; But however for your own Satisfaction, I have sent you the Garden from whence I gather'd, and I hope you will not think me vain, if I say, I have weeded and improv'd it. I hope to prevail on the Printer to reprint *The Lust's Dominion, &c.*, that my theft may be the more publick. But I detain you. I believe I sha'n't have the Happiness of seeing my dear Amillia 'till the middle of September: But be assur'd I shall always remain as I am,

Yours, A. Behn.

* Betterton's adaption of Marston's *The Dutch Courtezan*, which the actor calls *The Revenge*; or, *A Match in Newgate*, has sometimes been erroneously ascribed to Mrs. Behn by careless writers. She has also been given *The Woman Turn'd Bully*, a capital comedy with some clever characterization, which was produced at Dorset Garden in June, 1675, and printed without author's name the same year. Both Prologue and Epilogue, two pretty songs, Oh, the little Delights that a Lover takes; and Ah, how charming is the shade, together with a rollicking catch 'O London, wicked London-Town!' which is 'to be sung a l'yvronge, in a drunken humour', might all well be Mrs. Behn's, and the whole conduct of the play is very like her early manner. Beyond this, however, there is no evidence to suggest it is from her pen.

*(2) The overture, act-tunes, incidental music, were composed by Henry Purcell.

*(3) *Familiar Letters of Love, Gallantry, etc.*, Vol. I (1718), pp. 31-2.

The Rover (I) is undoubtedly the best known of Aphra Behn's comedies. It long remained a popular favourite in the theatre, its verve, bustle and wit, utterly defiant of the modest Josephs and qualmy prudes who censured these lively scenes. Steele has mention of this in an archly humorous paper, No. 51, *Spectator*, Saturday, 28 April, 1711. He pictures a young lady who has taken offence at some negligent expression in that chastest of ice-cold proprieties, *The Funeral*, and he forthwith more or less seriously proceeds to defend his play by quoting the example of both predecessors and contemporaries. Amongst the writers who are 'best skilled in this luscious Way', he informs us that 'we are obliged to the Lady who writ Ibrahim * for introducing a preparatory Scene to the very Action, when the Emperor throws his Handkerchief as a Signal for his Mistress to follow him into the most retired Part of the Seraglio.... This

ingenious Gentlewoman in this piece of Baudry refined upon an Author of the same Sex, who in *The Rover* makes a Country Squire strip to his Holland Drawers. For Blunt is disappointed, and the Emperor is understood to go on to the utmost.... It is not here to be omitted, that in one of the above-mentioned Female Compositions the Rover is very frequently sent on the same Errand; as I take it above once every Act. This is not wholly unnatural; for, they say, the Men-Authors draw themselves in their Chief Characters, and the Women-Writers may be allowed the same Liberty.'

* Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks, produced in 1696 (4to, 1696), a commendable tragedy by Mrs. Mary Pix, nee Griffiths (1666-1720?). The plot is based on Sir Paul Ricaut's continuation of the Turkish history.

Early in 1678, either the first or second week of January, *Sir Patient Fancy* was received with great applause. A hint from Brome, more than a hint from Moliere, much wit, vivacity, and cleverness make up this admirable comedy. Throughout the whole of her career it is amply evident that Mrs. Behn, an omnivorous reader, kept in constant touch with and profited by the French literature and theatre of her day. The debt of the English stage to France at this period is a fact often not sufficiently acknowledged, but one which it would really be difficult to over-emphasize. No adequate critical knowledge of much of our English song, fiction and drama of the Restoration can be attained without a close study of their French models and originals.

During the latter part of this year Mrs. Behn found time to revise and write up the romantic scenes she had composed two decades before as a girl in Surinam, and the result was a tragi-comedy, *The Young King*, which won considerable favour. Produced in March or early April,* 1679, it was not published till 1683, but a second edition was called for in 1698.*(2)

* The date is fixed by the Epilogue 'at his R.H. second exile into Flanders'. The Duke of York sailed for Antwerp 4 March, 1679. He returned in August owing to the King's illness.

*(2) This fact sufficiently explodes the quite untenable suggestion that *The Young King* in earlier days could find neither producer nor publisher. That the quarto did not appear until four years after the play had been seen on the stage is no argument of non-success. Ravenscroft's *Mamamouchi* was produced early in 1672 and 'continu'd Acting 9 Days with a full house'. It specially delighted the King and Court. It was not printed, however, until 1675.

In March, *The Feign'd Courtezans*, one of Mrs. Behn's happiest efforts, appeared on the boards of the Duke's House. Not one tittle is borrowed, and its success gives striking proof of the capacity of her unaided powers. When printed, the comedy was dedicated in adulatory terms to Nell Gwynne. With the great Betterton, handsome Will Smith, Nokes, Underhill, Leigh, an inimitable trio, the famous Mrs. Barry, pretty and piquante Betty Currer, the beautiful and serenely gracious Mrs. Mary Lee, in the cast, it had a perfect

galaxy of genius to give it life and triumph.

In 1681 a second part continued the adventures of *The Rover*, and surprisingly good the sequel is.

From 1678 to 1683 were years of the keenest political excitement and unrest. Fomented to frenzy by the murderous villainies of Oates and his accomplices, aggravated by the traitorous ambition and rascalities of Shaftesbury, by the deceit and weakness of Monmouth, and the open disloyalty of the Whiggish crew, party politics and controversy waxed hotter and fiercer until riots were common and a revolution seemed imminent. Fortunately an appeal in a royal declaration to the justice of the nation at large allayed the storm, and an overwhelming outburst of genuine enthusiasm ensued. Albeit the bill against him was thrown out with an 'ignoramus' by a packed jury 24 November, 1681, a year later, 28 November, 1682, Shaftesbury found it expedient to escape to Holland. Monmouth, who had been making a regal progress through the country, was arrested. Shortly after he was bailed out by his political friends, but he presently fled in terror lest he should pay the penalty of his follies and crimes, inasmuch as a true bill for high treason had been found against him. It was natural that at such a crisis the stage and satire (both prose and rhyme), should become impregnated with party feeling; and the Tory poets, with glorious John Dryden at their head, unmercifully pilloried their adversaries. In 1682 Mrs. Behn produced three comedies, two of which are mainly political. *The Roundheads*, a masterly pasquinade, shows the Puritans, near ancestors of the Whigs, in their most odious and veritable colours. *The City Heiress* lampoons Shaftesbury and his cit following in exquisite caricature. The wit and humour, the pointed raillery never coarsening into mere invective and zany burlesque, place this in the very front rank of her comedies.* *The False Count*, the third play of this year, is non-political, and she has herein borrowed a suggestion from Moliere. It is full of brilliant dialogue and point, whilst the situations are truly ludicrous and entertaining. As might well be surmised, *The Roundheads* and *The City Heiress* were not slow to wake the rancour of the Whigs, who looked about for an opportunity of vengeance which they shortly found. On 10 August, 1682, there was produced at the Duke's Theatre an anonymous tragedy *Romulus and Hersilia; or, The Sabine War*. It is a vigorous play of no small merit and attracted considerable attention at the time.*(2) Mrs. Behn contributed both Prologue and Epilogue, the former being spoken by that sweet-voiced blonde, winsome Charlotte Butler, the latter by Lady Slingsby, who acted Tarpeia. There was matter in the Epilogue which reflected upon the disgraced Duke of Monmouth, for whom in spite of his known treachery and treasons, Charles still retained the fondest affection. Warm representations were made in high quarters, and the following warrant was speedily issued:-

Whereas the Lady Slingsby Comedian and Mrs. Aphaw Behen have by acting and writing at his Royall Highnesse Theatre committed severall Misdemeanors and made abusive reflections upon persons of Quality, and

have written and spoken scandalous speeches without any License or Approbation of those that ought to peruse and authorize the same, These are therefore to require you to take into yor Custody the said Lady Slingsby and Mrs. Aphaw Behen and bring them before mee to answeere the said Offence, And for soe doing this shalbe yor sufficient Warrt. Given undr my hand and seale this 12th day of August, 1682.

To Henry Legatt Messenger
of His Maties Chamber, etc.

The lines particularly complained of ran as follows:

of all Treasons, mine was most accurst;
Rebelling 'gainst a KING and FATHER first.
A Sin, which Heav'n nor Man can e're forgive;
Nor could I Act it with the face to live.
There's nothing can my Reputation save
With all the True, the Loyal and the Brave;
Not my Remorse or death can Expiate
With them a Treason 'gainst the KING and State.

Coming from the mouth of the perjured Tarpeia they were of course winged with point unmistakable. It is not probable, however, that either authoress or actress was visited with anything more than censure and a fright. In any case their detention*(3) (if brought about) must have been very short-liv'd, for the partizans of Monmouth, although noisy and unquiet, were not really strong, and they met with the most effective opposition at every turn.

* Gould in The Play House, a Satyr, stung by Mrs. Behn's success, derides that

clean piece of Wit

The City Heiress by chaste Sappho Writ,
Where the Lewd Widow comes with Brazen Face,
Just seeking from a Stallion's rank Embrace,
T' acquaint the Audience with her Filthy Case.
Where can you find a Scene for juster Praise,
In Shakespear, Johnson, or in Fletcher's Plays?

*(2) Publication was delayed. Brooks Impartial Mercury Friday, 17 Nov., 1682, advertises: 'To be published on Monday next, the last new play called Romulus.' The 4to is dated 1683. A broad sheet, 1682, gives both Prologue 'spoken by Mrs. Butler, written by Mrs. Behn,' and Epilogue 'spoken by the Lady Slingsby.' The 4to gives 'Prologue, spoken by Mrs. Butler,' 'Epilogue, Writ by Mrs. A. Behn. Spoken by Tarpeia.'

*(3) Curtis' Protestant Mercury, August 12-6, 1682, notices that both Lady Slingsby and Mrs. Behn have been ordered into custody in respect of this Epilogue.

In this same year the Whigs in spite of their utmost efforts signally failed to suppress, and could only retard the production of Dryden and Lee's excellent tragedy The Duke of Guise, first performed 4 December. The play created a furore, and its political purport as a picture of the baffled intrigues of Shaftesbury in favour

of Lucy Walter's overweening son is obvious, nor is it rendered less so by Dryden's clever and caustic *Vindication of the Duke of Guise* (1683). It is interesting to note that Lady Slingsby, who played the Queen Mother, Catherine de' Medici, in this play, has some very sardonic speeches put in her mouth; indeed, as Henri III aptly remarks, 'she has a cruel wit'.

In 1684 were published the famous Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister. The letters, supposed to have passed between Forde, Lord Grey,* and his sister-in-law Lady Henrietta Berkeley, fifth daughter of the Earl, are certainly the work of Mrs. Behn. Romantic and sentimental, with now and again a pretty touch that is almost lyrical in its sweet cadence, they enjoyed the same extraordinary popularity which very similar productions have attained at a recent date. A third edition was called for in 1707.

* Forde Lord Grey of Werke, Earl of Tankerville, who succeeded to the title in 1675 was married to Lady Mary Berkeley. He eloped, however, with Lady Henrietta Berkley, and great scandal ensued. When he and his minions were brought to trial, 23 November, 1682, his mistress and a number of staunch Whigs boldly accompanied him into court. He was found guilty, but as his friends banded together to resist, something very like a riot ensued. He died 25 June, 1701. Lady Henrietta Berkeley, who never married, survived her lover nine years.

Mrs. Behn was also busy seeing her poems through the press. The title page is dated 1684, and they were issued with a dedication to the Earl of Salisbury.* In the same volume is included her graceful translation of the Abbe Tallemant's *Le Voyage de l'Isle d'Amour*, entitled, *Voyage to The Isle of Love*.

* Astrea with her soft gay sighing Swains
And rural virgins on the flowery Plains,
The lavish Peer's profuseness may reprove
Who gave her Guineas for the Isle of Love.

-Contemporary Satire.- (Harleian MSS.)

The following undated letter (preserved at Bayfordbury) addressed to Jacob Tonson, and first published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, May, 1836, pleads hard for an extra payment of five pounds for her book.

She writes:-

Deare Mr. Tonson

I am mightly oblig'd to you for ye service you have don me to Mr. Dryden; in whose esteeme I wou'd chuse to be rather than any bodys in the world; and I am sure I never, in thought, word, or deed merritted other from him, but if you had heard wt was told me, you wou'd have excus'd all I said on that account. Thank him most infinitely for ye hon. he offers, and I shall never think I can do any thing that can merritt so vast a glory; and I must owe it all to you if I have it. As for Mr. Creech, I would not have you afflict him wth a thing can not now be help'd, so never let him know my resentment. I am troubled for ye line that's left out of Dr. Garth,* and wish yor man wou'd write it in ye margent, at his leasure, to all you sell.

As for ye verses of mine, I shou'd really have thought 'em worth thirty pound; and I hope you will find it worth L25; not that I shou'd dispute at any other time for 5 pound wher I am so obleeged; but you can not think wt a preety thing ye Island will be, and wt a deal of labor I shall have yet with it: and if that pleases, I will do the 2d Voyage, wich will compose a little book as big as a novel by it self. But pray speake to yor Bror to advance the price to one 5lb more, 'twill at this time be more then given me, and I vow I wou'd not aske it if I did not really believe it worth more. Alas I wou'd not loose my time in such low gettings, but only since I am about it I am resolv'd to go throw wth it tho I shou'd give it. I pray go about it as soone as you please, for I shall finish as fast as you can go on. Methinks ye Voyage shou'd com last, as being ye largest volume. You know Mr. Couly's David is last, because a large poem, and Mrs. Philips her Plays for ye same reason. I wish I had more time, I wou'd ad something to ye verses yt I have a mind too, but, good deare Mr. Tonson, let it be 5lb more, for I may safly swere I have lost ye getting of 50lb by it, tho that's nothing to you, or my satisfaction and humour: but I have been without getting so long yt I am just on ye poynt of breaking, espesiall since a body has no credit at ye Playhouse for money as we usd to have, fifty or 60 deepe, or more; I want extreamly or I wo'd not urge this.

Yors A.B.

Pray send me ye loose papers to put to these I have, and let me know wich you will go about first, ye songs and verses or that. Send me an answer to-day.

* This of course cannot be correct, but it is so transcribed. In the transcript of this letter made by Malone, and now in the possession of G. Thorn Drury, Esq., K.C., over the word 'Garth's' is written 'Q', and at the foot of the page a note by Mitford says: 'This name seems to have been doubtful in the MSS.' I have thought it best not to attempt any emendation.

It is probable that about this date, 1683-4, she penned her little novel *The adventure of the Black Lady*, and also that excellent extravaganza *The King of Bantam*.* Both these and *The Unfortunate Happy Lady* are written as if they had certainly been completed before the death of Charles II, in which case they must have lain by, MSS, in Mrs. Behn's desk.

* Neither of these was printed until eight years after her death. They first appear, each with its separate title page, 1697, bound up in the Third Edition, 'with Large Additions,' of *All the Histories and Novels, Written by the Late Ingenious Mrs. Behn, Entire in One Volume*, 1698. After Nos. vii, viii, ix, *Memoirs of the Court of the King of Bantam*, *The Nun; or, the Perjured Beauty*, *The Adventure of the Black Lady* follows a note: 'These last three never before published.' Some superficial bibliographers (e.g. Miss Charlotte E. Morgan in her unreliable monograph, *The English Novel till 1749*) have postulated imaginary editions of 1683-4 for *The Little Black Lady* and *The King of Bantam*. *The Nun; or, the Perjured Beauty*, is universally confounded

with *The History of the Nun* (vide Vol. V, p. 259, Introduction to that novel) and dated 1689.

With reference to *The King of Bantam* we have in the 1698 collected edition of the Novels the following 'Advertisement to the Reader. The Stile of the Court of the King of Bantam, being so very different from Mrs. Behn's usual way of Writing, it may perhaps call its being genuine in Question; to obviate which objection, I must inform the Reader, that it was a Trial of Skill upon a Wager, to shew that she was able to write in the Style of the Celebrated Scarron, in Imitation of whom 'tis writ, tho' the Story be true. I need not say any thing of the other Two, they evidently confessing their admirable Author.'

The King, at the height of his power, after a short illness, died 6 February, 1685, an event that together with the accession of James naturally evoked a plethora of State Poems, to which flood Mrs. Behn contributed. Her Pindarics rank high amongst the semi-official, complimentary, threnodic or pastoral pseudo-Dithyrambs, of which the age was so bounteous; but it needed the supreme genius of a Dryden sustainedly to instil lyric fire and true poetry into these hybrid forms.* The nadir is sounded by the plumbeous productions of Shadwell, Nahum Tate, and 'Persons of Quality'. Aphra's Pindarick on the Death of Charles II ran through two editions in 1685, and her Poem to the Queen Dowager Catherine was published the same year. James II was crowned on St. George's Day, and she greeted her new monarch and old patron with a Poem on the Happy Coronation of His Sacred Majesty. A little later she published a Miscellany of poems by various hands: amongst whom were Etherege, Edmund Arwaker, Henry Crisp, and Otway, including not a few from her own pen, 'Together with Reflections on Morality, or Seneca Unmasked. Translated from the Maximes of the Duke de la Rochefoucauld', a number of clever apophthegms tersely turned.

* Swift, although he amply fulfilled Dryden's famous prophecy, 'Cousin Swift, you will never be a Pindaric poet', was doubtless thinking of these Pindarics when in *The Battle of the Book*, he wrote: 'Then Pindar slew-, and-, and Oldham, and-, and Afra the Amazon light of foot.'

The following note,* however, affords ample evidence that at this juncture, maugre her diligence and unremitting toils, she was far from being in easy circumstances:-

'Where as I am indebted to Mr. Bags the sum of six pownd for the payment of which Mr. Tonson has obleged him self. Now I do here by impowre Mr. Zachary Baggs, in case the said debt is not fully discharged before Michaelmas next, to stop what money he shall hereafter have in his hands of mine, upon the playing my first play till this aforesaid debt of six pownd be discharged.

Witness my hand this 1st August,- 85.

A. Behn.'

* First Published in the *Gentlemans's Magazine*, May, 1836.

Early in 1686 a frolicksome comedy of great merit, *The Lucky Chance*, was produced by her at the Theatre Royal, the home of the United

Companies. A Whiggish clique, unable to harm her in any other way, banded together to damn the play and so endeavoured to raise a pudic hubbub, that happily proved quite ineffective. The Lucky Chance, which contends with The Rover (I), and The Feign'd Courtezans for the honour of being Mrs. Behn's highest flight of comic genius, has scenes admittedly wantoning beyond the bounds of niggard propriety, but all are alive with a careless wit and a brilliant humour that prove quite irresistible. Next appeared those graceful translations from de Bonnecorse's *La Montre... seconde partie contenant La Boete et Le Miroir*, which she termed *The Lover's Watch* and *The Lady's Looking-Glass*.

In 1687 the Duke of Albemarle's voyage to Jamaica* to take up the government in the West Indies gave occasion for a Pindaric, but we only have one dramatic piece from Mrs. Behn, *The Emperor of the Moon*, a capital three act farce, Italian in sentiment and origin. For some little time past her health had begun to trouble her.*(2) Her three years of privation and cares had told upon her physically, and since then, 'forced to write for bread and not ashamed to own it,' she had spared neither mind nor bodily strength. Graver symptoms appeared, but yet she found time to translate from Fontenelle his version of Van Dale's *De Oraclis Ethnicorum* as *The History of Oracles and the Cheats of the Pagan Priests*, a book of great interest. There was also published in 1687 an edition in stately folio of *Aesop's Fables* with his Life in English, French and Latin, 'illustrated with One hundred and twelve Sculptures' and 'Thirty One New Figures representing his Life', by Francis Barlow, the celebrated draughtsman of birds and animals. Each plate to the Life has a quatrain appended, and each fable with its moral is versified beneath the accompanying picture. In his brief address to the Reader Barlow writes: 'The Ingenious Mrs. A. Behn has been so obliging as to perform the English Poetry, which in short comprehends the Sense of the Fable and Moral; Whereof to say much were needless, since it may sufficiently recommend it self to all Persons of Understanding.' To this year we further assign the composition of no fewer than four novels, *The Unfortunate Bride*, *The Dumb Virgin*, *The Wandering Beauty*, *The Unhappy Mistake*. She was working at high pressure, and 1688 still saw a tremendous literary output. Waller had died 21 October, 1687, at the great age of eighty-one, and her Elegiac Ode to his Memory begins:-

How to thy Sacred Memory, shall I bring
(Worthy thy Fame) a grateful Offering?
I, who by Toils of Sicknes, am become
Almost as near as thou art to a Tomb?
While every soft and every tender strain
Is ruffl'd, and ill-natur'd grown with Pain.

* Christopher Monck, second Duke of Albermarle, was appointed Governor-General of Jamaica, 26 November, 1687. He died there early in the following autumn.

*(2) 'Sappho famous for her Gout and Guilt,' writes Gould in *The Poetess*, a Satyr.

This she sent to his daughter-in-law with the following letter*:-
Madam,

At such losses as you have sustain'd in that of yor Glorious ffather in Law Mr. Waller, the whole world must wait on your sighs & mournings, tho' we must allow yours to be the more sensible by how much more (above your Sex) you are Mistriss of that Generous Tallent that made him so great & so admird (besids what we will allow as a Relation) tis therefore at your ffeet Madam we ought to lay all those Tributary Garlands, we humbler pretenders to the Muses believe it our Duty to offer at his Tombe- in excuse for mine Madam I can only say I am very ill & have been dying this twelve month, that they want those Graces & that spiritt wich possible I might have drest em in had my health & dulling vapors permitted me, howeuer Madam they are left to your finer judgment to determin whether they are worthy the Honour of the Press among those that cellibrat Mr. Wallers great fame, or of being doomed to the fire & whateuer you decree will extreamly satisfy

Madam

I humbly beg pardon
for my yll writing
Madam for tis with
a Lame hand scarce
able to hold a pen.

yor most Devoted &
most Obeadient
Seruant
A. BEHN.

* Now published for the first time by the courtesy of G. Thorn Drury, Esq., K.C., who generously obliged me with a transcript of the original.

Her weakness, lassitude, and despondency are more than apparent; yet bravely buckling to her work, and encouraged by her success with Fontenelle, she Englished with rare skill his Theory of the System of Several New Inhabited Worlds, prefixing thereto a first-rate 'Essay on Translated Prose.' She shows herself an admirable critic, broad-minded, with a keen eye for niceties of style. The Fair Jilt (licensed 17 April, 1688),* Oroonoko, and Agnes de Castro, followed in swift succession. She also published Lycidus, a Voyage from the Island of Love, returning to the Abbe Tallemant's dainty preciosities. On 10 June, James Francis Edward, Prince of Wales, was born at St. James's Palace, and Mrs. Behn having already written a Congratulatory Poem*(2) to Queen Mary of Modena on her expectation of the Prince, was ready with a Poem on his Happy Birth.

* In the original edition of The Fair Jilt (1688), we have advertised: 'There is now in the Press, Oroonoko; or, The History of the Royal Slave. Written by Madam Behn.'

*(2) In the second edition (1688), of this Congratulatory Poem to Queen Mary of Modena we have the following advertisement:- 'On Wednesday next will be published the most Ingenious and long Expected History of Oroonoko; or, the Royal Slave. By Mrs. Behn.'

One of the most social and convivial of women, a thorough Tory, well known to Dryden, Creech, Otway and all the leading men of her day, warm helper and ally of every struggling writer, Astrea began to be

completely overpowered by the continual strain, the unremittent tax upon both health and time. Overworked and overwrought, in the early months of 1689 she put into English verse the sixth book (of Trees) from Cowley's *Sex Libri Plantarum* (1668). Nahum Tate undertook Books IV and V and prefaced the translation when printed. As Mrs. Behn knew no Latin no doubt some friend, perhaps Tate himself, must have paraphrased the original for her. She further published *The Lucky Mistake* and *The History of the Nun; or, The Fair Vow Breaker*,* licensed 22 October, 1688. On the afternoon of 12 February, Mary, wife of William of Orange, had with great diffidence landed at Whitehall Stairs, and Mrs. Behn congratulated the lady in her *Poem To Her Sacred Majesty Queen Mary on her Arrival in England*. One regrets to find her writing on such an occasion, and that she realized the impropriety of her conduct is clear from the reference to the banished monarch. But she was weary, depressed, and ill, and had indeed for months past been racked with incessant pain. An agonizing complication of disorders now gave scant hope of recovery. It is in the highest degree interesting to note that during her last sickness Dr. Burnet, a figure of no little importance at that moment, kindly enquired after the dying woman. The Pindaric in which she thanks him, and which was printed March, 1689, proved the last poem she herself saw through the press. At length exhausted nature failed altogether, and she expired 16 April, 1689, the end hastened by a sad lack of skill in her physician. She is buried in the east cloisters of Westminster Abbey. A black marble slab marks the spot. On it are graven 'Mrs. Aphra Behn Dyed April, 16, A.D 1689,' and two lines, 'made by a very ingenious Gentleman tho' no poet':-*(2)

Here lies a Proof that Wit can never be
Defence enough against Mortality.*(3)

* The title page has 1689, but it was possibly published late in 1688.

*(2) Traditionally said to be John Hoyle.

*(3) Sam Briscoe, the publisher, in his *Dedicatory Epistle to Familiar Letters of love, Gallantry etc.* (2 vols., 1718), says: 'Had the rough Days of K. Charles II newly recover'd from the Confusion of a Civil War, or the tempestuous Time of James the Second, had the same Sence of Wit as our Gentlemen now appear to have, the first Impressions of Milton's *Paradise Lost* had never been sold for Waste Paper; the *Inimitable Hudibras* had never suffered the Miseries of a Neglected Cavalier; Tom Brown the merriest and most diverting'st man, had never expir'd so neglected; Mr. Dryden's *Religion* would never have lost him his Pension; or Mrs. Behn ever had but two Lines upon her Grave-stone.'

'She was of a generous and open Temper, something passionate, very serviceable to her Friends in all that was in her Power; and could sooner forgive an Injury, than do one. She had Wit, Honour, Good-Humour, and Judgment. She was Mistress of all the pleasing Arts of Conversation, but us'd 'em not to any but those who love Plain-dealing.' So she comes before us. A graceful, comely woman,*

merry and buxom, with brown hair and bright eyes, candid, sincere, a brilliant conversationalist in days when conversation was no mere slipshod gabble of slang but cut and thrust of poignant epigram and repartee; warm-hearted, perhaps too warm-hearted, and ready to lend a helping hand even to the most undeserving, a quality which gathered all Grub Street round her door. At a period when any and every writer, mean or great, of whatsoever merit or party, was continually assailed with vehement satire and acrid lampoons, lacking both truth and decency, Aphra Behn does not come off scot-free, nobody did; and upon occasion her name is amply vilified by her foes. There are some eight ungenerous lines with a side reference to the 'Conquests she had won' in Buckingham's A Trial of the Poets for the Bays, and a page or two of insipid spiritless rhymes, The Female Laureat, find a place in State Poems. The same collection contains A Satyr on the Modern Translators. 'Odi Imitatores servum pecus,' &c. By Mr. P-r,* (2) 1684. It begins rather smartly:-

Since the united Cunning of the Stage,
Has balk'd the hireling Drudges of the Age;
Since Betterton of late so thrifty's grown,
Revives Old Plays, or wisely acts his own;

the modern poets

Have left Stage-practice, chang'd their old Vocations,
Atoning for bad Plays with worse Translations.

In some instances this was true enough, but when the writer attacks Dryden he becomes ridiculous and imprecates

May he still split on some unlucky Coast,
And have his Works or Dictionary lost:
That he may know what Roman Authors mean,
No more than does our blind Translatress Behn,* (3)
The Female Wit, who next convicted stands,
Not for abusing Ovid's verse but Sand's:
She might have learn'd from the ill-borrow'd Grace,
(Which little helps the Ruin of her Face)
That Wit, like Beauty, triumphs o'er the Heart
When more of Nature's seen, and less of Art:
Nor strive in Ovid's Letters to have shown
As much of Skill, as Lewdness in her own.
Then let her from the next inconstant Lover,
Take a new Copy for a second Rover.
Describe the Cunning of a jilting Whore,
From the ill Arts herself has us'd before;
Thus let her write, but Paraphrase no more.

These verses are verjuiced, unwarranted, unfair. Tom Brown too in his Letters from the Dead to the Living has a long epistle 'From worthy Mrs. Behn the Poetess, to the famous Virgin Actress,' (Mrs. Bracegirdle), in which the Diana of the stage is crudely rallied. 'The Virgin's Answer to Mrs. Behn' contains allusions to Aphra's intrigue with some well-known dramatic writer, perhaps Ravenscroft, and speaks of many an other amour beside. But then for a goat Brown would

have proved Barbara Villiers a virgin, and taxed Torquemada with unorthodoxy. Brown has yet another gird at Mrs. Behn in his *The Late Converts Exposed, or the Reason of Mr. Bays's Changing his Religion &c. Considered in a Dialogue* (1690, a quarto tract; and reprinted in a *Collection of Brown's Dialogues*, 8vo, 1704). Says Eugenius: 'You may remember Mr. Bays, how the famed Astrea, once in her Life-time unluckily lighted upon such a Sacred Subject, and in a strange fit of Piety, must needs attempt a Paraphrase on the Lord's Prayer. But alas poor Gentlewoman! She had scarce travell'd half way, when Cupid served her as the Cut-Purse did the Old Justice in Bartholmew Fair, tickled her with a Straw in her Ear, and then she could not budge one foot further, till she had humbly requested her Maker to grant her a private Act of Toleration for a little Harmless Love, otherwise called Fornication.' There is a marginal note to this passage: 'Mrs. Behn's Miscell. Printed by Jos. Hindmarsh.' In a Letter from the Dead Thomas Brown to the Living Heraclitus (1704), a sixpenny tract, this wag is supposed to meet Mrs. Behn in the underworld, and anon establishes himself on the most familiar terms with his 'dear Afra'; they take, indeed, 'an extraordinary liking to one another's Company' for 'good Conversation is not so over plentiful in these Parts.' A bitterer attack yet, *An Epistle to Julian* (c. 1686-7), paints her as ill, feeble, dying:-

Doth that lewd Harlot, that Poetick Quean,
Fam'd through White Fryars, you know who I mean,
Mend for reproof, others set up in spight,
To flux, take glisters, vomits, purge and write.
Long with a Sciatica she's beside lame,
Her limbs distortur'd, Nerves shrunk up with pain,
And therefore I'll all sharp reflections shun,
Poverty, Poetry, Pox, are plagues enough for one.

In truth, Aphra Behn's life was not one of mere pleasure, but a hard struggle against overwhelming adversity, a continual round of work. We cannot but admire the courage of this lonely woman, who, poor and friendless, was the first in England to turn to the pen for a livelihood, and not only won herself bread but no mean position in the world of her day and English literature of all time. For years her name to a new book, a comedy, a poem, an essay from the French, was a word to conjure with for the booksellers. There are anecdotes in plenty. Some true, some not so reliable. She is said to have introduced milk-punch into England.*⁽⁴⁾ We are told that she could write a page of a novel or a scene of a play in a room full of people and yet hold her own in talk the while.*⁽⁵⁾ Her popularity was enormous, and edition after edition of her plays and novels was called for.

* 'She was a most beautiful woman, and a more excellent poet'.
Col. Colepeper. *Adversaria*, Vol. ii (Harleian MSS.)

*⁽²⁾ This piece finds a place in the unauthorised edition of Prior's *Poems*, 1707 a volume the poet himself repudiated. In the Cambridge edition of Prior's *Works* (1905-7), reason is given, however, to show

that the lines are certainly Prior's, and that he withdrew this and other satires (says Curll, the bookseller), owing to 'his great Modesty'. The Horatian tag (Epistles I, xiv, 19) is of course 'O Imitatores servum pecus'.

* (3) In his Preface Concerning Ovid's Epistles affixed to the translation of the Heroides (Ovid's Epistles), 'by Several Hands' (1680), Dryden writes 'The Reader will here find most of the Translations, with some little Latitude or variation from the Author's Sence: That of Oenone to Paris, is in Mr. Cowley's way of Imitation only. I was desir'd to say that the Author who is of the Fair Sex, understood not Latine. But if she does not, I am afraid she has given us occasion to be asham'd who do.'

* (4) 'Old Mr. John Bowman, the player, told me that Mrs. Behn was the First Person he ever knew or heard of who made the Liquor call'd Milk Punch.'- Oldys; MS. note in Langbaine. In a tattered MS. recipe book, the compilation of a good housewife named Mary Rockett, and dated 1711, the following directions are given how to brew this tippie. 'To make Milk Punch. Infuse the rinds of 8 Lemons in a Gallon of Brandy 48 hours then add 5 Quarts of Water and 2 pounds of Loaf Sugar then Squeeze the Juices of all the Lemons to these Ingredients add 2 Quarts of new milk Scald hot stirring the whole till it crudles grate in 2 Nutmegs let the whole infuse 1 Hour then refine through a flannel Bag.'

* (5) 'She always Writ with the greatest ease in the world, and that in the midst of Company, and Discourse of other matters. I saw her my self write Oroonoko, and keep her own in Discoursing with several then present in the Room.'- Gildon: An Account of the Life of the Incomparable Mrs. Behn, prefixed to The Younger Brother (4to 1696). Southerne says, with reference to Oroonoko, 'That she always told his Story, more feelingly than she writ it.'

In 1690, there was brought out on the stage a posthumous comedy, The Widow Ranter.* But without her supervision, it was badly cast, the script was mauled, and it failed. In 1696 Charles Gildon, who posed as her favourite protege (and edited her writings), gave The Younger Brother. He had, however, himself tampered with the text. The actors did it scant justice and it could not win a permanent place in the theatrical repertory. In May, 1738, The Gentleman's Magazine published The Apotheosis of Milton, a paper, full of interest, which ran through several numbers. It is a Vision, in which the writer, having fallen asleep in Westminster Abbey, is conducted by a Genius into a spacious hall, 'sacred to the Spirits of the Bards, whose Remains are buried, or whose Monuments are erected within this Pile. To night an Assembly of the greatest Importance is held upon the Admission of the Great Milton into this Society.' The Poets accordingly appear either in the habits which they were wont to wear on earth, or in some suitable attire. We have Chaucer, Drayton, Beaumont, Ben Jonson, and others who are well particularized, but when we get to the laureates and critics of a later period there are some really valuable touches. In 1738 there must have been many alive who

could well remember Dryden, Shadwell, Otway, Prior, Philips, Sheffield Duke of Buckinghamshire, Dennis, Atterbury, Lee, Congreve, Rowe, Addison, Betterton, Gay. In the course of his remarks the guide exclaims to the visitor: 'Observe that Lady dressed in the loose Robe de Chambre with her Neck and Breasts bare; how much Fire in her Eye! what a passionate Expression in her Motions; And how much Assurance in her Features! Observe what an Indignant Look she bestows on the President [Chaucer], who is telling her, that none of her Sex has any Right to a Seat there. How she throws her Eyes about, to see if she can find out any one of the Assembly who inclines to take her Part. No! not one stirs; they who are enclined in her favour are overawed, and the rest shake their Heads; and now she flings out of the Assembly. That extraordinary Woman is Afra Behn.' The passage is not impertinent, even though but as showing how early condemnatory tradition had begun to incrustate around Astrea. Fielding, however, makes his Man of the World tell a friend that the best way for a man to improve his intellect and commend himself to the ladies is by a course of Mrs. Behn's novels. With the oncoming of the ponderous and starched decorum of the third George's reign her vogue waned apace, but she was still read and quoted. On 12 December, 1786, Horace Walpole writes to the Countess of Upper Ossory, 'I am going to Mrs. Cowley's new play,*(2) which I suppose is as instructive as the Marriage of Figaro, for I am told it approaches to those of Mrs. Behn in Spartan delicacy; but I shall see Miss Farren, who, in my poor opinion is the first of all actresses.' Sir Walter Scott admired and praised her warmly. But the pinchbeck sobriety of later times was unable to tolerate her freedom. She was condemned in no small still voice as immoral, loose, scandalous; and writer after writer, leaving her unread, reiterated the charge till it passed into a byword of criticism, and her works were practically taboo in literature, a type and summary of all that was worst and foulest in Restoration days. The absurdities and falsity of this extreme are of course patent now, and it was inevitable the recoil should come.

* It is ushered in by one 'G.J. her friend.' This was almost certainly George Jenkins.

*(2) 'The School for Greybeards, produced at Drury Lane, 25 November, 1786. It owes much of its business to The Lucky Chance. See the Theatrical History of that comedy (Vol. iii, p. 180). Miss Farren acted Donna Seraphina, second wife of Don Alexis, one of the Greybeards. She also spoke the epilogue.

It is a commonplace to say that her novels are a landmark in the history of fiction. Even Macaulay allowed that the best of Defoe was 'in no respect... beyond the reach of Afra Behn'. Above all Oroonoko can be traced directly and indirectly, perhaps unconsciously, in many a descendant. Without assigning her any direct influence on Wilberforce, much of the reeling of this novel is the same as inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe. She has been claimed to be the literary ancestress of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Chateaubriand; nor is it

any exaggeration to find Byron and Rousseau in her train. Her lyrics, it has been well said, are often of 'quite bewildering beauty', but her comedies represent her best work and she is worthy to be ranked with the greatest dramatists of her day, with Vanbrugh and Etherege; not so strong as Wycherley, less polished than Congreve. Such faults as she has are obviously owing to the haste with which circumstances compelled her to write her scenes. That she should ever recover her pristine reputation is of course, owing to the passing of time with its change of manners, fashions, thought and style, impossible. But there is happily every indication that- long neglected and traduced- she will speedily vindicate for herself, as she is already beginning to do, her rightful claim to a high and honourable place in our glorious literature.

THE END