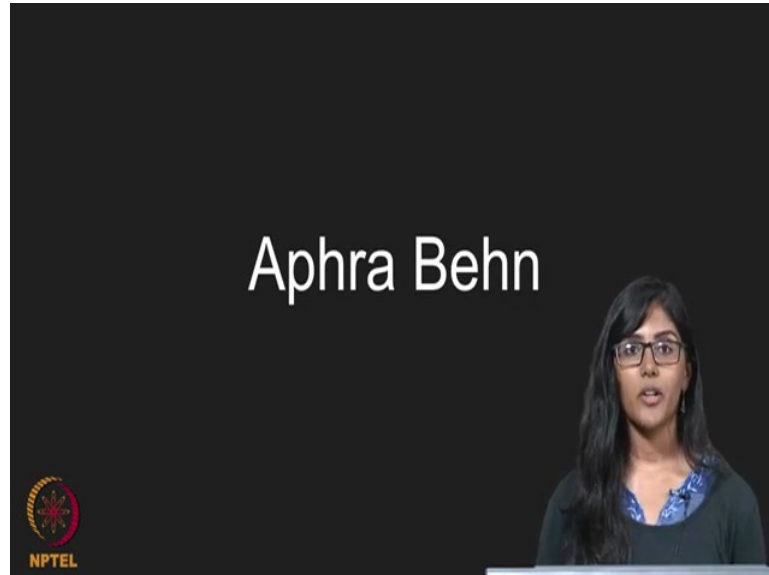


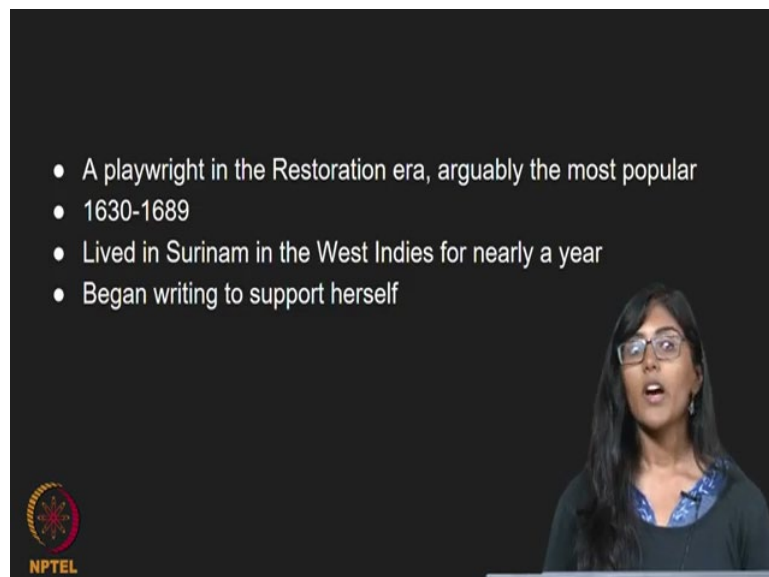
**Literary Criticism**  
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**Critical Importance of Aphra Behn**

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Hello everyone and welcome to this session of Literary Criticism for the NPTEL course. This session is on Aphra Behn who is quite a prominent and yet a simultaneously minor figure in the Restoration canon of literature in England.

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So, Aphra Behn is most commonly known as a playwright in the Restoration era, and it can be argued and has been argued that she is one of the most popular playwrights in the Restoration era. She was born in 1630 in England, and she died in 1689. Lack of birth records

or any other form of documentation whatsoever makes it difficult to place the exact date at which she was born, or the exact place in England where she was born, but it is commonly believed that she is the daughter of a barber and a wet nurse.

In some time in 1663, she lived in Surinam in the West Indies for nearly a year, she went with her father and her mother, and her father died. She came back a year later, and it was believed or documentation leads us to believe that she met a Dutch merchant with some variation of the spelling B E H N, Behn, and she married him, but there is no further mention of him and it is believed that he either died or left her, which is when she began writing to support herself because she needed the money.

She started writing in 1665 which was the height of the Restoration era. If you know English history you know that Charles the Second was restored to the throne in 1660- that was when the monarchy came back to England after the Republic, which was headed by Cromwell.

In 1665, she began writing and she began writing verse, that is how she started off her literary career. But it did not bring in too much money, possibly the fact that she was a woman, possibly the fact that she was not as popular and also possibly the fact that perhaps she did not have contacts.

But in 1668 she undertook some spying work for Charles the Second in Amsterdam I think, probably because of her Dutch connection, for which her letters and her diaries show that she was never paid although she repeatedly asked Charles the Second for reimbursement, he never did, and she was thrown into debtors' prison.

And that is also when she took to the pen seriously in order to bring in some income that could get her out of prison, out of debtors' prison. It did not reflect very well upon your status if you were thrown into prison for bankruptcy at that point of time.

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In verse:

- More classical than metaphysical
- Astrea, a speaker in Behn's poems
- Used verse that had a traditional relationship between structure and meaning
- Scandalous content

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So, moving on, in 1665, she started off by writing verse. Her poetry was more classical than metaphysical, which meant that she drew inspiration more from Ben Jonson and other poets and playwrights who followed classical traditions, more than she did from John Donne or rather what could be called more experimental poets of those days.

She wrote about contemporary events. She wrote about situations that she had first-hand experience in and people that she knew and these were not masked very well, whether it was in her verse or in her dramas. They were masked certainly, but they were masked just enough that people in her circle would know whom she was referring to. So, it is also seen as a form of satire and she was very good at it.

Astrea is a speaker in Behn's poems. This is a speaker that Behn creates and if it is not a first person speaker, then the speaker is usually Astrea in most of her poems. And this Astrea is a figure with a very definite voice, with very definite opinions. There is no vagueness as to who the speaker is in the poems. If it is not first-person I, referring directly to the poet as herself, it is Astrea. Astrea was also her codename for when she was performing espionage work for Charles the Second.

Now, it is interesting to note that her verse did not draw as much attention as her dramas did. She is well known for her plays rather than for her verse and later on she is known for her novel *Oroonoko*, which we will perhaps take a very brief look at. But the structure and the pattern of the poetry that she uses is a very traditional one.

So, it is not experimental, she is not trying out new forms or trying to revive extremely forgotten archaic old ones. She is following patterns that Johnson used himself and these verses have or these structures have a sort of unquestioned acceptance regarding the meaning that the structure has.

So, if a certain kind of structure is used, it is understood that it is meant for a certain kind of poem. So villanelles would perhaps signify a certain thing. If you are writing a poem of political protest, it would mean a different kind of structure, if you were writing one for courtship, it would mean another kind of structure. And so, if you use one kind of structure, it is understood that this is the genre of poetry that you use it for.

But with Behn the reason that she is probably looked upon so unfavorably, or the reason why she caused such a stir is that she broke this relationship. She did not follow this unquestioned very time-honored and accepted pattern, but she would use different structures for different genres of poetry that were not featured very much or that probably were not done very commonly or that were not done by “the Great Classicists” like Johnson, which probably drew a lot of unfavorable attention towards her.

Apart from this, apart from the verse and how she wrote her poems, she also drew inspiration from the lyricism that Philip Sidney used or Edmund Spenser used, rather than, as I said, more experimental poetry like John Donne. And Shakespeare was definitely a huge influence on her. And it is also important to note that the most authoritative version of her life is that she is the daughter of a barber, somewhere in Kent I think.

And questioning how a daughter of someone like a barber in Kent in the 1600s in England, had access to these kinds of resources where you could educate yourself into a classical tradition, I use “into” very deliberately because these forms of education were restricted to a certain group of people from certain economic classes alone.

And not just that; she was a woman as well, she was a girl, so, for her to possibly come across connections, make use of them, have access or gain access by whatever means she did, because none of this is ever documented anywhere, to a classical tradition, to an accepted tradition that was in existence in England and in Europe at the time is extremely resourceful of her. And not just to gain access to it, but to gain access to it to educate herself into it and to make use of it for her to produce her own writing is quite remarkable.

But then again, apart from the scandalous attention that her verse drew, in the beginning at least it did not draw too much attention. And that is probably why she turned to writing for the stage because she saw that these were more profitable, that this was a more profitable avenue for her to live upon than writing poetry.

Also, keep in mind that her contemporaries in poetry were people like Dryden and the Earl of Rochester, John Wilmot who had a certain stamp, a certain seal of approval from the court of Charles the Second. So, they were already established in a sense, and Behn was still possibly fighting her way against this or making her way into this pantheon of male verse and literature.

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"All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds". This is what Virginia Woolf wrote in 1929, in her book called *A Room of One's Own*, not a book but a series of essays called *A Room of One's Own*. And the reason Woolf says this is because Aphra Behn is the first woman who took up writing to make a living by it.

Yes, there were other women writers before her, during her time and after her, but these were from a certain class or they were from an elite aristocratic class where they were not forced to write, in order to make a living, in order to survive. They wrote for self-expression, for enjoyment, and also because they had access to education and wanted to, perhaps split their

wits and see where they stood against their male contemporaries, but it was not imperative that any of them write.

For Behn, however, it was extremely imperative that she wrote because this was the only way that she could get herself out of bankruptcy because she could expect no help from the state. Behn was also writing in a man's world with male value systems throughout and conforming to them at certain times and at other times appropriating them for her own needs, and perhaps at other times defying them outright.

So, for instance, there is a section of preface to one of her plays where she defends the charge of licentiousness that have been brought against all of her plays. It was common opinion that her plays were too ribald, were too bawdry, were too lewd for public viewing, for public consumption. And Behn outright states that the plays she has written, had they been written by a man would raise no eyebrows and no questions. But simply because it has been written by a woman all of these charges are being brought against them.

And she dares any of her critics or her contemporaries to hold up a play that she has written against one that has been written by Dryden or Shadwell or any of her other contemporaries at that time. And to point out a single instance of her being more lewd than her male contemporaries are. And she says, if you even find one instance where that can be so then I will accept all of your criticisms humbly without any objection.

So, this is a single instance of, perhaps a fraction of what she had to face being a woman in a man's world, especially at a time on the Restoration stage. Not just that. Keep in mind that she is coming from or she is following or she is next in line in a long tradition of essayists and critics who have debated how drama should be done, how literature should be done. What are the values of literature? What are the values of poetry? What are the rules that drama should follow? The unities for instance that Johnson was pretty insistent upon.

And you remember that Phillip Sydney says that it should teach as well as delight. And this is something that Dryden says as well, he says the drama should instruct or not instruct as well as delight, he says the drama should instruct delightfully, if I am not wrong. And all of these speak to certain moral value that they intend drama to have. And although this is commonly not associated with Restoration drama, the fact that people who wrote in the Restoration era and the Neo-classical era, the fact that they thought this is extremely important.

Behn on the other hand, again in one of her prefaces to one of her plays, I think it *is Lucky Chance*, sees no point in debating the value of drama or the usefulness of drama. She says that it is entertainment for any educated man that is what drama is, and to debate about how useful it is or what kind of value it should promote, or what kind of rules it should follow is completely pointless and she says it quite boldly.

Aphra Behn was probably one of the most popular playwrights. There is evidence to show that her contemporaries Dryden and Shadwell, Dryden for instance, was commissioned to write about three plays a year and he was commissioned by the court or by certain theatre companies to write three plays a year. So, no matter how badly these plays did, he would receive a certain sum of money for them for every play that he wrote.

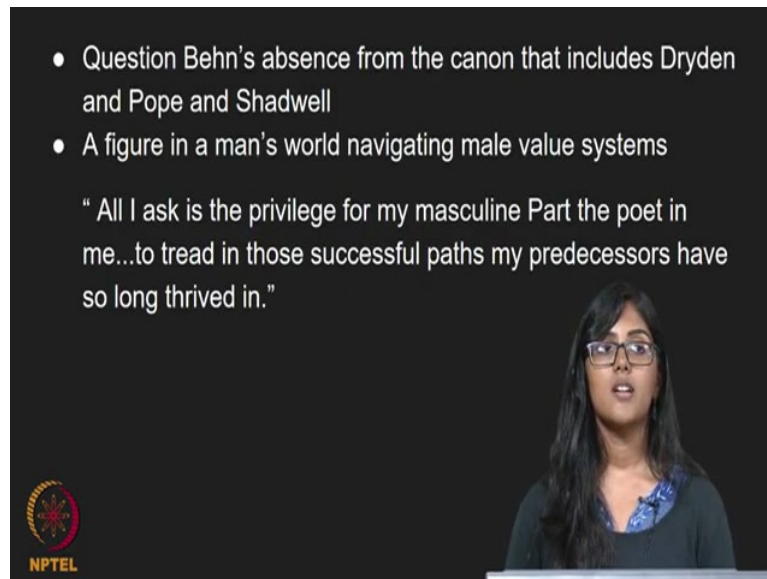
But commissions like this were not extended to women and least of all to Aphra Behn. She had no such commission, and her plays lived only as long as they live to put it very bluntly. If the play she wrote, if it was a success, it was a success and that is when she got her money. And even the successes depended on a night-to-night turnout of the audience. So, she is literally living from day-to-day from play-to-play. And if she invested all her time and energy and money in writing a play and having it performed and nobody showed up for that, it was too bad, she would not get paid for it, but it was not like that for the men.

Now, despite all of this, Aphra Behn's plays were performed by some of the most popular theater actors that were there during the Restoration era. There was a time at which she would have about 18 plays on the stage in a year and Dryden would have perhaps 13 or 14 and even Shadwell would have only 14. She was out-stripping all of them in terms of the number of plays she had upon stage and the amount of audience she was drawing for each of her plays and yet, she is mentioned as a token figure in the Restoration canon.

When you think of Restoration comedy or of Restoration drama in general, you think of Congreve, of Wycherley; when you think of the Neo-classical era, you think of Dryden, of Pope. And Behn is just sort of hanging there in between the two because her drama is most certainly, Restoration drama, but she has also written poetry, she has also written a novel.

*Oroonoko* is considered a prototype of the first English novel ever and yet she is accorded status that she probably would not have been accorded had she been a man, she would probably be more popular had she been a man who had written all of these things and done all of these wonderful amazing things, but that is not the case.

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- Question Behn's absence from the canon that includes Dryden and Pope and Shadwell
- A figure in a man's world navigating male value systems

" All I ask is the privilege for my masculine Part the poet in me...to tread in those successful paths my predecessors have so long thrived in."

We see her as a woman who has mobility in a man's world. Certainly, she is educated, although she has taken it upon herself to have that education. She has traveled, she has traveled to the West Indies, which was not a very common thing for women in her time to do. She has drawn from her experience. She has written verse, drama and literature. She has been a spy, she has traveled to Amsterdam as well. She is "in" the literary circle of the time, although she got there with a lot of effort.

But this kind of mobility that we see her having is also one that she has been forced to have. It is not like she came from a background where she was well-fed and well-educated and monetarily secure enough to venture into these circles, thinking that she had a second plan to fall back upon or a safe society net to fall back into, if things should go wrong. She had no other choice, she was forced to be this way and she has made an excellent success of it.

Sometimes even to the point that her contemporaries have been eclipsed. Behn has written a poem called "The Disappointment". She takes the story of Leander and Cloris and Leander comes upon Cloris in the woods one day, and he is extremely infatuated by her and he tries to make advances. But Cloris is not a very receptive of them, she is not receptive of them at all actually. And she swoons and she comes to and she finds Leander in a state of semi-potency and she just flees.

And this is Behn's writing of the poem and it is commonly agreed among critics that the intended meaning of the poem is that Cloris runs away because she does not want Leander and she does not want his advances. But interestingly it has also been argued and it is also



common enough to argue that the reason Cloris rushes away is because she is terrified and perhaps not terrified, but she is extremely modest and shy and she does not know how to react because she is inexperienced and all of that. And Behn has a very different take on that, she says that Cloris simply did not want it and never did and that is why she ran away and Leander is left extremely angry at the end.

Now, this is the poem that she has written. And John Wilmot, who is known as the Earl of Rochester and who was also alone known as an extremely licentious poet and Cavalier in Charles the Second's court has also written a similar poem called "The Imperfect Enjoyment", which deals with the similar theme of male impotency, except in the end of his poem, he recovers and he is able to do the deed, so to speak.

But when Behn's poem was published, it was first thought to be one of Rochester's poems and it was published in a collection of Rochester's poems. And the fact that a woman, not simply wrote, but dared to write about something like this, about a theme such as female enjoyment or female sexuality, shocked a lot of people and it did not draw her any favorable attention from people who could make or break her reputation.

Behn is very self-aware of the fact that education and access to education is restricted to a privileged few. And this is seen in the way in which she writes her prefaces to her plays and directs them to an audience because most of her prefaces and sometimes her epilogues to her plays are responding to charges.

We see her responding to charges of licentiousness, of ribaldness, of women writing for the stage, of women being popular enough, of women dealing with topics that are traditionally not meant to be dealt with, like female sexuality and sensuality and enjoyment.

And so you see her answering a lot of these charges in her prefaces and the epilogues of her plays *The Rover*, *Abdelazer*, *The Lucky Chance*, these are just a few plays where her prefaces extremely strong. And in one such preface she talks about learning and about how learning and education are the privilege of men, because it has been so all of this while.

But you also see that because it has been restricted to men, men are definitely above women, or are better educated than women, but and this is the argument we understand that has been leveled at her, that she is a woman with no traditional or classical learning to speak of, how dare she write. And she is answering us by saying yes, definitely men are better educated than women, but that is only because education has been restricted to the privileged few men.

However, if we are to go according to the tradition that you male figures hold so highly, then Shakespeare and Johnson are definitely part of your canon. And yes, Johnson was certainly classically educated and had access to education, but Shakespeare was definitely infinitely more popular than Johnson and he was a man who had little more than Grammar school education and who in some sense, like Behn herself educated himself into a tradition, so to speak, and did not come from Oxford or Cambridge or any of these schools. But, you know, he educated himself and he was wildly popular.

And she says, well, if you are holding Shakespeare up to be part of your great canon and tradition, then certainly I can feature and because I am because, you know at that point of time, her plays were doing much better than any of her contemporaries. And you see her as being a very sharp, very astute woman, with also a wonderful sense of humor.

So, you can see that she is sort of perhaps mocking the tradition or scorning it or not just mocking it or scorning it but in a sense, she herself is pointing to ruptures in the tradition that is understood as being contiguous without a break, without any form of rupture whatsoever. It is seen as a neat, streamlined kind of tradition, you know. The people who are part of this canon certainly must be great, must have had some sort of education. But she points to Shakespeare specifically, and says that well, look at him, he had very little learning and he wrote only for money and only for the stage. And he has done pretty well for himself and his education was no measure of his success in drama.

And this way, you see Behn doing a sort of criticism herself. She is looking back at the canon, she is looking at the absence of female figures in writing. And you see her, not exactly dismissing the tradition, but like I said, pointing to breaks or ruptures in it. But despite her being able to do this, she is still a figure in a man's world and she is navigating a world with male value systems. So, in this sense she incorporates and as I mentioned earlier, she appropriates some of these instances, some of these value systems at times.

Remember, Behn is writing at a time when Charles the Second has allowed women to act on stage. Now, that means that there would definitely be more people coming to watch the plays because of perhaps the titillating experience of it all. But Behn would definitely appropriate all of this, all of these factors. She knew that a lot of the audience would be male, and to ensure that she had a lot of people showing up for her plays, there would always be women, there would definitely be women in her plays, very strong women characters as well.

But she would have women dressing up in men's clothes for instance, to titillate the audience more because the sight of a woman in man's clothes, in trousers specifically where legs are delineated so clearly because they have been under skirts all this while, would draw more people to her place. She would have women dressing up in men's clothes, she would have a lot of bedroom scenes where women would sit or would start undressing at the end of a long day and scenes like that.

And she would also simultaneously give them extremely strong speeches. So, there is one play where there is a girl from a lovely aristocratic family who falls in love with a character, very much like John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester. He is a rake, he is licentious, but he is extremely witty and humorous and good-looking and all of that and he is a favorite at court.

And there is a girl from an aristocratic family who falls in love with him. You know, she is very good, she is very sweet, she is well-educated, and things like that, in whatever domain it was appropriate for women of aristocratic families to be educated in those points of time.

And there is also a prostitute, who is also deeply in love with this licentious rake. And you see the entire play progressing. And you see the girl from the aristocratic family ending up with this rake, with this well-educated rake from a good family who is a favorite at court.

And you see them falling in love and getting married, but you also see that it is the prostitute who has the strongest speeches and the best dialogue so to speak. And Behn I think is simply quite ingenious at doing this because she is breaking the binary. Firstly, she is talking about things that were never talked about, I mean, I do not think any play in the history of English literature, or very few plays in the history of English literature, show prostitutes as human beings or as women with desires of their own, with problems of their own, who can also be good human beings. They were definitely cast into very certain binaries, good and bad.

If you are prostitute you are bad, you have no morals. But Behn showed how it is possible for women to perhaps take up prostitution, perhaps to enjoy it, perhaps to have feelings of love themselves for men. And it is in that sense and perhaps with that motive in mind that she gives them that she gave this character such strong speeches. Because at the end of the play, you feel a lot of sympathy for the prostitute when you see her as a human being. And these were topics that Behn was dealing with that no male dramatist had ever dealt with before and it certainly shocked a lot of people.

So, you see her appropriating the fact that people would perhaps come to watch a play where there would be cross-dressing, where there would be a lot of licentiousness in the play itself. And you see her using that to sort of give a voice to trodden-down characters and perhaps minority characters like prostitutes.

And with regard to minority characters, you also see her doing this in *Oroonoko*. You see that *Oroonoko* who is a slave, who from Africa is renamed to Caesar. And you see Behn humanizing him extremely which was not common for authors or playwrights in her day.

“All I ask is the privilege for my masculine part, the poet in me, to tread in those successful parts my predecessors have so long thrived in”. This is another statement Behn makes in another one of her prefaces to a play and here you see not just the conflict, but you see her caught between these two worlds.

On one hand, she has dismissed, not dismissed, but shown how easy it is to dismiss learning as any measure of success, because being well-educated and being classically-trained ensures you know success on stage, and she points it out with Shakespeare and perhaps herself as well.

And she shows how the majority of the literary pantheon or literary canon is composed of males simply because they are the ones who had access to education. But at the same time, she asks for the privilege of her masculine part, which is the poet in her to tread successful parts her predecessors have so long thrived in.

And now, you see her equating poetry to a male domain, you see her attributing it to men, you see her, you see that Behn views poetry as a masculine activity, as something that only men have been able to do for so long and not just that, but been able to do very well, is what she is implicitly acknowledging in this.

Or perhaps she is simply making use of this as rhetoric, in order to implore her readers and her critics to read her poems on an equal standard, on an equal footing, along with those of her male contemporaries because you see her using the words “my masculine part, the poet in me.” So, the part of a woman that writes poetry has to be masculine because it has so long been a masculine activity, simply because it has been restricted to men who have had learning and tradition behind them, backing them up.

“To tread in those successful paths my predecessors have so long thrived in”. Poets, yes, she begs to be included among those or she begs for her masculine part, the part of her that writes poetry is the masculine part, to be included among those who write poetry and who become part of a canon, Behn asks for this privilege. And this can be seen as an instance where she perhaps is making use of rhetoric, perhaps believes in it, because it is impossible to say what she was thinking, documentation on her, about her thoughts, and her life is not as extensive as critics would like it to be.

But, it is these ruptures like this, where Behn fights her way into a canon, or fights her way partially into a canon, and enough to show the ruptures in the canon and in the accepted contiguity of the canon. And she points out the ruptures. And she also makes use of the value system that a canon makes use of in order to legitimize certain people, to try and ask for the same privilege herself.

Now, all of these points that we have been talking about bring us or can, in a way be used to answer, not just answer but to formulate a question about Behn’s absence from a canon, which includes Dryden and Pope and Shadwell. And yet there is a simultaneous token presence in it and I will illustrate this with a very quick segue into English history.

You see, the Neo-classical era and the Restoration era overlap quite a bit as to their authors. Dryden, for one, is a figure who is considered a Neoclassicist and yet is quite popular on the Restoration stage. His adaptations of classical texts and of comedy such as *Antony and Cleopatra* and other plays were performed on Restoration stage as Restoration drama along with Wycherley, Congreve and Aphra Behn.

But we also see that Behn is definitely associated with Restoration drama, whereas Dryden is associated with Neoclassicism as well as Restoration drama. And you see that Behn is definitely nowhere near the neoclassical canon, which is extremely strange because the two periods overlap. They are both in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or late 17<sup>th</sup> century in England. Restoration specifically lasted until about the 1690s, from 1660 to 1690. But Neoclassicism spans a time before this and very definitely during this as well.

But you see that the difference between neoclassicism which was commonly understood as a period when texts would draw inspiration from classical texts. But texts throughout literary history have been doing that. It is quite impossible for texts to not draw inspiration from

classical texts or from preceding texts. So, neoclassicism is specifically an era when texts imitated classical texts, they did not simply draw inspiration from it, they imitated it.

And in that sense, you see that Johnson could possibly be the first neoclassicist, because he was classically trained and he translated a lot of Latin and Greek texts into English, so as to make them accessible. He translated Horace's *Ars Poetica* and he also made available a translation of Aristotle's criteria for drama, such as the unities. The action in a play must happen in the span of 24 hours, across the span of a certain day, and not longer than that, only in a certain geographical location, he popularized this and this was followed very strictly by French neoclassicists in the 17th century.

So, it is about the same time as Neoclassicism and the Restoration era going on in England that they going on in France as well, except French dramatists such as Moliere and Racine followed this to the T, so to speak. But you will see the reason why I am saying all of this. But, Dryden, who was also a neoclassicist in England, while he was also classically trained, said that following the unities, you know, like in this way to the T, without any break from it, following Aristotle's laws extremely rigidly, simply lead to a death of the plot and to a lot of narrowness of imagination that is what Dryden says.

And he says that plays should instruct delightfully. So, this is a rather long-winded way of pitting Dryden against Behn, both of whom were pretty much contemporaries. But you see, if you go back to the earlier bit where I mentioned that Aphra Behn sees it as pointless to argue about the value of drama, simply because drama does not have any value, it is entertainment even for the most erudite of minds, she says, but Dryden says that dramas should instruct delightfully.

So, you see both of them drawing from different parts of the same tradition. Aphra Behn draws from Sydney and Sydney's lyricism and Dryden draws from Sydney's idea and belief that, you know, poetry, in this case drama should instruct delightfully, should teach as well as delight. You see Dryden as advocating for a break from classical standards, which is not what other neoclassicists like Pope would ever advocate.

Breaking away from Aristotle's criteria for drama, saying that the English stage and English plays have more life in them and this should not be ruined by simply following Aristotle's ideas of Unities very rigidly, this is not what neoclassicists would say and yet Dryden is saying it, and yet he is part of the canon.

And then there is Aphra Behn who is pointing out how certain figures like Shakespeare, who have not been educated into a tradition and are yet part of it, and yet her views are not as popular as Dryden's, because quite simply, it was easier to find Dryden's views on drama, and he is also got an essay on dramatic poesy. It was a lot easier to if you do a Google search on the net, to find Dryden's views on topics such as these than to find Aphra Behn's views on topics such as these.

Now, that is also because Dryden of course has written monographs and essays on things like dramatic poesy and criticism. But we find extremely insightful views on the class of the time, on who has access to education and things like that in Aphra Behn's prefaces and epilogues to her plays. All of her points that I have given you about the masculine part of the poet, about education being restricted, and things like that are found in the prefaces and epilogues of her plays.

So, yes, she has not written essays or what is considered, "serious writings" on topics like these, but nevertheless her views are present and culling them out from her drama, culling them out from what she has written as light-hearted drama, what is understood as light-hearted drama is an extremely interesting exercise because it provides more insight into what society was like at that time, into commonly held ideas of decorum, education, class, standard, which, yes, are reflected upon and are explained by her contemporaries who have had access to education. But an unintended view or perhaps a subtly-intended view of these topics is more insightful, the way Behn has given them.

Now, in this way, a couple of quick points on *Oroonoko*, now if you are familiar with the World Literature Course, you will know that *Oroonoko* is a novel written by Aphra Behn, close to the end of the Restoration period. And it was written in the span, I think she wrote it in one or two sittings at most, so, it is a very hastily written novel. But nonetheless, it is an extremely well-written novel for it is considered to be the first prototype of an English novel.

And it is also dealing with race. It is dealing with a slave, an African Prince, whose is captured and brought over to the West Indies which is where Behn spent a year of her life. And Behn provides an extremely human view of it. Behn also provides a rather obvious view about the savagery that is there at the heart of colonialism. Because remember, the restoration era follows directly, not directly, but follows the Elizabethan era with a couple of eras in between.

The Elizabethan era was when colonialism was at its peak, there were explorers going out to explore, coming back with tales of new lands with diaries, travelogues and memoirs being published. And Behn apart from her own travels drew from a lot of these I would expect, about how the white man was colonizing and conquering these territories and believing that they were bringing civilization to them.

*Oroonoko* talks about or shows how the colored person has culture and ideas of their own and are sometimes more civilized than what the Englishman believes himself to be, than what the white man believes himself to be. And yes, this is a reading that we are doing retrospectively. Yes, these are meanings that we attribute to Behn's work retrospectively, in hindsight. Nevertheless, the fact that she was able to write about this at a time when it was happening says a lot, about how perceptive she was about events that were happening around her and she was able to foresee the end that they would bring as well.

Another quick comment about Behn's presence in or absence in a canon is that, *Oroonoko* was not very popular when it first came out. And after Behn's death, which was in 1689, she died quite at the end of the Restoration era, just at the end of the Restoration era which is believed to end in 89 or in 1690 after the Glorious Revolution, but yes, Behn died and *Oroonoko* survived not as a novel, but it was adapted for the stage. And Behn did not adapt it for the stage, it was adapted by one of her younger contemporaries for the stage, who changed the ending and who made it extremely like *Othello* and the implications here are obvious. And that was an extremely popular play the one he adapted to be mapped on to *Othello* exactly, because this play that he adapted to the lines of *Othello* was far more popular than Behn's novel ever was.

And you see Behn's novel that deals with race, surviving into the ages or into the first half of the 18th century at least, as this play, not as her own play, not even surviving as her own novel, that is a far cry. It has been adapted for the stage- that is fine. But it is surviving as a play that has been adapted from something she has written and it has been adapted by a man.

And this adaptation is modeled on the lines of a play written by Shakespeare, who is a very easy reference point in the tradition. He is a very easy reference point for people to understand more than Aphra Behn. And that is how this is: her verse does not survive her, her restoration drama is popular today, yes, but that is after revival attempts. And the one novel that she wrote, the one novel that she wrote survives not as a novel but on stage adapted by a man, adapted to suit an audience that has Shakespeare as a reference point in their tradition.

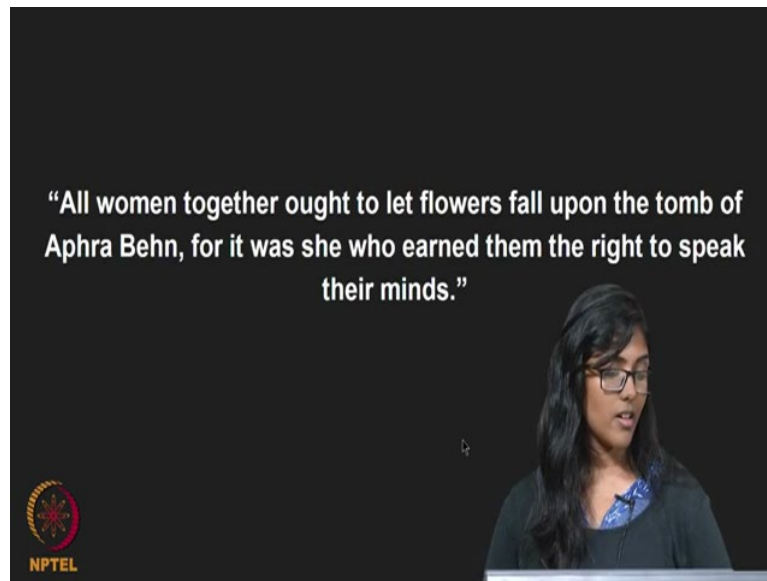


And I think that there is something to be said for going back to Behn's ideas of how education is no measure of popularity, because if they keep referencing back to Shakespeare, a man who had very little classical education, so to speak, then what are we to make of this tradition? Can Behn not find a place in it? Should she not be accorded a place in it? Is she not be accorded a place in it simply because she is a woman and simply because she did not fit in neatly into any of the categories of purely Restoration drama? Which is what Wycherley and Congreve they fit in pretty neatly into the categories of Restoration comedy.

But Behn is not simply dealing with comedy, she deals with satire, she deals with a whole host of serious themes and to top it all she is a woman. But not only has she written drama, she has probably seen more of the world than her contemporaries have. She has traveled to Amsterdam and Surinam.

She has written the prototype of a novel. She has written verse, sometimes even better than Rochester's, but still is sort of tacked under his name. And yet, she does not fit in neatly anywhere and this is a huge problem for, I suppose, literary periodization and categorizations of where to place Behn. But nevertheless, she must be placed.

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And going back to this comment is a good way to end this presentation. "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds." You see Behn as a figure who has dabbled in so many different genres and so many different ways of life that she is not fitted properly into any category, into any periodization. You see her as drawing from the classical tradition of being perhaps in her verse maybe a better neoclassicist than Dryden was. She does not openly dismiss Aristotle's three Unities. It is a good assumption that she was probably aware of them.

But you see Dryden openly dismissing them and yet he is guaranteed a part, a place in the neoclassical canon. Behn is not and yet her verse follows traditional structures, perhaps not traditional content, but traditional structures. And I think Behn brings up a lot of questions about how we categorize authors, about how we conveniently slot them into periodization, about how it is very convenient to associate Behn with bawdry Restoration comedy and be done with it and, oh right, she is a token woman writer. She is *a* woman writer in the Restoration era. But I think it would be more appropriate to say that Behn was *the* woman writer of the Restoration era. And I would like to end with this quote. Thank you.