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English Literature: Aspects of female passion and love in a selection of Aphra Behn's poetry

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Figure 1: Aphra Behn, engraving of portrait attributed to Mary Beale.
Acknowledgements

It is with some premature relief that I am handing over this dissertation, although I have yet to realize how I managed to complete it before the deadline. One thing is for sure: after the research and the proverbial months of ‘blood, sweat and tears’, it has yet to sink in with me that my Master thesis is finished and that I am soon to be a graduate of Ghent University; that is, if all goes well. I would however not be able to fully enjoy this event before acknowledging the help I received throughout this year.

First of all I would like to warmly thank the driving force behind my thesis: Professor Jean-Pierre Vander Motten. His courses on “English Literature II: Historical Survey: Older Period” in the Second Bachelor and “English Renaissance Literature” in the Master program captivated and increased my interest for English literature in the Renaissance period. It was Professor Vander Motten who also provided me with the subject for my bachelor paper and showed me that the world of seventeenth-century literature contains more than those ‘great names’ of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. My interest was now awakened in a pioneer seventeenth-century woman writer, Aphra Behn.

Aphra Behn is one of those authors who is regrettably not that well known in academic circles and outside. She has long been left out of the canon of English literature and as a consequence, many of her works have remained almost undiscussed. I saw it as a challenge to examine a selection of Behn’s love poems in this dissertation given the little scholarly research available and with the necessary support, feedback and patience from my supervisor it has been made possible.

Secondly I would like to thank my parents. Thanks to them, my passion for the English language grew from childhood onwards and my bookshelves are now crammed with English literature. Without their support and encouragements during the writing process of my thesis, I would not be where I am now. Thanks also to my boyfriend for supporting me.

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1. Justification

The occasion for writing this thesis has sprung from my passion for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literature throughout my academic studies at the faculty of Arts and Literature at Ghent University. After having attended Professor Vander Motten’s course on ‘English Literature II: Historical Survey: Older Period’ in the autumn of 2007, my interest for not only the great seventeenth century novelists grew but also for the female authors of the age, in particular Aphra Behn. I decided to write my bachelor paper in the field of late seventeenth- and eighteenth century fiction, focusing on a selection of short stories by Aphra Behn. In 2010, when I chose English as a main subject for my Master’s degree, I took further interest in Aphra Behn’s poetry and chose to discuss the aspects of love and gender dynamics in a selection of Aphra Behn’s love poems.

All poems discussed can be found in the appendix.

2. The tradition of seventeenth-century poetry: an outline

The seventeenth century is a period in English poetry influenced by the previous century’s tendency to “continue features of native medieval verse and developments based on classical and continental renaissance poetry” (Parfitt 13). The influence of classicism on seventeenth-century poetry is however double. On the one hand poets of the period wanted to imitate their predecessors and this tendency can be explained by means of the concept of “authority” which “remains […] important throughout the century” (Parfitt 13). Parfitt has argued that poets such as Carew, Donne, Oldham, and Dryden followed the example of both their sixteenth-century predecessors and Latin poets such as Catullus (13). This is reflected in the genre of the lyric, for example in the “sonnets of Sidney” (Parfitt 13). This is of course not to say that there was no personal input of the poets, but the concept of innovation had a different meaning in the seventeenth century then it has now. It was seen as “a matter of building on what already
exists, adapting, refining, and naturalizing” (Parfitt 13) it to a context of the poet’s choice. Another genre that became prolific in the Restoration is the satire. It was a continuation of the satiric poetry attacking “individuals, topical events and political ideology” (King 192) in previous decades and the basis for many mock-heroic poems and satires. Some of the famous satirists of the time are Butler, Rochester, Suckling and Dryden. Besides the genres of the lyric and the satire there was also a variety of “popular religious verse, folk lyric, and popular political satire” (Parfitt 15).

Literature was an area mainly restricted to men, which however does not mean that there were no female writers. For women to publish their works and sign them with their own name was however considered equal to prostitution and therefore some of them were forced to use pseudonyms in order to get their works published. Women writers in general suffered a lot of criticism and had often difficulties in not only having their works printed but also in attaining any success. Love poetry too was the realm of male poets who depicted women as a “passive receptacle of male desire” (Goreau 183), reducing them to sexual objects and mistresses who were not allowed an opinion of their own; they only had to obey their lovers. In the 1660s, the beginning of the Restoration, love became a “war between the sexes” (Goreau 181), depicting a “roving gallant who attempts to seduce a young lady, or even several young ladies, without committing himself in any way, while the heroine usually withholds her favors and tries to hold his interest through a series of false promises, disguises, teasings [...] before she takes the risk of sleeping with him” (Goreau 181). The love-poetry of the period reflects this battle between men and women. Women such as Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood were among several writers who rebelled against patriarchal conventions in their works.
3. A biography of Aphra Behn.

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) is a seventeenth-century British author who is known in most academic circles as a Restoration playwright. Some well-known plays of her are “The Rover” (Part one published in 1677 and Part two in 1681), “The Dutch Lover” (1673) and “Sir Patient Fancy” (1678). Behn has also published several poetry collections, novels (e.g. “Oroonoko”, 1688) and short stories such as “The History of the Nun” (1688). She is a prolific author having written a range of works in different genres roughly in between 1671 and 1689. Up to 1718, several posthumous poems and novels of Behn have also been published.

Behn’s identity has “long been shrouded in mystery” (Todd, inside cover page) but this has changed in the last three decades of the 20th century, largely by the merit of Maureen Duffy, Angeline Goreau and Janet Todd who each wrote a biography of Aphra Behn. Behn has led an eventful life, not only establishing herself as an autonomous female writer but addressing in her works social and political issues and even erotic topics.

In what follows I will give an overview of Behn’s life and the struggles she went through in order to become a writer in Restoration England, basing myself largely on Goreau’s biography of Behn. Seventeenth-century patriarchal society has been an important factor in turning her into a distinctly unique and ‘freethinking writer’ (Todd, inside cover page) in her age and even now, and her poems strongly reflect this influence.

Aphra Behn’s origins have long remained uncovered due to the fact that she was not considered a “famous writer” (Goreau 7) by scholars throughout the age. This has proven to be an unjust treatment; Behn was as prolific a writer as most of her contemporary male authors whose names did survive throughout literary history and were incorporated into the ‘canon’ of seventeenth-century literature. As Goreau argues, in her own time Behn was however considered at least “as well as Dryden or Wycherley” (Goreau 7) and even kept in contact with several of them.

The first to write a biography about Behn is a woman who wishes to remain anonymous, signing her “History of the Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn” with the name ‘One of the Fair Sex’. Paradoxically, Behn’s descent has remained just as much covered
up in mystery. This first biographer describes Behn as a “gentlewoman by birth, of a good family in the city of Canterbury in Kent” (Goreau 8). Behn’s maiden name was Aphra Johnson and this is confirmed by other sources that emerged in the 19th century. For instance, a vicar’s entry in “the parish register” (Goreau 9) of the town of Wye states that “On July 1640, were baptized at Wye, Ayfara the daughter and Peter the son of John and Amy Johnson” (Goreau 9). Goreau points out that Sir Edmund Gosse discovered in a manuscript of Anne Finch a reference to Wye as being the birthplace of Behn and a note stating that Mrs. Behn was daughter to a barber, who lived formerly in Wye, a little market town in Kent (Goreau 8-9). Later Behn was found to be the daughter of “John and Amy Amis” (Goreau 9) instead of Johnson. In any case, there is a record of an Aphra or ‘Ayfara’ born in Wye in 1640. Nowadays several scholars agree on the account of Colonel Thomas Colepepper, who “declared that her (Aphra’s) mother had been his wet-nurse” and that “her father’s name was Johnson” (Todd 13). Todd argues that Aphra could likely be “the daughter of Colepepper’s wet-nurse and Finch’s barber” (Todd 14), a girl named “Eaffrey Johnson, daughter of a Bartholomew Johnson of Canterbury” (Todd 14). Aphra’s mother would then probably be a woman named “Elizabeth Johnson, née Denham […], wet-nurse to the infant Colonel […] since Elizabeth had lived close to Colepepper’s mother during the latter’s first, more elevated marriage to Lord Strangford” (Todd 14).

There remain doubts concerning Aphra’s education as well, for if we accept the assumption that her father was a barber and her mother a wet-nurse, then how do we explain her “gentle upbringing” (Goreau 12) and broad knowledge of the world? An account of the “history of Surinam” (Goreau 12) has noted that a certain Johnson had been appointed “as Lieutenant General of that colony” (Goreau 12) and that Johnson “took with him his wife and children, and in that number, an adopted daughter Aphra” (Goreau 12). Elsewhere it has been argued that Aphra might have been the “natural daughter” (Goreau 13) of a Lady Willougby; this then would explain Aphra’s own upbringing as a lady. In either case, despite her humble origins and childhood in the rural area of Kent, Aphra turns into a true lady and “a learned woman” (Goreau 28). Her works are a reflection of the “conventional gentlewoman’s instruction” (Goreau 29) she has received: she masters the French language - as “The Disappointment” which a reworking of a French poem proves – and inserts an abundance of “references to Greek and Roman
mythology, to classical philosophy, poetry, and drama” (Goreau 29) as well as “French, Italian and occasional Spanish phrases” in her poems and plays.

Aphra’s decision to become a writer was not received well by society since most young educated women were expected to marry and were instructed accordingly: they had to learn “reading and writing and […] accounting” (Goreau 26) as well as “lessons in singing, dancing, playing the flute, French” (Goreau 26) etcetera. She grew up in a patriarchal society that attached importance to “individualism and to a revolutionary vision of an ideal world” (Goreau 21). These ideas were however solely reserved for men, yet Aphra identified strongly with them too.

Around 1663, the now 23-year old Aphra travels “with her family” (Duffy 29) to the West Indies and Surinam. Her father was supposedly “related to Lord Willougby” (Duffy 31), who set out to the Indies and Surinam for colonial matters and needed a “captain general for Surinam” (Duffy 31) yet there is no real proof of this. Duffy has suggested that Aphra’s father might as well “have gone as a planter, taking his family with him” (Duffy 32). Upon her return from the voyage to Surinam, Aphra wrote her famous novel ‘Oronooko’ (1688) dealing with the issue of slavery. Aphra’s unconventional character emerges already in this novel: she disapproves of and even condemns England’s colonial practices. A year after the voyage to Surinam, in 1664, Aphra finds herself back in London, England. Her father had died during the journey to Surinam and she is left without an “inheritance” (Goreau 71). As a woman with “no dowry, no income and no imminent prospect of any income” (Goreau 71), there were few other opportunities than either to marry, become a “chamber maid” (Goreau 71) or a mistress.

Quite against society’s conventions, Aphra Johnson chooses a future as a writer rather than securing herself financially and socially into what she calls “the legalized prostitution of arranged marriage” (Duffy 25-26). Yet she is aware of the disadvantages of being an independent woman writer in a patriarchal society and especially a “male-dominated literary world” (Goreau 29-30). In the seventeenth century, it was not only “unthinkable” (Goreau 71) for higher middle and upper class women to work but also
inappropriate for women in general to express their ideas and feelings into writing - publishing one’s work was even considered “a violation of feminine property” (Goreau 14). Aphra rebels against these conventions and openly writes about topics such as desire and sex; she has therefore long been considered “indecent, immoral, immodest” (Goreau 14) and her works have for a long time not been read for those same reasons.

Despite her aversion for marriage and her “limited marital possibilities” (Goreau 85) as a beautiful, intelligent yet dowerless woman, in 1664 Aphra does marry a Mr. Behn. Several records mention Mr. Behn as “a merchant of this city (i.e. London) though of Dutch extraction” (Duffy 48) or “an eminent London merchant of Dutch ancestry” (Goreau 84). These references remain however ambiguous; according to Duffy, Behn either could be born a Londoner or a Dutchman trading in London; the name Behn is furthermore not Dutch but “German” (48). Mr. Behn is even considered by some as “merely an invention” (Goreau 85) of Aphra. By 1666, as Goreau argues, Aphra is no longer married to Hoyle and the marriage has only covered a short period of her life (85). Some facts remain however incontestable: Aphra adopts the name of Behn for the rest of her life, using it for instance “on official correspondence” when she was in Antwerp in 1666 and signing most of her work with the name “Mrs. B.”. She was also “buried in Westminster Abbey as Mrs. Behn” (Goreau 85).

Behn is not only an exceptional figure in seventeenth century England because of an unconventional attitude which she displays through and in her writing, but also because of the politics in which she becomes involved in the 1660s. Goreau points out that despite the laws prohibiting women not only to act independently of their husbands in the private sphere, “involvement in state-matters” too was simply out of the question (89). This was part of the social rules dictating that women are only required to learn those social skills to please their husband and to display modesty above all else. Aphra Behn’s conscious choice to take up a political position in 1666 by “entering King Charles’ intelligence service” (Goreau 90) is therefore quite extraordinary. Behn is to act as a spy in the Anglo-Dutch war, traveling from England to Bruges and Antwerp for that reason. From Antwerp, she wrote several letters under the pseudonym ‘Astrea’ to Lord Arlington, who was the “Secretary of State in charge of intelligence” (Goreau 91) at the
time. After some months in Antwerp, Behn began to suffer from “money troubles” (Goreau 91) and despite several letters in which she pleaded Arlington for help, she is left to herself. At one point she tries to get back to England and borrows about “one hundred fifty pounds from a Mr. Butler” (Goreau 91) for that purpose. She is not able to pay back that amount of money once back in London although she solicits the King “to pay her […] what is so justly due” (Goreau 112), and is incarcerated for debts in a London prison in 1668. At some point Behn is able to leave prison again but the event has left its mark on her; she has learned the hard way that dependence on other could have dangerous consequences and that she needs her own financial base to become truly independent, as Goreau argues (113).

It is not clear when exactly Behn is released from prison but there is a record that she is “free by the middle of 1669 and at the door of the theater with a play” (Goreau 115). At this point she is 29 years old and decides the time has come to try and earn a living by writing, so she starts writing plays. Although Aphra Behn is arguably “the first woman to live by her pen” (Goreau 115), there are records of other women playwrights who tried their luck, however not successfully. Aphra Behn’s career as a playwright does however take off, initially because of some help from the director of the Duke’s Company, “Thomas Betterton” (Goreau 118), who arranged a staging of “her first play and afterward made her a ‘house’ playwright” (Goreau 118) but mostly for two reasons. Firstly, in the 1660s a change occurred in theaters, i.e. the “introduction of actresses to the stage” (Goreau 118-119) and secondly, the “advent of professional writers” (Goreau 118-119). Playwrights were now no longer heavily dependent on patrons and could earn enough money to support themselves. Aphra’s steady but sure rise to become a financially independent playwright has begun with the staging of “The Forced Marriage; or, the Jealous Bridegroom” (Goreau 123) in 1670. What makes the play distinctly different from all other plays written and performed at the time is its “feminine viewpoint” (Goreau 126). It is a first play of fifteen that Aphra Behn would write between 1670 and 1687 and it will prove to be the start of many works, not only plays, in which she boldly addressed political and social issues and shows her concern with women’s treatment in patriarchal society.
From the late 1670s and 1680s Behn starts publishing poems and novels as well, the first of them being the novel “The Fair Jilt” (1688), short stories and poems such as “Love Armed” (1677), “The Disappointment” (1680) and also the poetry volume “Poems upon Several Occasions” (1684).

Aphra Behn is now widowed and has left her spying missions behind her; she is fully concentrated on her writing career. In her work she constantly struggles for more social and sexual independence for women and for true equality in relationships; however when she meets John Hoyle, her ideals are problematized. He would become the one person whom she passionately falls in love with and the subject of so many of her poems. John Hoyle is said to be a “lawyer of Gray’s Inn” (Goreau 189) and entertained as contradictory a reputation as perhaps Aphra Behn does: he is described as “a Puritan in political stance, a Restoration rake in lifestyle […] witty and cynical” (Goreau 192). Goreau states that it “cannot be said for certain how or exactly when Aphra met Hoyle” (Goreau 192) but one thing is clear: he is a good friend of Aphra. She falls in love with him and it is generally assumed that Aphra began “a love-affair with John Hoyle […] sometime in the early or middle 1670s” (Goreau 193). Paradoxically he is one of the few men, if not the only man against whom she could not defend herself. Hoyle “kept her under his power by withholding his affection and approval, by holding her on the edge of rejection” (Goreau 197). In a number of poems by Behn, the evolution of the couple’s affections for each other is described and Aphra often refers to Hoyle by “using pastoral names such as “Amyntas, Lysander, Lysidas” (Duffy 132). In the end, their relationship did not last. The exact reasons of their break-up are not clear but it has been argued that Aphra “was too much for John Hoyle” (Goreau 199). Aphra was at the same time struggling with “her instinct for independence and her desperate need to hold on to him” (Goreau 199) and would not accept the way in which he treats her. Hoyle was also homosexual but “what effect […] it had on the relationship itself cannot be said” (Goreau 204). Aphra remains constant to her ideals of female independency and a right of an opinion of her own in one of her notes to Hoyle:

“I scorn to guard my tongue, yet I can with much ado hold it, when I have a great mind to say a thousand things I know will be taken in all ill sense.”

(Goreau 204)
In the 1670s then, Aphra Behn enjoys reasonable “success in society” (Goreau 211). She has a broad circle of friends, many of which were fellow playwrights, and a few patrons. It is however John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, who appears to be “the patron and friend she […] valued the most” (Goreau 211) in the late 1670s. By the beginning of the 1680s, Aphra has developed into a distinguished author, having produced about nine plays. Together with the praise and admiration of many, attacks and harsh criticism follow. This animosity from other authors grew mainly out of “resent that a woman had achieved what they had failed to” (Goreau 231) and though Aphra tries to conceal it, she was quite hurt that this criticism came “from ‘brothers of the pen’” (Duffy 248).

At the beginning of the 1680s, political and cultural changes in England such as the Popish Plot (1678) ended the “merry days of the Restoration” (Goreau 240) and the theatre world was affected too. The King’s Company for instance “closed down during much of 1678 and 1679” (Goreau 241) and as Aphra’s financial income was dependent on the theatre, so was her social independence. She now has to be careful with the “political polemic” (Goreau 247) she displays in her works but nevertheless continued to address politics. This escalates in 1682 when her name is mentioned in a charge prompted by Charles Monmouth. Behn had “pilloried Monmouth (the son of Charles) for desertion of his father” (Goreau 251) and would have to remain in custody, if only for a short period of time.

For playwrights such as Dryden and Wycherley the early 1680s were as troublesome as they were for Aphra Behn. Several writers found themselves either already in debt or had trouble making enough money to live on. Behn’s had witnessed the death of Rochester and was now confronted with the “degradation of her brother of the pen Thomas Otway” (Goreau 259), who eventually died in poverty in 1685. Duffy argues that by then Aphra was thrown into poverty as well as sickness and yet she continued to produce plays, poems and novels alike until her death in 1689 (286). She was buried in Westminster Abbey on “April 20th” (Duffy 286) of that year.
4. “The Disappointment”

4.1. Introduction

“The Disappointment” is one of Aphra Behn’s more elaborate poems dealing with power in relationships and matters of love. It was published in 1684 in Behn’s “Poems upon Several Occasions” but first appeared in “Poems on Several Occasions” by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, in 1680 and is for that reason “often ascribed to him” (Salzman 119). The poem is “one of the most often studied” (Livingston 191) works by Behn in academic circles. Most studies have related the poem to two or three sources. First of all, it can be seen as a “free translation of the first third” (Zeitz, Thoms 501) of a French poem entitled “L’Occasion perdue recouverte” (Zeitz, Thoms 501) by Jean Benech de Cantenac. In translating the French poem into English, Behn has made significant changes to the structure and contents of the poem. “The Disappointment” is also seen as a reworking of both Rochester’s and Sir George Etherege’s poem “The Imperfect Enjoyment”.

In what follows, I will focus on Aphra Behn’s reversal of the gender roles in “The Disappointment” by examining both thematic and structural aspects. Afterwards the poem’s relation with Rochester’s and de Cantenac’s version will be briefly discussed.

4.2. A reversal of power roles in “The Disappointment”

In fourteen stanzas, “The Disappointment” describes how a young man named Lysander seduces the maid Cloris and persuades her into making love; his wooing however does not lead to the desired outcome on his part.

In the opening lines of the poem the reader is introduced to Lysander, a fictional character that appears in several other poems by Aphra Behn, for instance in “To Lysander, Who Made Some Verses on a Discourse of Loves Fire” and “To Lysander at the Musick-Meeting”. The figure of Lysander is often found in combination with the female character Cloris, forming a ‘fictional couple’ in Behn’s poetry. However, as mentioned before, the name of Lysander was used by Behn as a pseudonym for John
Hoyle, her lover. She wrote several poems directed to Hoyle while she had a relationship with him and many of them show that they had problems in their relationship. “The Disappointment” is however unique in that it refers to the supposed “sexual difficulties” (Goreau 204) of Hoyle.

When we look at the way Lysander and Cloris are described in the first stanza, some early clues as to the character of both figures and the power relationship between them are given. Lysander is described as being “swayed” or moved by “an impatient passion”, i.e. he is sexually attracted by Cloris who is present at the scene with him. Zeitz and Thoms have argued that Lysander is very much dominated by his passions or “physical desires” (Zeitz, Thoms 502). His inability to control himself sexually is underlined by the words “impatient passion” which are put in front position of the second line. Cloris is said to be a “fair […] loved maid”, a beautiful and seemingly innocent girl not able to defend herself; she is at first sight presented as the weaker one of the two.

In the remaining lines, Behn uses a mythological reference to describe how Lysander is able to overpower the maid Cloris. Lysander is helped by “all things” in his secret plan to abduct Cloris and leaves “the gilded planet” with his chariot and descends to the sea to reach her. These lines remind us of Jupiter or his Greek counterpart Zeus who is often represented sitting in his chariot drawn by four horses. As the supreme deity, Jupiter has power over both Mount Olympus and the earth, and thus to compare Lysander with Jupiter makes sense; it implies that Lysander, like Jupiter, is in the powerful and superior position.

Behn does however cast doubt on who has the power in this stanza, and by which means they obtain power. A possible interpretation, set out by Zeitz and Thoms, is that Cloris is in an inferior position; line 4 and 5 in the stanza are especially indicative of this. The reason why she is in the inferior position is however unclear. She could be literally overpowered by an outburst of Lysander’s passions, it may be that the forces of nature and her own passions have overpowered her or thirdly, knowing what she wants, Cloris does not choose to defend herself any longer (502); i.e. she wants Lysander as much as he desires her, and consciously lets him overpower her. It is left in the open which of these possibilities is more plausible; it is arguably up to the reader to decide upon this.
“The Disappointment” contains several mythological references to, for instance, gods (such as Jupiter), which “are only convenient labels for mysterious inner drives” (Livingston 192) according to Livingston. The aspect of power is not the only connection between Jupiter and Lysander, for according to mythology, Jupiter is said to have had many sexual escapades although he was married to the goddess Juno. Keeping this in mind, Jupiter can be seen as symbolizing the male sexual drive and in this poem in particular, Lysander’s sexual drive. Jupiter is, however, also associated with impotence.

In the “Iliad I” by Homer, the nymph Thetis is said to have once freed Zeus (Jupiter) from the chains he was in because of an attempt of other gods to overthrow Zeus:

“You alone of all the gods saved Zeus the Darkener of the Skies from an inglorious fate, when some of the other Olympians - Hera, Poseidon, and Pallas Athene - had plotted to throw him into chains... You, goddess, went and saved him from that indignity.” (Homer, transl. Rieu)

Mircea Eliade has argued that the chains, from which Zeus was released, are “a metaphor for impotence [...]” (92-124). The textual reference to Jupiter and the fact that he is considered impotent thus already hint at a reversal of the social and sexual dominance over Cloris that emerges from the poem. As argued by Livingston, “The Disappointment” can also be related to Homer’s “Iliad” on the structural level; in particular in its use of a “ring composition” which I will be touching upon later on.

Instead of evoking an image of Jupiter, “the gilded planet” - ‘gilded’ meaning ‘covered in gold’ or ‘gold-colored’- in line 6 could arguably also refer to the sun, in particular the “male sun Phoebus” (Zeitz, Thoms 502) which is “descending to the sea”. Zeitz and Thoms remark that the use of the verb ‘descending’ is “suggestive in a poem about sexual and social power” (Zeitz, Thoms 502) as it hints at Lysander who no longer possesses sexual powers, i.e. being impotent and not able to satisfy Cloris sexually. This is reflected in the last two lines of the stanza: as “the gilded planet” does not leave any light to “guide the world”. This means that Lysander no longer has any power and Cloris becomes the one who with “brighter Eyes” receives the light. She “exercises the power abdicated by Phoebus” (Zeitz, Thoms 503) and becomes equally active, if not more powerful, in what happens between her and Lysander.
The poem then becomes more explicit about what kind of power Cloris and Lysander possess. The imagery shifts to a romantic, almost pastoral scene in a “lone thicket made for love” which at first sight reflects Cloris’ subordinated position towards Lysander’s wooing: her silence seems to imply that she yields and consents with whatever action Lysander undertakes, for instance when he starts to caress her. Again doubt is expressed as to why Cloris would choose to subject herself so easily. It could be that she languishes for Lysander’s touch as much as he longs for her, and is no longer able to control her sexual feelings, and therefore permits him to make love to her; Cloris “with a charming languishment, permits his force”. Yet these lines also contain the implication that she has the “power to permit or to prohibit” (Zeitz, Thoms 503); she can thus either refuse Lysander’s affections or permit them. Zeitz and Thoms have additionally argued that at the same time, “gently strove” can indicate that there is somehow a constraint on her striving for caresses and, perhaps, equality in the power relationship between her and her lover (503). Exactly what kind of constraint this could be, can be deduced from the following lines. As Lysander starts touching her body and making love to her, Cloris’ action is expressed by the following words:

“Her hands to his bosom softly meet,
But not to put him back designed,
Rather to draw him on inclined;
Whilst he lay trembling at her feet,
[...]”(ll. 15-18)

Cloris reciprocates Lysander’s touches because she does not ‘design’ to “put him back” but rather inclines to “draw him on”. The resistance or constraint she is “expected to enact” (Zeitz, Thoms 503) when Lysander wants to be intimate with her is not something she will show to the outer world. Paradoxically, on the one hand it is argued that Cloris does feel a constraint due to a “social code and by expected gender roles (Zeitz, Thoms 503) - because she is lower on the social ladder than Lysander - but on the other hand she refuses to accept this social code and lacks “the power to say – ‘Ah! What d’ye do?’”. In other words, the power she craves for but does not have, is the power “to suppress her physical, natural desires” (Zeitz, Thoms 503), to control herself in a way that Lysander as a man is not able to do. Additionally, the maid Cloris seems to lack the willpower “to conform to established gender roles (i.e. she will not resist [Lysander] as
she is expected to)” (Zeitz, Thoms 503). Paradoxically, the female character is at the same time constrained in her strife for power but at the same time still gains that power and expresses it through a denial of a “conventional response” (Zeitz, Thoms 503) (“Ah! What d’ye do?”) to Lysander’s action. Cloris has proven that she, as a woman, equally possesses feelings of desire and sexual awareness. According to Zeitz and Thoms, Cloris even seems to reverse the conventional gender roles set by society as Lysander is the one left trembling at her feet, thus “unmanned and rendered powerless” (503).

The poem continues now in a similar fashion to the previous stanza where Cloris “Permits his force, yet gently strove”, in hinting at the fact that Cloris is an innocent maiden with “bright eyes sweet” and yet she is “severe”. There is a certain command in her look suggesting that she lays claims to a position of power. The division in Cloris’ character becomes clearer: it is defined as a confused striving for “love and shame”. This could mean that she feels a desire for Lysander while at the same time she is ashamed to physically or verbally express this desire. This passage hints at Cloris’ struggle as she tries to find a balance between the social code she is subjected to and her own feelings and decision-making. This confusion that Cloris transmits has been read as a “strategy of seduction” (Zeitz, Thoms 505) because she is said to give “Fresh vigour to Lysander” and is “breathing faintly in his ear” in order to please him. However, the image of Cloris as a seductress is not consistent with what is said of Cloris previously; she remains a woman trying to break through the patriarchal code imposed on her and is at the same time aware of “the (social) code’s power and feel(s) its lash” (Zeitz, Thoms 505) as is clear from lines 4 and 14 of the poem. In this way she conforms to the behaviour expected from women at that time. Goreau comments on the dangers for “Restoration women” (Zeitz, Thoms 505) who want to lay claim to an individual voice:

“[…] if Restoration women acknowledged their own sexuality and acceded to it, they violated the essential element of what they have been brought up to believe was their femininity: virtue.”

Cloris is considered rebellious, violating her virtue in voicing her sexuality and expressing her desire for Lysander. In the following lines, Cloris’ frustration becomes clearer. On the one hand she is aware that she could be losing her “honour” - her virtue or
“chastity” (Zeitz, Thoms 505) as Carol Barash has termed it - in expressing her own opinion while on the other hand, despite that knowledge, she keeps “rebelling against it” (Zeitz, Thoms 505):

“She cried -- ‘Cease, cease -- your vain desire,
Or I’ll call out -- what would you do?
My dearer honour even to you,
I cannot, must not give -- retire,
[…]” (ll. 25-28)

This is a very theatrical passage since it represents Cloris’ voice in a direct, dramatical way. The persona allows Cloris to voice her feelings and she uses this opportunity to rebel yet again against the social restraints forced upon her. She want Lysander to control (to “cease”) his desires for her and even uses or exploits her status as an ‘innocent woman’ to provoke him; she says she will “call out” (i.e. start screaming) if he does not contain himself or “retire”, and there is no action he can take; Lysander is thus rendered powerless. Furthermore, she confidently states that she cannot - and will not - surrender her “honour” to him and forces him to choose: either he must “retire”, retreat from his actions or “take this [her] life”. As she knows perfectly well, he will never take her life because he has conquered her heart. This “gently mocking tone” (Todd 120) in the female voice of Cloris is present in this passage but also in other instances of Behn’s poem. Cloris playfully or seriously challenges Lysander and mocks his incapacity to act, both in word and deed. Lysander is unable to act and this is reinforced by the fact that he remains silent; his voice is absent from the poem. The male voice is probably intentionally left out, an ‘absent presence in the poem’, since Aphra Behn wants to give voice to the female character in “The Disappointment”. The final lines seem to imply that Cloris is aware of her position as a woman in society despite her want of power; she acknowledges that Lysander has achieved “the conquest of my [her] heart” and in this way acts the “respectable female role” meant for all virtuous women of the seventeenth century.

Cloris’ rebellion in the second part of the stanza is not only clear from the words, it is also reflected in the verse: from the moment Cloris exclaims “Cease, cease”, the verse is broken up and the flow of the words is interrupted by “pauses and dashes” (Zeitz, Thoms 505) in order to “suggest panting and somewhat less than undivided attention to the spoken word” (Zeitz, Thoms 505), both in the case of the reader and in the case of
Lysander, at whom the exclamations are directed. These dashes could suggest that Cloris may be held back by social rules in fully expressing her feelings, but she is not held back in taking action. On the other hand, the dashes could hint at a breakdown of language the instant Cloris tries to express her emotions. Both interpretations are reasonable and possibly a combination of the two needs to be considered, keeping in mind Cloris’ paradoxical character.

Gradually, more attention is paid to the male protagonist, Lysander. The action in the fourth stanza evolves mainly around him yet his voice is not directly heard, his personal words never break through. He is only spoken of in the third person personal pronoun ‘he’. Before the poem shifts to focus on Lysander’s moves, it is mentioned that he is “as much unused to fear as he was capable of love”; in other words, that Lysander is as fearless as he is incapable of love. This shows how through the language Aphra Behn subtly conveys the idea that Lysander is not living up to what is expected from a man in a patriarchal society. Lysander has no fear at all when it comes to seducing and trying to make love to Cloris. However, as will be become clear later on, he is incapable of fulfilling Cloris’ expectations and (sexual) desires. Lysander searches “the blessed minutes to improve”, i.e. to continue arousing Cloris and advance himself to her sexually:

“Kissed her mouth, her neck her hair;
Each touch her new desire alarms,
His burning trembling hand he pressed
Upon her swelling snowy breast,
[...=” (ll. 34-37)

Cloris appears to be much taken by Lysander’s touches and caresses as she lies “panting in his arms”. However, there is subtle irony present in the language describing Lysander’s actions, especially “the conventional heroic language of power and military conquest used to represent the male role” (Zeitz, Thoms 506). A term such as “to conquer” is normally applied to a military context and is usually related to ‘conquering land’. In the context of the poem it is implied that women are a land or a city that need to be ‘conquered’ and Lysander can thus be said to ‘besiege’ Cloris in the thicket. Although Lysander would conform to the image of some kind of heroic saviour, a strong, conquering male figure dominating his mistress according to seventeenth-century
common social rules, his power is in this poem subtly undermined by the language Aphra Behn uses. This points out to the reader that Behn’s intention is to reinterpret the patriarchal image of men in general, diminish men’s power over women and even mock the efforts of men in seducing women and in trying to exercise their power over the other sex.

At the end of the stanza, the idea of the woman subjected to a man’s will is expressed more explicitly. Cloris’ physical and perhaps even her intellectual “beauties” lay open for Lysander to conquer and are described in military terminology as “spoils and trophies of the enemy”. Cloris’ virtues and beauties are considered stolen goods or plunder taken by the enemy.

In this passage the narrator attacks men as dominating women and abusing their power to exploit women in several ways. However, this too needs to be qualified since the use of the word “unguarded” implies that Cloris is unprotected and it is not difficult for Lysander to overpower her. Zeitz and Thoms rightfully wonder at “how powerful a conquest this is” (Zeitz, Thoms 506).

The language continues to illustrate Lysander’s baseness and to describe Cloris as a virtuous and pure woman, a kind of “paradise” to man. Pure must be understood in the sense of “chaste”, referring to the virginity of a young woman. Besides the use of mythological references, “The Disappointment” contains many metaphors which also allow Behn to ironically expose Lysander’s character. Some of these metaphors are present for instance in the following stanza, where Lysander advancing towards Cloris’ “genitalia” (Zeitz, Thoms 506) is subtly described as following:

“His daring hand that altar seized,  
Where gods of love do sacrifice:  
That awful throne, that paradise  
Where rage is calmed, and anger pleased,  
That fountain where delight still flows,  
And gives the universal world repose.” (ll. 45-50)

Behn uses the religious term “altar” to describe Cloris’ genitalia in a passage which is very much charged with “erotic tension” (Zeitz, Thoms 507) and containing other sexual metaphors such as “awful throne”, “paradise” and “fountain” of delight - all charging the
poem with irony. The image of the fountain also turns up in various other poems as a metaphor for the woman; but the poet Sir John Suckling for instance has used it as a sexual metaphor, denoting a woman’s vagina. Arguably, Behn chooses to insert the sexual metaphor of the fountain not to degrade women to mere sexual objects but to denounce the very practice of commodifying women, and defining them only in sexual terms as several male poets also did in their poetry.

The metaphors for the female body contrast with the military terminology of the previous stanza and works towards a climax or “repose”. As the “erotic tension” (Zeitz, Thoms 507) builds up and the reader expects a release of sexual energy ending in a calming repose, an unexpected turn arises in the sixth stanza.

Lysander and Cloris are making love to each other and seem completely caught up in passion as they lie “upon the moss”. Cloris is even said to be “half dead and breathless” (55) and showing “no signs of life” (59) apart from short breaths. The hyperbolic language in the stanza displays yet again Behn’s irony; the scene that the two lovers create seems too idyllic and perfect to be true. It is moreover improbably that Lysander is able to affect Cloris in such a way that she almost lies “half dead” on the moss. The “fountain of delight” could also be related to mythology, in particular to Ovid’s “Metamorphoses”, which contains the story of the naiad\(^2\) Arethusa who is being pursued by the god Alpheus. She plunges into the sea to escape him and turns up again in a fountain in Sicily. The imagery of a nymph links up to what was previously mentioned of the god Jupiter, who was said to have had several sexual escapades, many of them with nymphs. Aphra Behn is indeed said to have used “the characters of nymph and swain” (Munns 182) in her poem in order to focus on “describing its (the male failure) effect on his female partner” (Munns 182). The myths of transformation echoing in the poem add to this effect, as the reader is reminded of the nymph Arethusa changing into a fountain [figure 3], and by extension also of the story in Ovid’s “Metamorphoses” of the god Apollo and the nymph Daphne [figure 2]. In the latter story, Daphne is turned into a laurel tree by her father while she is chased by Apollo. A depiction of both scenes can be found below. These and other myths in which powerful male characters (i.e. gods) fail to

\(^2\) River or fountain nymph.
conquer the object of their desire, a lovely nymph, foreshadow and contextualize the swain Lysander’s failure to fulfill Cloris’ desire.

Behn artfully describes the way in which Cloris is perceived through Lysander’s eyes as “A shape designed for love and play” (stanza 7) and shows yet again the paradoxical nature of Cloris’ character, who is “a victim to love’s sacred flame” (68) but is at the same time willfully “offering her virgin innocence” (67). Cloris feels neither pride nor shame when she presents herself to Lysander, for touched by Cupid’s arrow she desires Lysander’s sexual performance and dispenses “her softest joys” in expectation of this.

The building up of sexual tension in the previous stanzas ironically clashes with the action or rather the absence of action in the last line of the seventh stanza, when Lysander is “Unable to perform the sacrifice”, i.e. he is unable to get an erection and take away Cloris’ virginity. The inability to ejaculate is clearly Lysander’s fault and is the reason of Cloris’ disappointment. The connotation of ‘sacrifice’ is only one example of
Behn’s use of ambiguity to mock Lysander. Behn elaborates at length on his impotence in the following two stanzas, which have to be read with an eye to the ironic and even mocking tone achieved through the use of connotative words such as “the insensible” (referring to Lysander’s genitalia). Lysander’s failing is mockingly said to be due to “envious gods” who “snatch his power”, yet in the lines immediately following it is pointed out that the support of Nature (i.e. his penis) lacks the art ‘to live’ and “faintness its slackened nerves invade” (stanza 9). Besides stressing Lysander’s “rage and shame”, there is also a focus on the consequences of Lysander’s failing for Cloris, and her reaction. Munns points out that Cloris is not sweetly understanding of his failure as one might perhaps expect, but horrified when she discovers she cannot arouse him and touches his limp penis (182):

“Her timorous hand she gently laid
(Or guided by design or chance)
Upon that fabulous Priapas,
[...] never did young shepherdess,
[...] More nimbly draw her fingers back,
Finding beneath the verdant leaves, a snake.” (ll. 103-110)

Cloris withdraws her hand quickly, quite shocked of and even detested by Lysander’s inability to sexually perform. The contrast between Lysander being described as a “fabulous Priapas” and his genitals afterwards referred to as a snake is yet again proof of the metaphorical language, echoing mythology and the Genesis story. Priapus is a “Greek fertility god, whose symbol was the phallus” (Greenblatt 1457) and thus aptly reflects Lysander’s supposed virility. The snake can refer to a passage from the Old Testament in which evil, represented by the snake, seduces Eve to eat the apple and thus causes the fall of man into sin, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. From that moment onwards, humans feel shame and wear a leaf in front of their genitals. In the Biblical sense, the snake that Cloris finds “beneath the verdant leaves” (stanza 11) can refer to an evil twist of nature that causes Lysander to fail. The image of the snake has throughout the ages acquired several meanings in different cultures; one is reminded for instance of the snake in “Archaic and Classical Greek iconography” (Csapo 256) or its association with Hermes “the snake-god” (Frothingham 175). Frothingham points out that Hermes traditionally carried a “caduceus” which is a pair of snakes wound around a wand
or scepter; he is therefore also called the Caduceus-god, “the predecessor of the Priapic herm-god” (175). The snakes on the caduceus are said to represent the “double snake, male and female” (Frothingham 175) and these “conveyed the same idea as the phallus” (Frothingham 176), thus both Hermes and the snake are connected to phallic imagery. If we put this in the context of “The Disappointment”, Behn most likely intended to use the snake to refer to Lysander’s phallus, which is no longer a symbol of fertility but of weakness and sexual failure. Lysander’s impotence is exposed in these lines in a less subtle way than before and guides the reader immediately into the context of impotence. As was also the case in previous stanzas, Behn here makes use of religious terminology and mythological references in an ironical way, to stress Lysander’s loss of power and portray Cloris as the ‘potent’ one.

One might think that the climax of “The Disappointment” is reached by the end of the eleventh stanza, with the dramatic words “Finding beneath the verdant leaves, a snake”. This effect is even more stressed by the comma, which syntactically separates the object ‘snake’ from the rest of the sentence. The end sentences of each stanza do not contain a true climax though; they are part of Behn’s technique of stressing and mocking Lysander’s impotence and a process of building up towards the climax at the end of the poem.

As the poem draws nearer to its end, Behn continues to stress Cloris’ emotional response to Lysander’s failure to fulfill her sexual desires. She is described as being confused, disdained and ashamed and soon abandons Lysander, “Leaving him fainting on the gloomy bed” (stanza 12). The contrast between the lovers’ reactions is striking: Lysander is very much concerned with himself, he is consumed with “despair” and increasing “rage and shame”; mainly “self-absorbed and self-directed” (Munns 181) with no concern or notice of Cloris’ feelings. Cloris, on the other hand, reacts quite compassionately at first and even understanding of Lysander’s problem but when nothing is to be done about the situation, she flees the scene. The swain then faints in a very unmanly fashion, not able to grasp what has happened and unable to control Cloris’ reaction. The shame Lysander feels when he is not able to sexually perform is projected onto Cloris, who feels equal shame “at having participated in this fiasco” (Munns 181) and perhaps more importantly, at being associated with the weak male. Munns has argued
that “given the centrality of rape in Restoration discourses of masculine sexuality, there can be few more humiliating suggestions than the idea that it is male incapacity and not male rampant vigour” (Munns 181) that causes Cloris to leave Lysander behind. It is not because of a violent sexual act (such as rape) from the male’s part that Cloris fled, but due to the male’s incapacity to have sexual intercourse with her. Lysander’s impotence, however humiliating it may be, is however not the central point in this poem, it is rather “the female experience” (Munns 183) which is stressed; this is particularly clear from the last stanza.

The one but last stanza describes Cloris’ flight in mythological terms; Cloris was at the beginning of the poem styled “a nymph” and so she is now again related to one of these mythological creatures, i.e. the nymph Daphne who flees from Apollo, “the Delphic God”; as mentioned earlier in the analysis. As Daphne was saved from Apollo by being turned into a laurel tree, Cloris here saves herself from any further shame and rapidly flees the scene. While Lysander is described as pitifully “fainting on the gloomy bed”, Cloris remains the strong and fair maid she has ever been in the poem:

“The wind that wantoned in her hair,  
And with her ruffled garments played,  
Discovered in the flying maid  
All that the gods e’er made, of fair.”(ll. 125-128)

None of the “blushes” of shame are to be seen on her face any longer, she seems determined in leaving the scene and is thus representative of the woman taking control of the situation and consequently, symbolizes the reversal of power and gender roles. She is capable of all that Lysander is incapable of, not only on the sexual level but on a higher, intellectual level too. In fleeing she tries to save her honour; notably this would not be required of men in Restoration society when they would for instance rape a woman, because the woman would always be the victim, the passive object who has no say in the act whatsoever and who is accused of ‘seducing’ the man instead. In this poem however, Lysander is the passive one, failing to stop Cloris from fleeing and too bewildered to try and follow her. The stanza ends with a reference to gods; this is ironically intended as Lysander is compared to Venus’ lover Adonis who was cruelly slain; in the poem however Lysander is not dead; it is his sexual power that has ‘died’. In the opinion of the
persona - and presumably also in Aphra Behn’s opinion - impotence seems worse than death, for Lysander will have to live with the fact that he is impotent and that he has failed Cloris.

At the very end of “The Disappointment” the voice of the poetic persona is heard, stating that “The nymph’s resentments none but I / Can well imagine or condole”. This points out to the reader that the narrator is sympathizing with what happened to Cloris. No reason is given why the persona feels aligned to the female protagonist, but one likely possibility is that she is a woman and can thus relate to Cloris because she is a woman too, or perhaps has even experienced a situation similar to that of Cloris. The persona cannot sympathize with Lysander simply because “…none can guess Lysander’s soul, / But those who swayed his destiny”. His “silent griefs” are at first “unknowable” (Munns 184) but then the persona repeats that Lysander only feels rage. Blind rage directed to the gods, to himself and even more to Cloris; according to him it is she who is the cause of his sexual failure. Cloris is no longer a “loved maid” but a shepherdess with “soft bewitching influence” who with her witchcraft has cruelly “damned him to the hell of impotence”. Lysander does not in any sense blame himself for what has happened; being consumed by anger, he cannot think rationally (“Renounced his reason with his life”, stanza 10) and shifts the fault off to the woman. With such dramatic words the poem comes to end, and there is almost a sarcastic tone to these last lines as if the persona indulged in Lysander’s impotence and triumphs over the fact that Cloris is more powerful than her lover.

4.3. “The Disappointment” as a revision of gender roles in patriarchal society

Aphra Behn’s intention is hardly hidden in this poem as she comments ironically on a scene of love-making where neither the male nor the female play out their traditional gender roles. Initially Lysander seems in control over Cloris when he woes her, but there are already subtle hints referring to Cloris’ power. Already in the middle of the poem it is revealed that Lysander fails to get an erection. The persona furthermore refers to Lysander’s “limp penis” (Munns 184) using metaphors such as “the insensible” and “that fabulous Priap, That potent god, as poets feign”, clearly revealing Lysander’s weakness
in a humorous fashion and pointing out “that the poets, indeed, lie” or feign. There is no man on Earth who resembles Priapus in his sexual potency and readers should not trust poets who claim this. The persona could be telling us that poets and their use of elevated language should not be trusted; this is however paradoxical since Behn is the author of “The Disappointment”. Inserting this metapoetical reference could be seen as a way for Behn to point out on the one hand that she does not see her task as a poet to praise picture-perfect romantic scenes, or on the other hand, that high-flown poetic language can be used mockingly; proof of this is the humorous and ironic tone of voice which rings throughout the entire poem.

Behn is showing the reader that the traditional love-poetry, in which idyllic scenes are sketched, is first not realistic and second does not have positive implications for women, who are in the subversive role in a (sexual) relationship and in society in general. Behn rebels against the social (and patriarchal) code in her poem, by reversing “the military language of sexual conquest” (Munns 184) and rewriting “the Edenic myth” (Munns 184) through describing the penis as “a snake from which the nymph recoils and which brings neither knowledge nor pleasure” (Munns 184). Unlike the apple from which Eve and Adam ate in Eden and which provided knowledge to them, the penis is clearly not a source of pleasure to Cloris, since it is limp. Furthermore, Behn uses mythology to emphasize the female victory and gain of power as opposed to the male’s impotence and loss of authority over women.

4.4. “The Disappointment” in comparison with de Cantenac’s “L’Occasion perdue recouverte” and Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment”

There is an ongoing discussion as to whether the fourteen-stanza long poem “L’Occasion perdue recouverte” or ‘The Lost Opportunity Recovered” is written by the famous French playwright Pierre Corneille or the somewhat less known writer Jean Benech de Cantenac (1628-1714) (Clin-Lalande 47). In either case, there is however certainty on the fact that Behn did translate the “first third” (Zeitz, Thoms 501) of this French poem and has inserted changes into her translation. Like Behn’s “The Disappointment”, the poem deals with the lovers Cloris and Lysander. The textual changes that Behn carried through are conscious, since they help in establishing Cloris as
a woman who, although restrained by social conventions, tries to resist male dominance. For instance in the last line of first stanza of Behn’s poem, the verb ‘hurled’ is present, indicating an “agency” (Zeitz, Thoms 502). The verb is however not present in the French original which simply states “Que dans les beaux yeux de Cloris”. In the third stanza of Behn’s version, Cloris expresses her resistance differently than in de Cantenac’s poem:

« And breathing faintly in his ear, […] » (The Disappointment, stanza 3, line 4)
« ‘Lysandre’, dit-elle tout bas, […] » (L’Occasion perdue recouverte, stanza 3, line 5)

The fact that Cloris in Behn’s poem whispers in his ear, points towards Cloris’ awareness of “the respectable female role” (Zeitz, Thoms 505) although she is “rebelling against it” (Zeitz, Thoms 505) nonetheless. In de Cantenac’s version Cloris’ words are spoken simply in a low voice. The Disappointment shows of Behn’s knowledge of the French language and her skills as a translatress; the subtle changes she makes on the textual level are conscious and their meaning can often be related to Behn’s intentions of empowering the woman in the poem.

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, was a seventeenth-century poet, playwright and a good friend of Aphra Behn. In 1679 he wrote the long love poem “Imperfect Enjoyment”, thus preceding Behn’s “The Disappointment” which was to be published in 1684. The two poems can be connected to each other, for they share the same subject: sexuality. Rochester’s poem however radically differs from “The Disappointment” in its “blatantly shocking […] sexual language and imagery” (Wilcoxon 375) whereas Behn remains more implicit and subtle in her phrasing, using metaphors and the alike. The sexually explicit verses of Rochester’s poem are told from the perspective of “the male lover” (Zeitz, Thoms 511) and have to be seen as part of Rochester’s witty and satiric style. The male speaker in “The Imperfect Enjoyment” reacts differently upon discovering his impotence in roughly the middle of the poem: “And rage at last confirms me impotent” (line 30). The speaker then goes on to curse his genitalia in a rather amusing and mocking fashion. In Behn’s poem it is the female speaker, Cloris, who reveals Lysander’s impotence only at the very end of the poem. An important element in Rochester’s poem
is that the woman is not depicted as the wronged victim; the male speaker “conveys affection and tenderness toward the disappointed mistress” (Wilcoxon 389) calling her for instance “his great Love” (l. 60) and “the wronged Corinna” (l. 72) in an almost apologetic mode. In this sense, Rochester’s “The Imperfect Enjoyment” seems to “invoke an ideal of mutual consideration and equality” (Wilcoxon 389) and attack relationships in which a woman is seen as a “sex-tingling cunt” (Wilcoxon 389) or “a common fucking-post” (l. 63).

“The Imperfect Enjoyment” shows us that Rochester’s ideas are very much in line with Behn’s ideas about relationships, rebelling against patriarchal society who sees women as sex objects and pleading for more equality between men and women.


5.1. Introduction

“The Willing Mistress” is one of Aphra Behn’s shorter poems, which appeared in her play “The Dutch Lover” in 1673. This comedy has to be viewed in the context of “wartime propaganda” (Gabbard 557), since in 1672 “the armies of Louis XIV - with whom England was allied through the secret Treaty of Dover - overran five of the seven United Provinces” (Spurr 12-13,33) of the Netherlands. This event spurred several English authors to refer to it in their works. They considered the event an “imminent demise” (Gabbard 557) for the Dutch Republic. According to the politician Sir William Temple, the Dutch demise was due to the Dutch having “failed to encourage manly virtue” (Gabbard 557). Temple wrote a work called “Observations Upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands”, in which he makes the division between “warlike”\(^3\) and “effeminate”\(^4\) men. Along with others, he considered the Dutch as part of this last ‘category’ of men.

“The Dutch Lover” deals very much with the issue of manliness and “delineates […] various masculinities coexisting on a spectrum bounded by the terms warlike and effeminate” (Gabbard 557). Behn’s poem “The Willing Mistress” fits into this discourse

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\(^4\) ibidem.
since it is told from a female point of view (as is also the case for “The Disappointment”),
discussing the gender roles and problematizing the male’s role. There are however two
versions of “The Willing Mistress”, the first one dating from 1673 and the second
appearing in Behn’s “Poems Upon Several Occasions” in 1684, as Duyfhuizen points
out. The two versions are said to contain “substantive changes […] essentially lexical”
(Duyfhuizen 66) but do not radically alter the text of the poem. However, “lines eleven
and eighteen” (Duyfhuizen 66), replacing the words “wanton” and “amorous” by
respectively the words “amorous” and “softening”, show a kind of “poetic softening”
(Duyfhuizen 66) of the feelings displayed in the first version’s “bolder wantonness”
(Duyfhuizen 66).

5.2. Textual analysis

As with the other poems discussed, the ways in which poetic language is bent to
Aphra Behn’s intentions and contributes to the gender discourse, is of central importance
in this poem.
The title of this brief poem, “The Willing Mistress” seems at first sight to hint at the
subversive position of a woman who is seduced by her lover and ‘willingly’ allows him
to woe her. This can however be otherwise interpreted. The female protagonist also
appears to be a ‘mistress’, which implies that she is not Amyntas’ wife and that the latter
is presumably having a relationship with her out of wedlock.

Although the poem is effective in voicing the woman’s feelings, her name is
never mentioned. This is in contrast to the male, Amyntas, who is introduced to us in the
first lines.
At first an idyllic scenery is sketched in which where the two lovers find themselves, and
this reminds us of the thicket of Lysander and Cloris in “The Disappointment”. It is a
place in perfect harmony and nature seems to provide security and protection for
Amyntas and his lover, as trees shade them from the sun and intruding eyes of others who
could have ‘caught the lovers redhanded’. The fact that nature has “the place secur’d
from humane Eyes” implies that what Amyntas and his mistress are about to do is not
innocent and that they would have reason to fear discovery if they were not hidden in the
grove. The last two lines of this stanza are equally suggestive of what Amyntas and his mistress are about to do. The winds and the boughs could be a metaphor for the lovers; the winds that “kiss the yielding Boughs” are a personification. If the winds and the boughs represent respectively Amyntas and his mistress, the implication could be made the male, Amyntas is slightly more dominant over the female since he does “gently rise” while she is “yielding” to his kiss.

What is remarkable in this poem is the directness with which the female voices her own emotions. Aphra Behn is explicit about the desires of the woman and this is what makes the lyric exceptional, especially in an age in which women were not expected to talk about their desires and “the major archetype for a female lover was either the ‘‘coy mistress’ […] or the metonymic ‘cunt’” (Duyfhuizen 63). Furthermore, Duyfhuizen argues that “control of female representation was considered a male province – as was essentially all poetry itself and all sexual feeling” (Duyfhuizen 64). Women were not allowed to have (sexual) feelings and express these into writing. It was probably not appreciated in male-dominated poetic circles that Behn is letting the female voice speak in her poetry; both she and the “willing mistress” thus “perform an extraordinary act in frankly proclaiming female passion” (Duyfhuizen 64). This is also the case for “other heroines” (Duyfhuizen 64) in her poetry as a longer poem such as “The Disappointment” has already proven.

As mentioned before in the introduction, the altering of a few words in lines 11 and 18 in the poem as contained in “The Dutch Lover” is intentionally done by Behn and gives the poem a softer, less confrontational tone. There is speculation as to the reason of the changes, but it is argued that Aphra Behn “may have wanted to celebrate the tenderness of unconstrained sexuality” (Duyfhuizen 66) and therefore to “move the poem a step away from the more subversive and paradoxical social connotations represented by the female figure of the ‘wanton’”(Duyfhuizen 66). In other words, she did not want to focus on sexuality itself, the way she did in for instance “The Disappointment”, but rather emphasize the sweet, soft feelings involved in an amorous scene such as this, between Amyntas and his lover. She did not want to convey an image of the woman as ‘wanton’ since the term has connotative meanings such as ‘immoral’, ‘unchaste’ and ‘irresponsible
– not immediately positive and flattering adjectives. The image of the unchaste and (sexually) free-thinking woman would also contrast with the image of women in general and the expectations of society they had to live up to in the Restoration.

Traditionally in the seventeenth century, “women were praised chiefly for their domestic capabilities and for their ability to function as static, passive exemplars of virtue” (Latt 56). This ‘ideal image’ of women confined to knitting by the fireplace could possibly be linked with the concept of the ‘angel in the house’, which is proclaimed as the feminine ideal in Victorian times. The ‘angel in the house’ concept refers to a woman who takes care of her children as a good mother, occupies herself with household tasks and importantly, is submissive to her husband or lover. The female character presented in “The Willing Mistress” is however not quite the submissive type; she openly proclaims her feelings for Amyntas. She is still aware of the social conventions and this perhaps keeps her from telling what exactly she received from Amyntas, which is clear from the last lines in the second stanza:

“[…]
Which made me willing to receive
That which I dare not name.”(ll.15-16)

However, these lines are ambiguous in the sense that we do not know for sure whether she keeps from speaking out of fear or if it is merely a coy teasing and stirring of the reader’s imagination. We do start to wonder at what the woman might tell us further in the poem. Does she dare to express her desire more freely? She does not, and neither is it specified what the lovers exactly do after the initial wooing, but the reader can easily guess that Amyntas and his lover have sexual intercourse after a description of what we may call the ‘foreplay’. Behn’s choice of words in this version of the poem leaves no doubts as to the nature of both the lovers’ desires and the outcome of the wooing suggesting in the second and third stanza. In this poem, the “willing mistress” dares talk about her own sexuality which is clear from line 14 (“And I return’d the same”, the same referring to ‘many Kisses’, line 13), line 15 (“Which made me willing to receive”, my italics) and line 19 (“On her that was already fir’d”). She tells us she is as passionate as Amyntas in giving kisses and willing to give up her virginity and her chastity. The mistress is not ashamed to admit that Amyntas can easily physically ‘conquer’ her
because she is already aroused (see line 19-20); we get an overall impression that she enjoys his enticing “Tricks”. The love in this poem is thus openly proclaimed as a mutual love; both lovers consent in the wooing and the sexual act that arguably follows from it.

There is a progression in the poem, evolving from an innocent description of the scenery to a quite explicit description of the sexual acts and the suggestive outcome of the lover’s frolic. Language is important in this process as Behn consciously uses terms such as “Amorous”, “softening”, “fir’d” which leave little to the imagination. She combines this with ambiguous, suggestive statements such as in the very last line of the poem “Ah who can guess the rest?”. When considering the poem as a whole, the portrayal of the woman is not related to the concept of the ‘angel in the house’ and the relation between man and woman is overall a romantic and passionate one. The title of the poem still defines the female character as a mistress, according to the traditions of Restoration literature in which “the woman was an established type, a clearly defined character […] identified as daughters, wives, mothers, or mistresses” (Richetti 66) but she is first and foremost a ‘willing’ woman who desires the same as her lover Amyntas; although she is yet modest or careful enough not to mention anything more and be even more explicit.

This paradoxical situation of the woman, on the one hand directly and unconventionally admitting her sexual desires and on the other still feeling somewhat restrained can be linked to Aphra Behn’s personal situation. Duyfhuizen has argued that for women to “advocate the social philosophy of sexual autonomy” was too often met with “male resistance”, as was the case with Aphra Behn herself (64-65). One of the major restraints that “kept women from publishing their writing in the seventeenth century”, as Goreau argues, is the “fear of violating feminine modesty” (Duyfhuizen 65). In the same way that the female protagonist in “The Willing Mistress” dares not express anything further relating to sexuality or the sexual act, Behn struggled with openly talking about female sexuality in her poetry. But Behn did not want to confine herself to the domestic sphere as society expected her to and as a result she “was constantly attacked by critics (mostly male) who did not hesitate to use her gender as a criterion for her worth as a poet” (Duyfhuizen 65). Women were “consistently discouraged from becoming actively, directly involved in matters of public importance” (Latt 57) and only “participated in society in any but the most limited of ways” (Latt 57). To publish poetry such as Behn
did was seen as “to make oneself ‘public’: to expose oneself to ‘the world’” (Duyfhuizen 65). For instance women writers were said to have “violated their feminine modesty both by egressing from the private sphere which was their proper domain and by permitting foreign eyes access to what ought to remain hidden and anonymous” (Duyfhuizen 65). Female sexuality was not an acceptable topic for women to write about; it was a task left to male poets such as “Robert Herrick, Andrew Marvell” (Duyfhuizen 63) and John Dryden who mostly drew a not very flattering image of the mistress. Does Behn in inserting the statement “That which I dare not name” (my italics) implicitly points out to the reader her own difficulties in establishing herself as a poet? We do not know, but the social context of the seventeenth century needs to be taken into account if “The Willing Mistress” is to be read as a poem about the female experience of sexuality.

5.3. Intertextuality in “The Willing Mistress”; “The Dutch Lover” and “The Reflection: A Song”.

The poem can be related to Behn’s comedy “The Dutch Lover” (1673) in which it was published. In the play, as Duyfhuizen mentions, the poem is “sung by a maidservant (i.e. Francisca) to her mistress Cleonte” (II, vi) and consisted of more than three stanzas (66). In the play, the song has a particular function since it “figures the plot entailment of Silvio’s obsessive love for Cleonte” (Duyfhuizen 66). Similar to what happens in the poem, “Cleonte and Silvio dare not name the subject of their discourse” (Duyfhuizen 66) in the play.

Duyfhuizen has compared this version of the poem to the one later published in “Poems upon Several Occasions” and concludes that Behn’s reason for shortening the poem into three stanzas may be linked to “her more established position as a writer a decade after “The Dutch Lover” or her greater willingness to leave the question of the poem’s sexual entailments indeterminate” (Duyfhuizen 72). There is however no certainty concerning the matter. In “The Dutch Lover” the role of the ‘willing mistress’ is more complicated: she is no longer the ‘Coy Mistress’ but a woman who openly acknowledges her own desire and moreover admits “equal activity in sexual advance” (see line 14) (Goreau 165).
The play deals with gender transgressions but turns back in the end to the “conventional [...] teleology of marriage [...]” (Gorea 165) and heterosexual relationships. This switch from an unconventional back to a conventional view is in alignment with Aphra’s ideas. Goreau further argues that Behn was all too aware of the practical difficulties of acquiring sexual liberty and as a woman she was “too much subject to the conventional wisdom about women that was part of her education (165).

“The Willing Mistress” also links up with another poem by Behn called “The Reflection: A Song” which is considered “a continuation” (Gorea 165) of the poem in “The Dutch Lover” but differs from the 1684 version of “The Willing Mistress”.

In “The Reflection”, a slightly longer lyric than “The Willing Mistress”, the woeful story is told of a swain and his mistress Serena. The poem connects to the version in “The Dutch Lover” as the “setting is much the same, as is the subject” (Duyfhuizen 72). We read about the complaints of a young woman, Serena, who has sacrificed her virginity for her lover and feels very wronged when she is soon afterwards abandoned by this “cruel Swain”. The tone and thirt of this lyric contrasts with the almost romantic, sweet descriptions of frolic in “The Willing Mistress” as discussed in the textual analysis (see 5.2). The poem is one long complaint of the misfortune bestowed upon a young woman by a “cruel swain” whose name is not known. Instead of describing a quite romantic image of an Arcadia, the poem dramatically introduces us to “Poor loft Serena” who bewails her sad fate upon on a lonely hill. After this succinct introduction we are now drawn into the story and Serena commences her complaint - almost out of necessity: “She must speak or dye”. We soon learn that a young swain is the one to blame for her misfortune: he seduced his lover who, in all her innocence, “gave thee [the swain] what was mine”, i.e. her virginity. As mentioned before, chastity and virginity were values to be held high by young women. Although this was not entirely applicable to the situation of mistresses, since they had a extramarital relationship with a man, the consequences of abandonment after having been deflowered would probably have been substantial for them too. For one thing, a mistress would no longer have the option of becoming the mistress of another suitor. In this poem however, the damage done to Serena is not only on a physical level but also on an emotional level, and this is very much emphasized in, for instance, line 18 (“I did my Soul Incline”), 29 (“And when you spoke my Liftning Soul”) or line 36 (“[..] you won the Heart”). Serena had sincerely hoped her lover would
remain faithful to her not only for the sake of honor, but also because she believed he loved her as truly and faithfully as she did him.

The structure of the poem contains similarities and contrasts to the three stanzas of “The Willing Mistress”. In “The Reflection: A Song”, two ‘introductory’ stanzas set in a sad tone introduce us to the female protagonist and victim, who soon addresses the swain in her complaint, starting line 14. Note that same sad, woeful tone will return later on in the poem when Serena tells us about her lover’s betrayal. The first stanza of “The Willing Mistress” which for the sake of the comparison I shall also call ‘the introductory stanza’, describes two lovers who find themselves in a quiet, romantic place somewhere in a forest, in perfect harmony with nature. The remaining two stanzas of “The Willing Mistress” are similar to stanzas three to five of “The Reflection: A Song” in the sense that they describe how the two lovers engage in wooing and frolicking. In the latter poem the particular stanzas give us a sense of how the swain seduces Serena with his “soft Charms of Eloquence”, his “Eyes in Silence” telling their tale, his “Flattery”, his use of “Arts”, “Presents made”, “Songs” and “Letters writ”. Serena is as easily won over by the “Eyes in Silence [who] told their Tale” as the ‘willing mistress’ is enchanted by the “Charming Eyes” of Amyntas, who tell “their softning Tale”. Both Serena and the female protagonist of “The Willing Mistress” are passionately aroused by their lover:

“[…] On her that was already fir’d” (“The Willing Mistress”, l. 19)

“[…] I heedlesly Resign’d the rest,
And quickly was undone.” (“The Reflection: A Song”, ll. 43-44)

One difference is however that in the first poem the protagonists are already lovers and the mistress was already “fir’d” and “willing to receive” her lover’s kisses immediately; in “The Reflection” it is first described how the male lover had to win over Serena’s heart, not always without difficulties:

“Alas how long in vain you strove
My coldness to divert!
How long besieg’d it round with Love,
Before you won the Heart.” (ll. 33-36)
Note also in these and some of the following lines the use of military language (e.g. “besieg’d”, “won”, “invade”) to refer to the male’s seduction techniques and the woman’s physicality. This indicates Behn’s intention of showing us how men see women as objects to be “conquered” and “invaded” (i.e. deflowered) and condemning this practice by means of Serena’s voice. Perhaps she even points out how maltreatment and manipulation of women by a seductive and cunning man, such as in this poem, leads to nothing but despair.

The last two stanzas of the poem make up the main contrast with “The Willing Mistress” since they return to the melancholic and dramatic tone of the first stanzas. They describe how Serena ‘surrenders’ to her lover eventually and how, after her deflowering, the swain’s love for Serena quickly lessens. None of this can be found in “The Willing Mistress” (1684 version) which ends with an ‘open image’ (“Ah who can guess the rest?”), leaving it up to the reader to imagine what happens next. In “The Reflection: A Song”, Serena reaches the end of her complaint in the last stanza and only expresses dramatically her wish to “dye” of melancholy. Indulging in listlessness, she calls upon nature to grieve with her and “be Gay no more”.

This kind of emotionally-charged ending appears conventional in a love-poem like this one; however it is pointed out by Duyfhuizen “how few were the voices speaking against the seduction poetry produced by men” (73).

“The Reflection: A Song” gives a voice to a wronged mistress who is being abandoned by her lover. Perhaps the poem does not merely contain a complaint by Serena but an accusation by Aphra Behn herself too, who wishes to confront us with the injustice done to a young woman who, we may presume, shares this kind of fate with several other mistresses. The image of the ‘willing mistress’ and the “betrayed lover” (Duyfhuizen 73) show us (in)directly how women are restrained in society. The poems are “characterized by their […] recognition of consequences beyond the passionate moment” (Duyfhuizen 73), which is especially clear in “The Reflection: A Song”. This lyric recognizes the emotional devastation of a mistress abused by a “cruel Swain” who only wanted possession of her body. He saw the young woman as a mere object to conquer and treated her accordingly, knowing he would suffer almost no consequences when mistreating a mistress in such a way. Aphra Behn wants to emphasize by means of this poem how
society creates inequality between men and women by allowing this practice and especially, how injustice is done to women.


6.1. Introduction

“The Return” is one of Aphra Behn’s shorter love-poems published in “Poems upon Several Occasions” in 1684. Unlike “The Disappointment”, this poem does not try to conceal its purpose, which is warning the young swain Amyntas not to mistreat his mistress as he did in “The Willing Mistress” for he will be punished for it. A short discussion of “The Return” in relation to “The Willing Mistress” is relevant in order point out Aphra Behn’s intention of indicting more explicitly men’s practices of mistreating wives and mistresses.

6.2. Textual analysis and a comparison to “The Willing Mistress”

The opening lines of “The Return” introduce the reader to the same male protagonist prefiguring in “The Willing Mistress”, Amyntas. Behn has used this character of the shepherd or swain Amyntas in several love poems as a means to address men in general. Amyntas thus functions as a kind of exemplary character for seventeenth-century men and consequently, for the seventeenth-century social and patriarchal codes which disadvantage women on multiple levels.

Similar to “The Reflection: A Song”, the first stanzas of “The Return” sketch a rather negative image of Amyntas seducing a young woman. He may have “Art to subdue” and a conquering “Look or a Smile” but he uses these charms only to “rifle the Spoil”, to ruin her virginity without any pity. The despising tone which rings already throughout the first six lines is characteristic for the whole poem and will prove a means to arrive at the bitter closing lines of the poem. The way in which Amyntas is described contrasts heavily with Amyntas’ caresses in “The Willing Mistress” which are passionately welcomed by his lover. In “The Willing Mistress” there is however no specific mention as to what happens
after this initial frolic; the reader is left to wonder as to what could happen (“Ah who can guess the rest?”). In the light of this, it could be argued that the lovers then have sexual intercourse and that either the male lover does not abandon her after having deflowered her, or he does leave his mistress. In the case of abandonment, the poem “The Return” could be argued to serve as a warning for the woman in “The Willing Mistress” of what could happen.

As opposed to the previous stanza, where the relation between man and woman was compared to that of conqueror and spoil or trophee, in the middle stanza the military terminology creates an image of male and female as enemies. The woman is described as a “Foe” who “arms herself with Pride” when the male seeks for a way for her to give up her virginity. However, she proves to be a weak opponent, all “her Efforts are but vain” and Amyntas turns out to be the “Victor”.

After the building up of indictments at the address of Amyntas with the use of the military language of conquest, the poem reaches its expected ‘climax’ with the lines “Whilst proudly you aim / New Conquests to gain, / Some hard-hearted Nymph may return you your own”. This is clearly an explicit threat or even a promise of revenge (“[…] Shepherd beware”). One day Amyntas will be punished by a “hard-hearted Nymph” for all the wrong he has done to her. The political comparison is made with a “Tyrant” who has wronged his people and should not feel “secure in his Throne” despite being a “Victor”. Remarkably it is also a woman, one of Amyntas’ ‘conquests’, who shall get back to Amyntas for his inappropriate behaviour. It is not by any change in laws or society that this abuse of women will be punished. The author herself, Behn, is indeed aware that as a woman there is little she can do to change the patriarchal codes:

Your soft warring Eyes,
[...]
Can laugh at the Aids of my feeble Disdain; (stanza 2, my italics)

By means of the threat, Behn does not only vent her frustration and bitter feelings towards the social practices of the time, but also expresses her hope for a change in patriarchal society, a change in the relations between men and women.
6.3. “The Return” as an indictment against patriarchal society.

Amyntas is clearly no longer the charming swain whom we find in “The Willing Mistress”, but is described as a cruel “Tyrant” and a “Victor” in whose opinion women are mere “Conquests” to be made, objects to whom no loyalty is required. The military discourse, explicitly used throughout “The Return”, helps Aphra Behn to underline the reality of patriarchal society in which women are suppressed. At the same time she seems to rebel against men’s behaviour by means of the accusing tone and the almost vengeful end remark of the poem.

Behn shows us that seventeenth-century society, dominated by men, is not a favourable time for women to live in. However it is argued that although “women had little effective power in the contemporary world; their effect on men in romantic relationships was substantial” (Latt 44). They could satisfy the sexual needs of men and thus gain power over him and perhaps this is why in many literary works of the time a feeling of “fear and antagonism […] toward women” (Latt 57) is present. However, mistresses remained very much dependent on their lovers and took a great risk sacrificing their virginity.

Behn arguably aspires for a return to a situation in which the female exerts power over the male. A woman might one day rebel against Amyntas and punish him in one way or another. We can ask ourselves the question if Behn did not secretly refer to herself as being that “hard-hearted Nymph”, as the one ‘teaching Amyntas a lesson’ and by extension, confronting society with the fact that this kind of treatment of women is unacceptable. The title of the poem is now understood as foreshadowing the end lines of the poem: at some point women will reciprocate or ‘return’ the favour to the men who have abused them.
7. “To Alexis in Answer to his poem against Fruition. Ode.”

7.1. Introduction

The poem “To Alexis in Answer to his poem against Fruition. Ode” can be found in Behn’s “Lycidus: Or The Lover in Fashion... Together with a Miscellany of New Poems”, published in 1688. That same volume contains two other poems which will be discussed further on, i.e. “To Alexis, On his saying, I lov’d a Man that talk’d much” and “To the fair Clarinda”. In eight stanzas this poem reflects upon the “hapless sex”, men, who are indicted for not being faithful to one woman but always wanting more and entertaining one relationship after the other.

As the title indicates, the poem deals with the poetical character Alexis, who will also turn up in several other poems by Behn. Remarkably, in this poem, in contrast to the previous poems discussed, the voice of a male speaker appears towards the end of poem, in answer to the dominant female voice complaining about men in most part of the poem. A closer analysis will try to provide answers as to why Behn would choose to let a male voice enter into the poem, and also look into the way men’s behaviour is described throughout the poem.

7.2. Textual analysis

As mentioned before, the opening lines of the poem address the “hapless sex” which, if we read further on in the poem, refers to the female sex. The language used to describe men in the first stanza is a curious mixture of sharp irony and seriousness. At this point it is not yet clear that the speaker is a woman, this is only affirmed in the second stanza. As the title implies, the poem as a whole is conceived as a reply to a supposed “Poem against Fruition” that Alexis wrote. It is one of several poems that Behn wrote which are directed at fictional characters, in this case Alexis. According to the dictionary, ‘fruition’ refers to the ‘realization of hopes’ or ‘getting what was wanted’ and thus refers to Alexis’ “unstable insatiability” (Salzman 11) for conquering one woman after another.
The poem consecutively sums up the behaviour of men and how they treat their mistresses or lovers. It is not hard to see the sharpness in between the lines, as the first stanza, describing how men try to charm women, already contains negative edges. This is clear from the mentioning of the “false fires”, “baneful harms”, “feebly” “songs that please (though bad)” and “neglected” (my italics). These are negative terms all connected to the subject of the stanza, the “hapless” or ‘unlucky’ sex, i.e. women. We get a description of men falsely charm women with their ‘fires’, which are soon extinct “like lightning flash” because men soon neglect their charms directed at a woman due to a loss of interest. Men’s charms are compared to songs which please the ear when new, but which become boring and are neglected when familiar. In the same way, it is implied, men treat their mistresses. Men are in as early as the first stanza described as fickle creatures that fail to remain faithful to one woman and cannot sustain a stable relationship.

The female is mentioned for the first time in the second stanza as “a beauty which by angels’ forms it drew”. Women are presented as creatures from Heaven blessed with beauty and intellect (“the mind with brighter glories grace”, l. 10); this is however all “in vain” as the female voice, intruding in the poem, confirms: women are restricted to having “one betraying interview” with their lovers, i.e. sexual intercourse. The intellect and charms that women possess do them no good for their lovers soon lose interest in them and desire for another woman. Remarkably it is a female voice taking over here, as is indicated by the possessive pronoun ‘our’ and the collective pronoun ‘we’ in respectively lines 4 and 7 of the second stanza. This shift in focalization indicates that Behn wants to give the woman a voice, an opportunity to speak her opinion and expose men’s inconstancies in matters of love. It soon becomes clear which opinion Aphra Behn wants to convey in the poem as a whole: “Since man with that inconstancy was born, / To love the absent, and the present scorn.” (stanza 3). Men are shown to be inconstant in their relationship with a woman, for they always long for another mistress once they tire of their present one. Therefore, a woman “cannot depend on him in the way that she can, or should, rely on herself” (Stapleton 90) and it is a woman’s voice who confirms this in the following “rhetorical question”: “Who do we deck, why do we dress / For such a short-lived happiness?” The sarcastic tone of these lines are hardly unnoticeable; the
women wonders why she should be concerned about her looks to please men who only desire to conquer their mistress in the literal sense and then abandon her. This can be linked with the reality of seventeenth-century relationships. Women were at all times expected by men to hold high the virtue of modesty and chastity and yet even when they obeyed these rules they could and would often be abandoned by their lovers or husbands (see line 24 “they fly us if we yeild”). Women were thus faced with a male fickleness against which there was no defense, and this is what Behn complains about in these lines. Arguably, the act of abandonment is mentioned in the last line of the second stanza as “a real ill”. This term could be interpreted in two different ways: firstly, as referring to the disrespect shown to women and following sexual abuse - as woman are seen as mere objects to ‘conquer’ - or secondly, the ‘ruin’ inflicted on women after they have been abandoned by their lover. No longer being a virgin meant that a woman could no longer find another suitor, which was not a favorable situation in a society in which both wives and mistresses were largely dependent on men. The woman speaking in these lines is very much aware of the vulnerable position of women and their dependence on men: she realizes that “[…] either way ‘tis we must be undone?” and continues to describe men’s disloyalty. The building up of emotions from the first to the fifth stanza is also reflected visually in the grammar of the lines. At first, almost all sentences end with a full stop, then rhetorical questions are inserted and finally the stanzas abound with exclamations in the front position of the lines. Doubtlessly this sort of structure is functional; it stresses women’s desire for men to be more faithful towards their partners and at the same time openly and shamefully exposes men’s irresponsible behaviour.

The ‘ode’ is now turned into a real complaint as the female addresses man again in an exclamatory voice, echoing the exclamation at the very beginning of the poem (“Ah hapless sex!”). This gives the lines a dramatic tone and emphasizes the frustration ringing in the female voice. The contrasts between men and women become even more explicit when the female exclaims “Inconstancy’s the good supreme, / The rest is airy notion, empty dream!”’. This sentence is repeating the idea of men’s inconstancy or unfaithfulness and is contrasting it with women’s (vain) attempts to win over the heart of their lover. The language is also proof of this: the possessive pronouns “his” and “our” connected with respectively the substantives “conquest” and “shame” is contrasted in line 5 of the fifth stanza. The military terminology that Behn used in previously discussed
poems, appears again in these lines to define men’s view on women as objects. Men and
their “inconstancy” are seen as the “supreme”, the most important motivational drive of
men in relationships. Women on the contrary are left with nothing but shame. Yet they
latter appear to have, paradoxically, no choice but to pursue men’s love as it is their
“great business and aim” in life. The central objective of the poem is indeed to oppose
men and women’s behaviour and this is what the contents of the poem and the grammar
suggest. Stapleton confirms this also by stating that the poem consists of a “dichotomy
between men’s perfidy and women’s desire” (Stapleton 90).

Up to the fifth stanza, the poem has been an essay-like complaint coming from a woman;
in the concluding stanza however a male voice takes over and gives the poem an ironic
end twist. The male voice supposedly comments on the female’s complaint in the
previous stanzas, but the lines are more than just a comment directed at the woman. The
male addresses the “nymph”, who may stand for any mistress or woman who doubts her
lover’s honesty or intentions. He states that if ever a woman’s lover may “the bliss
desire” and may think he is like Alexis, should nevertheless be heedful of his desires.
Alexis, to whom the poem is directed, is one of Behn’s poetical characters constructed by
Behn to voice her opinion on the male sex. What supposedly happened to Alexis, as it is
told in these lines, is somewhat similar to what happened to Lysander in “The
Disappointment”: despite his desire for sexual satisfaction (“wished possession” of the
woman, in the physical and sexual sense), he is struck by impotence (“[…] damps his
fire”) and is forced to leave each “sighing and abandoned maid” he has tried to seduce.
The “fatal lesson he has learned” is that the swain should nevemore be concerned with
his sexual powers, for he has succeeded in seducing a nymph once but will not be able to
do it ever again.

The sharp condemn of men in this particular stanza is clearly identifiable as it is
throughout the poem. Paradoxically in these last lines it is a male voice that does the
talking. Behn has probably shifted the focalization in the last stanza to a male voice to
expose men’s weakness in an ironical tone. The explicit warning directed at men which
was found in “The Reflection: A Song” is in this poem implicitly present: a woman’s
voice openly talks about men’s misbehaviour and wonders why women should do trouble
at all to please men, since they are abandoned by the lover after the sexual act either way.
The male sex is overall associated with negative terminology and is more of an open accusation of men rather than an ode. This leads to another paradox, namely that of the title. “To Alexis in Answer to his Poem against Fruition” is supposedly an ode; but since we have already concluded that it is a long, essay-like complaint directed at swains, it is quite the opposite of what has been defined as ‘the ode’ from the 18th century. The ode is mainly an encomiastic genre but this poem is far from celebratory as it only lashes out at men’s inconstancy. The title of the poem acquires new meaning in relation to the male voice present in the last stanza. Paradoxically and ironically it is also Alexis, a man, who wrote a poem against “fruition”, against men trying to get what they want from women, i.e. an orgasm. We can assume that this poem, which is an answer to Alexis’ poem, is thus a reinforcement of what Alexis wrote. We do have to keep in mind that the author of the poem is Aphra Behn, who intended the whole lyric as an indictment against men. She consciously adapts a women’s point of view or, in this case, uses the male voice to talk in favour of women. The ironic hint towards impotence in the last lines tress mocks the sexual weakness of male lovers.

8. “To the fair Clarinda, who made Love to me, imagin’d more than Woman”

8.1. Introduction

This poem, often abbreviated to simply “To the fair Clarinda” is printed in “Lycidus: Or The Lover in Fashion... Together with a Miscellany of New Poems” (1688) and is nowadays often found in “Selected Poems”, a poetry volume containing a selection of Aphra Behn’s love poetry. It is one of Behn’s more famous gender-reversing poems, “frequently anthologized” and for the most part seen as “a lesbian poem, a poem about female relationships, or about romantic relationships” according to Frangos (21). Several of other Behn poems, “To the fair Clarinda” is told from a female point of view but deals this time not with a heterosexual relationship but with a woman the speaker is presumably in love with.
8.2. The ambiguous sexual nature of the woman in “To the fair Clarinda”

Over the years there has been discussion as to whether “the fair Clarinda” addressed in the poem is a woman or a hermaphrodite. Most scholars seem to be of the opinion that there is no doubt that this is merely a poem about the love between two women; Donoghue for example argues that it is simply a poem about lesbian love because of “her name” (Frangos 24) which “implies clarity” (Frangos 25), and the fact that “the title of the poem admits that Clarinda is a woman and not a hermaphrodite” (Frangos 21). However, Frangos has proposed a counter-argument to this perhaps hasty conclusion, arguing that Donoghue “reads the title selectively, privileging the word woman over the rest of the phrase in which it appears and ignoring the rhetorical impact of both “more than” and “imagin’d” (21). Indeed the implication is made that Clarinda is, in the eyes of the speaker, “more than Woman” (my italics) which could suggest that Clarinda is bisexual.

The opening lines do not as yet give away that the speaker is a woman; this will only become clear further on in the poem. Clarinda, the one at which the poem is directed to, is first described as a “fair lovely maid” but then the speaker corrects himself or herself - apparently not wanting to define Clarinda in strictly feminine terms - and calls her “lovely charming youth”. This kind of terminology is just as ambiguous as the words “imagin’d more than Woman” for if the reader but lets his imagination have free play the “charming youth”, a gender-neutral term, can be interpreted as referring to either a young woman or a young man; or both. If the “youth” refers to at the same time a man and a woman, Clarinda could be a hermaphrodite. In the eyes of the speaker at least, this name “more approaches truth”. On the other hand, Frangos point out that a common connotation of the word ‘youth’ is “a young man between boyhood and mature age” (25); in combination with the more feminine terms ‘fair’ and ‘lovely’ this again creates the suggestion that Clarinda has boyish features as well.

Frangos confirms the ambiguity of the language in stating that “a striking feature of the poem is the way that Behn avoids using a gendered pronoun when referring to Clarinda” (23), refusing to define her as either a woman or a man and thus leaving the reader in constant doubt. As Frangos argues, the speaker addresses Clarinda directly, i.e.
in the second person as if Clarinda were right beside the speaker; and therefore she is referred to as you throughout the poem (23).

Since ‘you’ is also a gender-neutral pronoun in abstract terms, the confusion as to Clarinda’s gender is reinforced and the “hermaphroditic overtones of the poem” (Frangos 23) become more prolific.

As is already shown, language is an important determining factor for the poem’s interpretations. Although Clarinda is a female name, there is also an intertextual reference to “an Amazonian character in Tasso” (Frangos 24), an Italian poet and contemporary of Behn. Clarinda or ‘Clorinda’ in Torquato Tasso’s “Gerusalemme Liberata” is a woman fighting against the Christians (see figure 4) and thus “invokes the combination of masculine traits purportedly adopted by the Amazons and begins to hint toward the ways in which Clarinda is ‘more than Woman’” (Frangos 24). As we can see in the painting below, Clorinda acts more like a man in dressing herself up in armour. We can thus link Clarinda to the Greek mythological figures of female warriors, the Amazons.

Figure 4: Eugène Delacroix, “Clorinda Rescues Olindo and Sophronia” (1856).

The image of the Amazons that is conjured up in relation with Clarinda helps in establishing an image of her as being partly female and partly male. She is admired by the speaker for her beauty and yet it is suggested there is more to her than this, she is “more than Woman”. This brings us back to the opening lines of the poem, in which the speaker
states that “fair lovely maid” (1) is not an adequate term to described Clarinda on the basis of it being “Too weak, too feminine” (2) for a creature like Clarinda who is “nobler” (2) than that. Frangos argues that the speaker, acknowledging the singularity or restrictiveness of the label “feminine” (2), suggests in this way that Clarinda is also partly “masculine” (25).

In the following lines another suggestion is made as to Clarinda’s bisexual nature: the speaker describes her pursue of Clarinda, who is again referred to in gender-neutral terms as “the youth” (7). Despite of the rivalry of other women (“so much beauteous woman is in view” (8)), the speaker seems to yield to Clarinda’s charms. The “charms” are in the first place a female character trait but at the same time the speaker calls Clarinda’s appearance ambiguously “thy deluding form” (10, my italics). This could not only refer to the stunningly beautiful female features of Clarinda but probably to the confusion Clarinda’s appearance creates, which suggests that she has male features too.

At this point the speaker admits that she herself is of the female sex, with the words “[…] thou giv’st us pain, / While the bright nymph betrays us to the swain.” (10-11, my italics). The speaker uses the collective pronoun “us” twice, thus pointing out that Clarinda is attractive not only to the speaker but also to others of the speaker’s sex. This is also foreshadowed by the use of the personal pronoun “we” in line 9. Then it is revealed that “the bright nymph” (11), Clarinda “betrays” her to a swain, a young man. The combination of “the bright nymph” and the “swain” in one line seems to suggest that “Clarinda’s feminine and masculine parts work together” (Frangos 28) and that Clarinda is at the same time nymph (feminine) and swain (masculine). Clarinda is seen as a woman because she is called a “nymph”, which a strictly female mythological creature. The bisexual nature of Clarinda is to an extent also confirmed through some of the transformation myths in Ovid’s “Metamorphoses”. In these myths, nymphs transform into something else and it is this process of transformation that could also suggest that Clarinda is a coalescence of female and male characteristics due to a transformation. This is another proof of the doubt that Behn is constantly casting upon Clarinda’s sexual identity, which is part of the poem’s thematic.
Although it is clear by now that in the speaker’s opinion Clarinda is more than just a woman, the “subsequent references in the poem to Clarinda’s (feminine) beauty” (Frangos 25) - such as “maid”, “nymph” - confirm that “the feminine representation is an important part of Clarinda’s persona for the speaker” (Frangos 25). The speaker, who has by now revealed herself as being of the female sex, is more explicit about Clarinda’s female appearances than she is about the masculine part of Clarinda, which is perhaps intentionally “left […] unspecified” (Frangos 25). The reader has to interpret for himself what exactly it is that makes Clarinda “more than Woman”. One could assume that, due to the intertextual reference to Tasso’s warrior-like Clorinda, it is Clarinda’s “mannerisms or attitudes” (Frangos 25) that make her also masculine, but eventually it could just as well be her “ability to inspire love/desire in a woman” (Frangos 25) - as is suggested in ll. 9-10 - or simply her looks.

One of Aphra Behn’s main intentions in the poem is breaking through the socially accepted standard of heterosexual relationships. The reader is immediately made aware of the fact that this is not a standard love-poem situated in a “pastoral conceit” (Frangos 24) (such as for instance “The Disappointment” initially is) through a part of the title that quite explicitly mentions the sexual intercourse of the speaker and Clarinda: “To the fair Clarinda, who made Love to me…” The title as a whole not only gives the poem a “sexualized aura” (Frangos 25) but also immediately casts doubt upon the sexual identity of Clarinda who is “imagin’d more than Woman”. Frangos further argues that when the speaker reveals herself to be of the female sex, it becomes clear the woman-to-woman sexuality is at the centre of the poem, as well as how it is understood by the speaker and how readers may understand it (25). As argued before, the relationship between Clarinda and the speaker could on first sight be interpreted as a lesbian one. However, the indications made in the title and on several instances elsewhere in the poem cannot be ignored; they seem to indicate that there is indeed ‘something masculine’ about Clarinda and consequently, the relationship between Clarinda and the speaker is further problematized. In ll. 12-15, the speaker reveals more about Clarinda, and how she understands her relationship with Clarinda in society:
“In pity to our sex thou wert sent,
That we might love, and yet be innocent:
For sure no crime with thee we can commit;
Or if we should – thy form excuses it.”

The speaker points out that she can love Clarinda and still be considered ‘innocent’ (13). The ‘innocence’ could refer to society’s resolute “blindness” (Frangos 28) that “can’t see a relationship between women as an erotic one” (Frangos 28) and is blind to the sexual tension between the speaker and Clarinda. Society expects women to maintain relationships on a purely amicable basis and therefore allows the relationship between Clarinda and the speaker. However, the speaker seems to insinuate that society has knowledge about Clarinda’s hermaphroditic nature: they “sent Clarinda to women out of pity”, pity for “the sexual restrictions placed on them, the cultural demands that women not have, much less act on, sexual/erotic inclinations or desires” (Frangos 28). Society is aware of the fact that they put restrictions on women and commands them to be less influenced by sexual desires, to control their feelings and sexual desires. For a woman to express her desire as the speaker does in the poem, is resolutely denouncing this social rule and what’s more, protesting against the fact that society did not expect women to voice their feelings in writing.

Consequently, Aphra Behn too rebels through the speaker’s voice against society’s restrictions on women; restrictions which are approved of in conventional pastoral love-poetry. Behn refuses to adhere to this kind of poetry; this is clear from the “choice of the word ‘betrays’” which “invokes the convention of seduction and betrayal, which is often the desired outcome of standard pastoral poems: the satisfaction of the speaker’s desire, though it usually means the ruin of the beloved” (Frangos 28). In common pastoral poetry, unsurprisingly mostly by the hand of male authors, the swain is the speaker. He expresses his desire to have sexual intercourse with his mistress and therefore seduces her. This means that the mistress, once she has lost her virginity, is a ‘ruined maid’. Virginity is an important value for unmarried women in the seventeenth century, for they were dependent on their chastity and virginity in order to find another suitor. If a suitor would abandon his mistress and betray her for another mistress, she would become self-dependent unless she had any family who would still want to support
her. Independence was still difficult for 17th-century women since they were quite restrained in pursuing a profession. In “To the Fair Clarinda” however, Frangos points out that “this is not the end, nor does either the woman seem to be ruined – [...] nor [...] does the relationship pose a threat to either woman’s reputation” (Frangos 28). There is no mention of betrayal, only a description of playful seduction between two women. In this way Behn is offering an alternative to “the pastoral convention and social expectation that physical sexuality ends in ruin for the woman” (Frangos 28). Of course, in pastoral poetry, sexual intercourse occurred typically between a man and a woman and this is indeed also the “dominant cultural assumption” (Frangos 28) of the age. Behn is implicitly pointing out that in the poem there is no abuse or betrayal of the woman, since “there’s no man” (Frangos 28) present in the setting.

Behn is thus not only rewriting the conventions of pastoral love-poetry but also the cultural expectations of a patriarchal society. She seems to denounce men’s ways of misleading and (sexually) betraying women - she calls this a “crime” (14) - and is showing the reader that there is nothing wrong with the love between two women. Moreover, a relationship between women is presented as less pernicious since neither of the partners can be wronged or ruined. This idea is clearly reflected in ll.14-15, where the speaker says “For sure no crime with thee we can commit; Or if we should – thy form excuses it”. There are however two things that are remarkable about this line. Firstly, the dash in l. 15 which suggests that Behn does not want to go into detail about what it is exactly that the women might do. The reader is therefore “invited to complete this sentence” (Frangos 29). It has been suggested that the dash could be replaced by either “a euphemism for sexual activity or [...] by reading an open-ended proposition about whether women should speak openly about the sexual desires” (Frangos 29). In Aphra Behn’s age, women were not expected to talk openly about their feelings let alone their sexual cravings, so Behn could be stressing this by leaving the verb out. On the other hand, Behn has been quite explicit in the rest of the poem about the sexuality between the women and consequently, not mentioning the exact (physical) action that Clarinda and the speaker might undertake, could be a way of mockingly “retreating behind feminine modesty and claims not to understand the bawdy implications that could be read onto the relationship she describes” (Frangos 29) although both her and the reader can see both Behn’s and the speaker’s actual ‘immodesty’ when looking at the poem as a whole.
Why Behn chooses to insert the rather harsh word “crime” (14), “which seems strikingly out of place in a love poem” (Frangos 29), can be explained if we relate it to 17th-century laws regarding sexuality and assuming that the specific crime here intended is that of “sodomy” (Frangos 29). At the time, Frangos argues, the practice of sodomy was typically understood as sexual activity between men and the punishment […] was death” (29). It was therefore not punishable by law if two women were caught in an intimate situation, and this is what Behn points out in line 14. On the other hand, if we believe what the speaker has told us so far about Clarinda being “more than Woman” and possessing something masculine as well; the ‘crime’ would not be sodomy since Clarinda is a hermaphrodite. In any case, Behn does take “physical sexuality between women” (Frangos 29) seriously; otherwise she would be using a less crude term to suggest sexual intercourse between the speaker and Clarinda.

Lines 16 and especially line 17 seem to echo the final lines of the eleventh stanza in “The Disappointment” in which Cloris touches her lover’s limp phallus or ‘snake’ in metaphorical terms. If we assume that the “snake” in this poem refers to a penis, it is again made clear that Clarinda could be hermaphrodite, with female traits, i.e. “Clarinda’s labial leaves” (Frangos 30), but also with obvious masculine body parts. However, the lines remain ambiguous. According to Frangos, Behn is not specifying the nature of this snake in the leaves and therefore the ‘snake’ could not only refer to a penis but just as well to a large or projecting clitoris, dildo or merely a figurative phallus, i.e. an active and desiring sexuality hiding under the surface of their feminine friendship, unnoticed by outsiders (30). The reader is left in the dark as to what exactly is meant here, which enhances the sexual connotations and ambiguity of the poem all the more. If we consider the more explicit references to sexuality between the speaker and Clarinda in the poem, it is reasonable to suppose that the snake is a reference to a real body part, be it of a female or a male body and, more importantly, the two women “can lay claim to this powerful icon of sexuality and put it to their own uses” (Frangos 30). They seem to admit that there is a lot more than friendship between them but do not want to share the details of their sexuality with the reader.
The second and shortest stanza of the poem confirms the speaker’s view of her beloved Clarinda, who is described poetically as “Thou beauteous wonder of a different kind, / Soft Cloris with the dear Alexis joined;” (18-19). These lines seem to echo the title of the poem in which the speaker defined Clarinda as “more than Woman” and line 10 of the poem which contains a reference to Clarinda’s “deluding form”. Clarinda is a wonder of a different kind which implies she is not merely a woman but something more than that. She is also seen as a man in the poetic persona’s opinion, because of some distinct masculine traits she possesses, physical or other. Aphra Behn emphasizes the fact that Clarinda is “both male and female at the same time” (Frangos 30) by “using stock pastoral names” (Frangos 30) such as Cloris and Alexis. These names are used in other Behn poems too, in which there is no doubt as to Cloris being of the female sex, and Alexis of the male sex. In “To the fair Clarinda”, the adjectives ‘soft’ and ‘dear’ are added to stress respectively the distinct female and male features of Clarinda. However, since both sexes are mentioned in one line to describe the joint nature of Clarinda’s sex, there can be no doubt that Clarinda is indeed described as a hermaphrodite, and not merely a lesbian woman. Throughout the poem, it is also suggested that Clarinda is “even able to switch back and forth between single-sexual identities at will” (Frangos 30). This is pointed out in for instance line 11, in which the ‘bright nymph’ (the female part of Clarinda) seems to switch to the male part of the ‘swain’. However, in the end it is never completely specified which parts of Clarinda are considered female in the speaker’s view, and which ones are distinctly male.

In contrast to the ll. 18-19, the following two lines seem to counter the speaker’s emphasis on Clarinda being equally and wholly woman and man at the same time. The female characteristics of Clarinda are a real temptation to the speaker and other women whereas in e.g. lines 9 and 10 Clarinda’s “feminine charms were something of an obstacle for the speaker to overcome” (Frangos 30) and only subtle, implicit hints were given to Clarinda’s masculine traits. These lines even seem a “reversal of the [...] dynamic” (Frangos 30) as portrayed in the whole poem. In line 20 Clarinda’s “manly part” is acknowledged as the subject of the sentence and as a normality; the speaker seems this time “tempted with the image of the maid” (21). While previously the speaker was seduced by Clarinda’s “deluding form”, i.e. her male part, now the “roles” (Frangos
30) have changed. Clarinda’s female charms and “image” (21) are problematized: they are the reason for the speaker’s sexual agony. The reversal of female and male roles in one person, Clarinda, is remarkable. Clarinda’s personality, or rather her sexuality, has a double effect on the speaker. As a woman, the speaker is at the same time attracted by and struggling with the female and male parts of Clarinda and yet she declares:

“While we the noblest passions do extend
The love to Hermes, Aphrodite the friend.” (ll. 22-23)

In the last lines of the poem, the “dual figure of Clarinda” (Frangos 31) is defined by means of a reference to Hermes and Aphrodite, a male and a female god from Greek mythology. This reference is relevant since it puts “a finer point on the relationship” (Frangos 31) between Clarinda and the speaker”. Aphrodite, as the goddess of love, sexuality and beauty, is the ultimate representative of the female and Hermes represents the “masculine part of Clarinda’s persona” (Frangos 31). The duality of Clarinda’s sexuality is represented in the word ‘hermaphrodite’ itself, which is a fusion of ‘herm-’ and ‘Aphrodite’, referring to the two gods. In Greek mythology Hermes is primarily the messenger of the gods but also the god of border-crossing, the god of travelers. If we assume that Clarinda is defined as a hermaphrodite, it is not only border-crossing to hint at Clarinda’s hermaphroditic nature in writing as Behn does, but the very state of hermaphroditism would be a ‘crossing’ of the lines of the laws concerning sexual activity in the 17th century.

Elsewhere Hermes has also been associated with “an Oriental deity of Babylonian extraction” (Frothingham 175) who is worshipped as a symbol of fertility and often appears in visual art as a “snake-god […] thought of in snake form” (Frothingham 175). According to Frothingham, in this Oriental context, Hermes is seen as the messenger of the Great Mother and represented as the double snake, male and female (175). The double nature of Hermes depicted as a male and female snake at the same time, can be linked to the sexual duality of Clarinda as a hermaphrodite and fits within the final image of Clarinda as described in ll. 22-23.

A few other elements are remarkable in these last lines. Not only is a detailed look at the language itself important in recovering the layers of sexual discourse and ambiguity
in between the lines, but figures of speech are too. In line 15 of the first stanza for instance, the dash in the middle of the sentence is suggestive of sexual intercourse. Similarly, the comma in the very last line of the poem, separating the words ‘Hermes’ and ‘Aphrodite’ is arguably a “phallic comma […] – a pause before the climax” (Frangos 31). The comma seems on the one hand to divide the masculine (Hermes) and the feminine part (Aphrodite) of Clarinda while it is obvious that Clarinda is a fusion of both, as mentioned in line 19. In fact, if we put lines 19 and 23 together, the masculine and feminine names seem to form a chiasmus (see words in italics):

“Soft Cloris with the dear Alexis joined;”
“The love to Hermes, Aphrodite the friend.”

In the chiasmus, the pastoral names and the names of the Greek gods are juxtaposed. Whether Aphra Behn constructed this chiasmus intentionally we do not know. However, several other elements are consciously introduced to contribute to the poem’s ambiguity. Throughout the first stanza in particular, the speaker drops hints and reveals both explicit and implicit details about Clarinda’s sexual identity and her relation with the speaker. The reader is never really certain of Clarinda’s sex; it is only at the very end of the poem that fairly obvious statements are given as to Clarinda’s hermaphroditism. Mainly the association of Clarinda with ‘soft Cloris’ and ‘dear Alexis’ at the same time points out that in the opinion of the speaker, Clarinda’s masculine and feminine parts are equally important.

The last lines are also rather explicit in pointing out which part of Clarinda the speaker is romantically and sexually attracted to, ruling out all doubts that the reader might have from earlier hints that the speaker gave on this subject (for instance in ll. 6, 9-10, 14, 21). It is obvious that the “noblest passions” (22) the speaker and other women have for Clarinda consist of a “love to Hermes” (23). In other words, the romantic feelings of the speaker are reserved for the masculine part of Clarinda and the amiable feelings, the friendship, are reserved for the feminine part of Clarinda. Hereby the speaker admits that it is Clarinda’s masculine part that charms her (as it did in l. 7: “And without blushes I the youth pursue”) and that the woman Clarinda is merely a friend of hers. The relation between the speaker and Clarinda is problematized in this aspect since both Clarinda herself and the speaker’s feelings for Clarinda are mixed. Frangos argues
that Clarinda embodies both sexes and the speaker feels differently towards respectively Clarinda’s female and male part and therefore the attractions cannot simply be understood as woman-to-woman or woman-to-man (31). The relationship between the two women and the feelings the speaker has for Clarinda are not straightforward and at times contradictory.

To add to the suggestive quality of the poem, Aphrodite is argued to refer not only the Greek goddess of love but also to the author of the poem herself, since the word ‘aphrodite’ contains “Behn’s own first name, Aphra” (Frangos 31) and secondly, Aphrodite literally means “lover of Aphra” (Ballaster 76). This suggests that Clarinda takes up a “role as Aphra’s lover” (Frangos 31). In this case, the speaker is arguably Behn herself, and the poem can be seen as a kind of confession of Behn, declaring her love for the hermaphrodite Clarinda. Goreau has validated this argument by stating that after the affair with John Hoyle, Behn might have “transferred her sexual interest to women” (Goreau 205). The term ‘Aphrodite’ is then a pun on “Hermes, trickster among the gods and Aphrodite, goddess of love; Hermaphrodite, the two sexes joined; and ‘Aphra’, hidden in ‘Aphrodite’” (Goreau 206). Is Aphra tricking the reader by ‘admitting’ her love for Clarinda? It remains open to further interpretation.

8.3. Conclusion

Throughout the poem Aphra Behn describes a sexual and romantic relationship with another person, Clarinda, which is wholly “self-contained and fulfilling” (Frangos 31). As Frangos argues, Behn creates a situation in which women can entertain a relationship as purely friends, based on similarity as well as a relationship based on difference, diverging from the traditional heterosexual dynamic (31). Society often does not see any harm in close relationships between women yet Behn warns that such bonds may still be seen as a ‘crime’ once it is discovered that these bonds are also sexual in nature. The whole poem is loaded with sexual connotations and ambiguous language to show that the relationship between the speaker and Clarinda is not straightforward and cannot be categorized.
The reversal of roles of the feminine and the masculine part of Clarinda shows us that the “woman can be - and is - the aggressive masculine figure” (Frangos 31) against whose charms the speaker struggles and that the other part is “the passive but resistant feminine party” (Frangos 31). The image of Clarinda given in the poem is that of a strong person whose qualities are not strictly ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’; Behn indicates that she does not agree with the roles society imposes on men and particularly women; the doubleness in Clarinda’s character thus exemplifies “the artificiality of such gendered roles” (Frangos 31). The poem is an excellent example of Behn’s gender dynamics and serves as a means to struggle against social divisions between men and women. Its subject remains however a remarkable case in 17th-century poetry.

9. “To Lysander, on Some Verses he Writ, and asking more for his Heart then ‘twas worth”

9.1. Introduction

“To Lysander, on Some Verses he Writ..” is the one but final poem in Behn’s “Poems upon Several Occasions” published in 1684. It is one of several poems directed at the poetical character Lysander, other poems are for instance “To Lysander at the Musick-Meeting” and “To Lysander, who made some Verses on a Discourse of Love’s Fire”. Behn uses Lysander in these poems as a ‘stereotype’ to address men in general and to set forth her views on men’s behaviour towards women and to critique patriarchal society in a variety of ways, but the name is also an implicit reference to Behn’s lover John Hoyle, as mentioned earlier. Other poems such as “The Disappointment” also feature the character of Lysander.

This particular poem is similar to a poem such as “The Reflection: A Song” in its long excursion on a man who has wronged his lover in one way or another. As the title suggests, the poem is a reply, or rather a rebuke of a female voice, to the male protagonist Lysander who has writ a love letter to a woman. Letting a female voice complain about men’s misbehaviour is a way for Behn to voice her own opinion on the disadvantages of being a woman in 17th-century patriarchal society and “the sexual politics that Restoration love had become” (Goreau 185). Men were allowed to be promiscuous
whereas a woman had to reserve all her affections, physical and emotional, to one man only.

9.2. Textual analysis

The first lines introduce the reader to the general element of comparison that runs throughout the whole poem. The speaker tells Lysander to take back his heart, i.e. the love that he has given her. The tone of voice ringing in these lines is unmistakably a frustrated, bitter one. The woman calls his heart a ‘fond valu’d Trifle’ (2) and this indicates a change in her emotions towards Lysander: she was fond of him and valued his love highly in past days but no longer wants to cherish his heart, which is now a ‘Trifle’ to her. She has discovered something about Lysander’s character that does not please her at all and hints at this in lines 3 and 4. Lysander is like other men whom the speaker calls ‘Love-Merchants’ (3), trading women’s hearts. She accuses both Lysander and men in general of treating a woman’s love like a commodity, i.e. like an object that can be bought and sold at random. The speaker not only expresses her frustration and anger but even hate at how ‘meanly’ (4) men treat women. By now it is clear that Lysander fulfills a double function: he is not only the one at whom the speaker directs her anger but he is also representative for male-dominated society in general. The fact that the speaker addresses Lysander directly by using the personal pronoun ‘you’ indicates directness and adds to the dramatic quality of the poem.

The commoditization of women by patriarchal society is one of the central themes running through the poem and this is reflected in the language. Already in the title and the first stanza several words are related to the economical field and the trading business, for instance ‘valu’d’ (2), ‘Merchants’ (3), ‘Trade’ (3) and ‘Bargains’ (4). This illustrates yet again that Behn’s choice of words is particularly relevant in mirroring the poem’s thematics. Throughout the poem, the business and trading terminology keeps returning. The speaker now uses the metaphor of a trading market “to illustrate Lysander’s materialism”(Stiebel) in seeing women as a commodity and points out that love is the “one Staple Rate” (7) in ‘the market of women’ and it is not up to the man to choose whom he falls in love with: Love does not ‘leave it to the Traders Choice’ (8) but chooses for itself.
Love is clearly personified in these lines, which is clear from the fact that it is written with a capital letter. The personification of Love also recalls the mythological figure of Cupid, shooting arrows at lovers with his bow. The implication of lines 7 and 8 is of course that love itself is not something that can be forced either - you cannot simply choose whom you fall in love with - and consequently, love is not a commodity either.

The speaker tells us now how she thinks a man should treat his lover and what kind of love a woman deserves, i.e. a genuine, sincere and ‘True’ (9) love. Lysander has however not shown that his feelings towards her are genuine; the speaker expresses this metaphorically by saying that ‘Subt’ly you [Lysander] advance the Price’ (10). Love is metaphorically seen as a ‘deal’ or an investment between two people and Lysander has not kept to his end of the bargain, because he is asking a high rate and is monopolizing the ‘free Trade’ (12) in the ‘market of love’. The speaker emphasizes the fact that Lysander is indeed ‘asking more for his Heart then ‘twas worth’; he is asking so much more in return for his love than he himself would be willing to give. This is an unfair practice in the eyes of the speaker, who is of the opinion that the love two people give each other should be equal in amount. In the following stanzas, the speaker continues to sum up what characterizes Lysander’s “double standard in love” (Stiebel): Lysander demanded more from her in the relationship than she demanded of him; the relationship is therefore not based on equality and reciprocity but on inequality and imbalance in matters of love.

She complains about the fact that as soon as she is in a relationship with Lysander, she no longer is the ‘Buyer’ (13) of his heart but a ‘Humble Slave’ (13). The issue of slavery in a heterosexual relationship is emphasized by putting the word ‘slave’ in italics. Mentioning the slavery can also be considered a way for Behn to lash out at society that prefers the “subordination” (Latt 43) of women not only in relationships but also in public life. Women in the 17th-century were after all not allowed to pursue “public lives for themselves” (Latt 43) nor were they wholly entitled of an own opinion in their relationship. These social restrictions of women were probably due to a male fear of the power of women (43) as Latt argues, a fear that was surprisingly alive in the 17th century. In order to counter these fears, women were often attacked in literature as Joseph
Swetnam’s “The Araignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and unconstant women” (London, 1617), a work with a rather unambiguous title, is proof of. Hence also the surprisingly many misogynist love-poems attacking women which are circulating in the period. Behn is not only highlighting the unfair treatment of women but is implicitly also referring to herself. As a woman she also encountered difficulties once she decided to pursue a career as a writer and started writing love-poetry, attacking patriarchal society in a variety of ways.

In stanzas four and five the speakers tells us in what ways Lysander is treating her like a slave. He demands to have all of her in his relationship and does not allow her to ‘bate a Look or Glance’ (14) at anyone else - especially other men - without his consent. The implication is here that Lysander is a jealous man who sees everything black and white and does not know how to compromise. Lysander is a possessive, greedy character who does not want to share his lover; he does not even allow her to have friends. Their relationship is clearly characterized by inequality, since Lysander demands more of his lover than she does of him. Every action she undertakes, every ‘friendly Smile or Kiss’ (19) directed at another person has to be accounted for. This kind of subjection and repression of freedom is ‘unjust’ (21) and truly unacceptable in the eyes of the speaker. As a tyrant suppresses his people, Lysander is suppressing the ‘Freedoms’ (22) of the speaker’s life.

In line 23 another character is mentioned in the poem, a woman named Adraste. She is presumably a mistress of Lysander and thus the rival of the speaker. The speaker complains that the mistress is given certain privileges and freedoms that she herself does not get so easily; this again emphasizes the inequality in the relationship between Lysander and the speaker. Lysander is free to have mistresses and the speaker is not even allowed social contact with friends. This kind of situation is quite a realistic one in 17th-century households. Married women at the time had to “remain indoors” (Latt 43-44) and “individual women were effectively isolated from one another, thereby enforcing their dependence on their husbands, who in turn were then able to limit their social contacts, making themselves the focus of their wives’ intellectual and emotional lives” (Latt 43-44). Since men did not have to justify themselves towards their wives, it would have been easier to cheat on them. The ‘punishment’ for having an extramarital relationship was
also more severe for women than for men, encouraging the practice of cheating. Women were powerless and had almost no say in their marriage and could therefore do little about the sexual escapades of their husband. In this poem, it is not clear whether the speaker and Lysander are married or just lovers, but in either case she cannot undertake any actions when she discovers Lysander is cheating on her. She can only complain about the unfair treatment, how the rival is taking away ‘the Lovers Right’ (28) of embracing Lysander, and she has to spend her nights in loneliness.

Although the rival Adraste is mentioned by name and the poetic persona describes how Adraste lures Lysander away, the frustration and anger are never directed at Adraste but at Lysander. The male is the guilty party in this triangular relationship for he is the one that should be faithful to his lover rather than go on seducing other women. The frustration in the persona’s tone of voice resurfaces again in the eight stanza, in which the ‘I’ is emphasized. Adraste is said to receive all of Lysander’s loving words and “Love-Inchanting” (35) caresses. The persona admits her love for Lysander but does realize that he is not a good match for her; she is only hurt by what he does as is stated quite explicitly in line 36. The relationship between Lysander and the persona is thus a ruinous one and by introducing the character of Adraste this point is only confirmed. In stanzas eight to ten, a certain thematic structure is visible, namely, each four-line stanza comments on 1) how Lysander treats respectively Adraste and the speaker 2) how this hurts the speaker’s feelings and leaves her powerless 3) the persona emphasizing her own hurt by means of an emphasis on the ‘I’, which is written in italics. The tone of voice echoing from these stanzas is an egotistic one; the persona does not want any pity from the reader nor an apology from Lysander, she only repeatedly stresses how she is wronged as the ‘I’ emphasized in lines 31, 36 and 37 indicate.

Behn foregrounds the problematic social status of a mistress yet again by letting the persona describe Lysander as a ‘licenc’d Thief’ (39). The noun ‘licence’ is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as “(written or printed statement giving) permission from someone in authority to do something; authorization”\(^5\). This particular meaning can be linked to the position of women in the seventeenth century. In

relationships, especially extramarital ones, mistresses had little to say; all the power and authority would lie in the relationship in the hands of the man. There was little a woman could for instance legally do when she was cheated on by her husband and therefore several women had to endure their husband’s misbehaviour powerless. On the other hand, a woman was quickly accused of being a whore when she cheated on her husband. As for mistresses, who were mostly financially dependent on their suitors, they were often left in misery and even poverty when their suitor abandoned them.

In the poem, Lysander is not only called a ‘licenc’d Thief’ (39) whose actions are approved of by society, but he is also licentious in the sense that he is “immoral (esp. in sexual matters); not held back by morality”\(^6\). Aphra Behn clearly does not intend to complain about an individual man’s misbehaviour throughout this poem, but expose the intrinsic social wrongs imposed on women. She uses the character of Lysander as a stereotype and a means to exemplify what is wrong in patriarchal society. In line 40, the persona refers again to Lysander as a thief who ‘does my dear-Bought pleasures steal’.

This is an ambiguous line since the ‘Dear-bought pleasures’ refer not only to the persona’s love and affections but also to bodily pleasures. These ‘pleasures’ she has given Lysander are ‘Dear-bought’; meaning, she granted them at great cost, for after having had sexual intercourse with her, Lysander leaves her for another woman. The mistress has lost her virginity and thus has more difficulty finding a new suitor; she has become a ‘ruined’ woman. Lines 39 and 40 show a view of women as sexual objects and affirms the “emphasis on sexuality” (Latt 45) in seventeenth-century love poems. Aphra Behn makes frequent use of the theme of sexuality and its connotations too, but for different purposes than many other love poets of the period, such as Thomas Carew and Sir John Suckling, did. In several of Carew’s and Suckling’s poems, sexuality “is rarely seen as a means of achieving greater intimacy with a woman” (Latt 45) and women are blatantly “reduced to the level of mere objects, capable of gratifying male sexual needs” (Latt 46). This is what Behn is pointing out in the tenth stanza and it can be related to the first two stanzas of the poem too, in which she tells about men’s view on women as a

commodity. Lysander does not have any respect for his lover as a person and swaps her for another woman once she has satisfied his (sexual) needs. The use of terminology related to crime (e.g. ‘Thief’, ‘Dear-bought’ and ‘steal’) in stanza ten reinforce the persona’s view and, more importantly, are perhaps also a sign of Aphra Behn’s view of abandonment as a crime and the need for laws to protect (un)married women.

So far, the language and imagery used in the poem seems to define Lysander and the female persona in black-and-white distinctions. The persona is the victim of Lysander’s fickleness and unfaithfulness and yet she cannot let go of him. Why she cannot do this is never literally specified in the poem. Is it because she is a woman and therefore cannot undertake any real action? There are enough clues in the poem which indicate that this is the case. For instance in line 39 the persona states that she ‘dare not blame’ Lysander; this indicates her restraint when thinking of standing up against Lysander in public or in the domestic sphere.

The tone of voice is clearly evolving in the poem and confirms the persona’s storm of feelings. The first stanzas are rather accusing in tone, half way through the poem the tone becomes more complaining and finally bitterness and frustration take over. Lysander’s love is not such a ‘Trifle’ (2) after all, for she complains about having lost it. The poem captivates the reader in a whirlwind of emotions by means of conventional images which the female reader can easily associate with, as for instance in the eleventh stanza: “Whilst like a Glimering Taper still I burn” (41). The comparison of the persona’s love with the image of a candle’s burning long links up with the common image of love as a flame, which can be either kindled or blown out; it is quite easy for any reader to conjure up the this image in his or her mind and it could also facilitate a feeling of compassion for the persona, for female readers at least. The comparison implies that the feelings between Lysander and the persona are no longer mutual. As was already indicated in line 32 (“[…] hopeless Love […]”), the persona is indeed aware of the fact that there is no hope to regain Lysander’s love and that she must endure “the hopeless Pain” (44) of seeing him with other women.

“To Lysander, on some Verses he writ…” is a means for Behn to convey a social and moral message, as is the case for other poems discussed. Towards the end of the
poem, the reader thus starts to wonder what the persona’s monologue will lead to. The dramatic and complaining tone of voice in particularly stanzas ten and eleven are not continued in the final two stanzas. The female voice now addresses her lover Lysander in a poised and friendlier tone, no longer caught in a chaos of emotions. She asks her ‘lovely Swain’ (45) Lysander to ‘be just’ (45) and pleads for equality in the romantic relationship. Lysander should not make use of any ‘Freedoms’ (46) that he forbids her to take for that would make him not only a possessive person but also a hypocrite. She points out to Lysander that he treats her unfairly; his sexual escapades stand in shrill contrast with her own confinement to the domestic sphere, for she is not even allowed to have contact with other friends let alone have a relationship with other men.

The name of Amynta appearing in line 47 may refer either to another mistress of Lysander besides Adraste or to the poetic persona herself. There is something to be said for both hypotheses. It is likely that Amynta is another character on the whole, because whenever the speaker is talking about herself, she intentionally uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ (as in for instance lines 3, 5, 17, 31, 36 and 37) to lay emphasis on her own experiences. On the other hand, there is a possibility that she could be talking about herself in the third person, in this way revealing her name to the reader and creating a distance between Lysander and herself. This distancing effect then indicates that the speaker is now able to look at her situation more ‘rationally’. She is asking the male what she wishes, i.e. as much freedom in (sexual) matters (see line 48: “That she may Rove as well as you”) as he possesses. The ‘roving’ or wandering could however also refer to freedom in a broader sense, on a more social level. The speaker desires to be less confined to the domestic sphere. The passage could reflect a more explicit way of the author to advocate for more freedoms for women in society; this is also confirmed in line 37-38, in which the speaker asks Lysander in a selfless way to give one of her rivals, an equal amount of freedoms so that ‘she may Rove as well as you’ – i.e. enjoy the pleasure of having several lovers as well.

In the context of the last stanza, it is clear that the speaker first and foremost demands more freedom and equality in the area of love and relationships. After having lamented Lysander’s unfaithfulness in previous stanzas, the poetic persona surprisingly does not want Lysander to abandon his wantonness for other women. She only requires
him to be honest with himself and with each other and grant her equal sexual freedom so
that she may entertain relationships with other men. In the end the speaker pleads for
fairness in the relationship and does not have a problem with an ‘open relationship’ as
long as she is granted the same ‘freedoms’ as Lysander. She openly acknowledges that he
is no longer interested in her (see line 50) and seems to have accepted this. However, the
the last two lines then introduce a warning or ‘promise’ or revenge: “For the sly
Gamester, who ne’er plays me fair, / Must Trick for Trick expect to find” (51-52). The
speaker cunningly adds that ‘the sly Gamester’ (51) Lysander may one day expect to be
tricked, for this is only a fair punishment since he tricks women all the time. A ‘gamester’
is someone who plays games, in particular a gambler. The term thus typifies Lysander as
a gambler when it comes to love, not taking his relationship with a woman serious but
seeing it as a game, in which he can also cheat. The severe tone of these last lines is
similar to the end lines of Behn’s “The Return” (“Some hard-hearted Nymph may return
you your own”) which also contains a promise of revenge.

9.3. Conclusion

“To Lysander, on some Verses he writ, and asking more for his Heart then ‘twas
worth” is a poem that demonstrates Behn’s use of subtle mechanisms to indicate her
concern with women’s treatment in seventeenth-century society. The rich poetic language
with its many metaphors, comparisons, imagery and ambiguousness is typical of Behn’s
style. It characterizes several other of Behn’s love poems too.

By means of the language of trade the poem reveals how society, and men in
particular, look upon women as mere commodities. Behn sketches an image of love as a
market in which women become slaves. The poetic persona becomes the spokeswoman
of Behn, bitterly protesting against the commoditization of the feminine sex and the
unfaithfulness of men. The last lines of the poem do not only represent a threat directed at
Lysander, but also reflect Behn’s hope that one day a woman will rebel and ‘teach her
lover a lesson’. The poem on a whole shows the reader how the concept of love is
deformed by patriarchal society and how relationships are experienced differently by
women than by men. The poem reflects the Restoration ‘war between the sexes’ quite
effectively.
10. Final conclusion: Aphra Behn: reconstructing gender and sexuality

Throughout her literary career, Aphra Behn wanted to expose and attack the wrongs done to women in seventeenth-century patriarchal society, as well as express her own political opinion. She was all too well aware of the constraints imposed on women at the time when she made the unconventional choice of becoming a writer, struggling for financial and social independence until her death.

Behn’s turbulent life as a playwright, poet, novelist, spy and lover prove that she was quite a unique personality in her own time. In poems such as “The Disappointment” and “The Willing Mistress” Behn consciously allows a critical, rebellious and distinctly feminine voice to denounce the “swaggering sexual freedom Restoration men enjoyed” (Goreau 39) and openly admit her own “sexual stance” (Goreau 39). Behn rebels against the social inequality between men and women, openly discusses feminine desire, men’s sexual failure and breaks down the boundaries of heterosexuality and gender roles in poems such as “To the Fair Clarinda”, “The Willing Mistress” and “The Disappointment”.

The poems discussed contain a rich visual imagery, numerous mythological references and ambiguous terminology which are all elements working together to reconstruct Aphra Behn’s vision on love, desire and sexuality as distinctly personal concepts which cannot be defined by social laws and conventions. Behn successfully describes the feminine identity according to her own views and gives the female an opportunity to utter her feelings and desires through these poems. Her love-poems can be quite critical and harsh but at the same time manage to convey Behn’s sense of humor by means of irony.

Aphra Behn can be considered a forerunner of the feminist movement which would only emerge centuries later, although she was not immune to what she calls the “odious burden of feminine honor” (Goreau 39) which she criticized often in her works. Her problematic relationship with John Hoyle for instance, gives to show that at some point in her life she was torn between her own beliefs and the virtue of modesty required of women in Restoration society. Poems such as “The Disappointment” and “To Lysander, on Some Verses he Writ, and asking more for his Heart then ‘twas worth” are an ample proof of this. Aphra Behn remains a paradoxical figure up to this day.
1. “The Disappointment”

I.

ONE day the amorous Lysander,
By an impatient passion swayed,
Surprised fair Cloris, that loved maid,
Who could defend herself no longer.
All things did with his love conspire;
The gilded planet of the day,
In his gay chariot drawn by fire,
Was now descending to the sea,
And left no light to guide the world,
But what from Cloris' brighter eyes was hurled.

II.

In a lone thicket made for love,
Silent as a yielding maid's consent,
She with a charming languishment,
Permits his force, yet gently strove;
Her hands his bosom softly meet,
But not to put him back designed,
Rather to draw him on inclined;
Whilst he lay trembling at her feet,
Resistance 'tis in vain to show;
She wants the power to say -- 'Ah! What d'ye do?'

III.

Her bright eyes sweet, and yet severe,
Where love and shame confusedly strive,
Fresh vigour to Lysander give;
And breathing faintly in his ear,
She cried -- 'Cease, cease -- your vain desire,
Or I'll call out -- what would you do?
My dearer honour even to you
I cannot, must not give -- retire,
Or take this life, whose chiefest part
I gave you with the conquest of my heart.'
IV.

But he as much unused to fear,
As he was capable of love,
The blessed minutes to improve,
Kisses her mouth, her neck, her hair;
Each touch her new desire alarms,
His burning trembling hand he pressed
Upon her swelling snowy breast,
While she lay panting in his arms.
All her unguarded beauties lie
The spoils and trophies of the enemy.

V.

And now without respect or fear,
He seeks the object of his vows,
(His love no modesty allows)
By swift degrees advancing where
His daring hand that altar siezed,
Where gods of love do sacrifice:
That awful throne, that paradise
Where rage is calmed, and anger pleased,
That fountain where delight still flows,
And gives the universal world repose.

VI.

Her balmy lips encountering his,
Their bodies, as their souls, are joined;
Where both in transports unconfined
Extend themselves upon the moss.
Cloris half dead and breathless lay;
Her soft eyes cast a humid light,
Such as divides the day and night;
Or falling stars, whose fires decay:
And now no signs of life she shows,
But what in short-breathed sighs returns and goes.

VII.

He saw how at her length she lay;
He saw her rising bosom bare;
Her loose thin robes, through which appear
A shape designed for love and play;
Abandoned by her pride and shame
She does her softest joys dispense,
Offering her virgin innocence
A victim to love's sacred flame;
While the o'er-ravished shepherd lies
Unable to perform the sacrifice.

VIII.

Ready to taste a thousand joys,
The too transported hapless swain
Found the vast pleasure turned to pain;
Pleasure which too much love destroys.
The willing garments by he laid,
And Heaven all opened to his view,
Mad to possess, himself he threw
On the defenceless lovely maid.
But oh what envious gods conspire
To snatch his power, yet leave him the desire!

IX.

Nature's support (without whose aid
She can no human being give)
Itself now wants the art to live;
Faintness its slackened nerves invade;
In vain th'enraged youth essayed
To call its fleeting vigour back,
No motion 'twill from motion take;
Excess of love his love betrayed.
In vain he toils, in vain commands;
The insensible fell weeping in his hand.

X.

In this so amorous cruel strife,
Where love and fate were too severe,
The poor Lysander in despair
Renounced his reason with his life.
Now all the brisk and active fire
That should the nobler part inflame,
Served to increase his rage and shame,
And left no spark of new desire:
Not all her naked charms could move
Or calm that rage that had debauched his love.
XI.

Cloris returning from the trance
Which love and soft desire had bred,
Her timorous hand she gently laid
(Or guided by design or chance)
Upon that fabulous Priapas,
That potent god, as poets feign;
But never did young shepherdess,
Gathering of fern upon the plain,
More nimbly draw her fingers back,
Finding beneath the verdant leaves, a snake.

XII.

Then Cloris her fair hand withdrew,
Finding that god of her desires
Disarmed of all his awful fires,
And cold as flowers bathed in morning dew.
Who can the nymph's confusion guess?
The blood forsook the hinder place,
And strewed with blushes all her face,
Which both disdain and shame expressed:
And from Lysander's arms she fled,
Leaving him fainting on the gloomy bed.

XIII.

Like lightning through the grove she hies,
Or Daphne from the Delphic god,
No print upon the grassy road
She leaves, t'instruct pursuing eyes.
The wind that wantoned in her hair,
And with her ruffled garments played,
Discovered in the flying maid
All that the gods e'er made, of fair.
So Venus, when her love was slain,
With fear and haste flew o'er the fatal plain.

XIV.

The nymph's resentments none but I
Can well imagine or condole:
But none can guess Lysander's soul,
But those who swayed his destiny.
His silent griefs swell up to storms,
And not one god his fury spares;
He cursed his birth, his fate, his stars
But more the shepherdess's charms,
Whose soft bewitching influence
Had damned him to the hell of impotence.


Amyntas led me to a Grove,
    Where all the Trees did shade us;
The Sun it self, though it had Strove,
    It could not have betray’d us:
The place secur’d from humane Eyes,
    No other fear allows.
But when the Winds that gently rise,
    Doe Kiss the yielding Boughs.

Down there we satt upon the Moss,
    And id begin to play
A Thousand Amorous Tricks, to pass
    The heat of all the day.
A many Kisses he did give:
    And I return’d the same
Which made me willing to receive
    That which I dare not name.

His Charming Eyes no Aid requir’d
    To tell their softning Tale;
On her that was already fir’d
    ’Twas easy to prevale.
He did but Kiss and Clasp me round,
    Whilst those his thoughts Exprest:
And lay’d me gently on the Ground;
    Ah who can guess the rest?

I.

Poor Loft Serena, to Bemoan
The Rigor of her Fate,
High’d to a Rivers-side alone,
Upon whole Brinks she sat.
Her Eyes, as if they would have spar’d,
The Language of her Tongue,
In Silent Tears a while declar’d
The Sense of all her wrong.

II.

But they alas too feeble were,
Her Grief was swoln too high
To be Exprest in Sighs and Tears;
She must or speak or dye.
And thus at last she did complain,
Is this the Faith, said she,
Which thou allowest me, cruel Swaïn,
For that I gave to thee?

III.

Heaven knows with how much Innocence
I did my Soul Incline
To thy Soft Charmes of Eloquence,
And gave thee what was mine.
I had not one Reserve in Store,
But at thy Feet I lay’d
Those Arms that Conquer’d heretofore,
Tho’ now thy Trophies made.

IV.

Thy Eyes in Silence told their Tale
Of Love in such a way,
That ‘twas as easie to Prevail,
As after to Betray.
And when you spoke my Listning Soul,
Was on the Flattery Hung:
And I was lost without Controul,
Such Musick grac’d thy Tongue.
V.
Alas how long in vain you strove
My coldness to divert!
How long besie’d it round with Love,
Before you won the Heart.
What Arts you us’d, what Presents made,
What Songs, what Letters writ:
And left no Charm that cou’d invade,
Or with your Eyes or Wit.

VI.
Till by such Obligations Prest,
By such dear Perjuries won:
I heedlessly Resign’d the rest,
And quickly was undone.
For as my Kindling Flames increase,
Yours glimmeringly decay:
The Rifled Joys no more can Please,
That once oblig’d your Stay.

VII.
Witness ye Springs, ye Meads and Groves,
Who oft were conscious made
To all our Hours and Vows of Love;
Witness how I’m Betray’d.
Trees drop your Leaves, be Gay no more,
Ye Rivers waste and drye:
Whilst on your Melancholy Shore,
I lay me Down and dye.
4. “The Return”

I.

Amyntas whilst you
Have an Art to subdue,
And can conquer a Heart with a Look or a Smile,
You Pityless grow,
And no Faith will allow;
’Tis the Glory you seek when you rifle the Spoil.

II.

Your soft warring Eyes,
When prepar’d for the Prize,
Can laugh at the Aids of my feeble Disdain;
You can humble the Foe,
And soon make her to know
Tho’ she arms her with Pride, her Efforts are but vain.

III.

But Shepherd beware,
Though a Victor you are;
A Tyrant was never secure in his Throne;
Whilst proudly you aim
New Conquests to gain,
Some hard-hearted Nymph may return you your own.

5. “To Alexis in Answer to his poem against Fruition. Ode”

Ah hapless sex! Who bear no charms,
  But what like lightning flash and are no more
    False fires sent down for baneful harms,
Fires which the fleeting lover feebly warms
  And given like past beboches o'er,
    Like songs that please (though bad) when new,
  But learned by heart neglected grew.

In vain did Heav'n adorn the shape and face
With beauties which by angels' forms it drew:
In vain the mind with brighter glories grace,
While all our joys are stinted to the space
  Of one betraying interview,
With one surrender to the eager will
We're short lived nothing or a real ill.
Since man with that inconstancy was born,
To love the absent, and the present scorn.
   Why do we deck, why do we dress
   For such a short-lived happiness?
   Why do we put attraction on,
Since either way 'tis we must be undone?
   They fly if honour take our part,
   Our virtue drives 'em o'er the field.
   We lose 'em by too much desert,
   And Oh! They fly us if we yeild.
   Ye Gods! Is there no charm in all the fair
To fix this wild, this faithless, wanderer.


Fair lovely maid, or if that title be
Too weak, too feminine for nobler thee,
Permit a name that more approaches truth:
And let me call thee, lovely charming youth.
This last will justify my soft complaint,
While that may serve to lessen my constraint;
And without blushes I the youth pursue,
When so much beauteous woman is in view,
Against thy charms we struggle but in vain
With thy deluding form thou giv'st us pain,
While the bright nymph betrays us to the swain.
In pity to our sex sure thou wert sent,
That we might love, and yet be innocent:
For sure no crime with thee we can commit;
Or if we should — thy form excuses it.
For who, that gathers fairest flowers believes
A snake lies hid beneath the fragrant leaves.

Thou beauteous wonder of a different kind,
Soft Cloris with the dear Alexis joined;
When ere the manly part of thee, would plead
Thou tempts us with the image of the maid,
While we the noblest passions do extend
The love to Hermes, Aphrodite the friend.
7. “To Lysander, on Some Verses he Writ, and asking more for his Heart then ‘twas worth”

I.

Take back that Heart, you with such Caution give,  
Take the fond valu’d Trifle back;  
I hate Love-Merchants that a Trade wou’d drive;  
And meanly cunning Bargains make.

II.

I care not how the busy Market goes,  
And scorn to Chaffer for a price:  
Love does one Staple Rate on all impose,  
Nor leaves it to the Traders Choice.

III.

A Heart requires a Heart Unfeign’d and True,  
Though Subt’ly you advance the Price,  
And ask a Rate that Simple Love ne’er knew:  
And the free Trade monopolize.

IV.

An Humble Slave the Buyer must become,  
She must not bate a Look or Glance,  
You will have all, or you’ll have none;  
See how Loves Market you inhaunce.

V.

Is’t not enough, I gave you Heart for Heart,  
But I must add my Lips and Eies;  
I must no friendly Smile or Kiss impart;  
But you must Dun me with Advice.

VI.

And every Hour still more unjust you grow,  
Those Freedoms you my life deny,  
You to Adraste are oblig’d to show,  
And give her all my Rifled Joy.

VII.

Without Controul she gazes on that Face,
And all the happy Envyed Night,
In the pleas’d Circle of your fond imbrace:
She takes away the Lovers Right.

VIII.

From me she Ravishes those silent Hours,
That are my Sacred Love my due;
Whilst I in vain accuse the angry Powers,
That make me hopeless Love pursue.

IX.

Adrastes Ears with that dear Voice are blest,
That Charms my Soul at every Sound,
And with those Love-Inchanting Touches prest:
Which I ne’er felt without a Wound.

X.

She has thee all: whilst I with silent Greif,
The Fragments of thy Softness feel,
Yet dare not blame the happy licenc’d Thief:
That does my Dear-bought Pleasures steal.

XI.

Whilst like a Glimering Taper still I burn,
And waste my self in my own flame,
Adraste takes the welcome rich Return:
And leaves me all the hopeless Pain.

XII.

Be just, my lovely Swain, and do not take
Freedoms you’ll not to me allow;
Or give Amynta so much Freedom back:
That she may Rove as well as you.

XIII.

Let us then love upon the honest Square,
Since Interest neither have design’d,
For the sly Gamester, who ne’er plays me fair,
Must Trick for Trick expect to find.
12. Bibliography

Primary sources


Secondary sources


