



# APHRA BEHN

THE CHALLENGE OF GENDER

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WELL,  
HOWDY!

HOW ARE  
YOU?




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- SPY;
- 1<sup>ST</sup> FEMALE ENGLISH PROFESSIONAL WRITER;
- SUCCESSFUL PLAYWRIGHT and "MOTHER OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL";
- EARLY ABOLITIONIST;
- "LOOSE WOMAN" (wore men's pants);
- ICONOCLAST and OUTSIDER;
- GENERAL BADASS;
- Should be played by Kate McKinnon in the biopic (imho)

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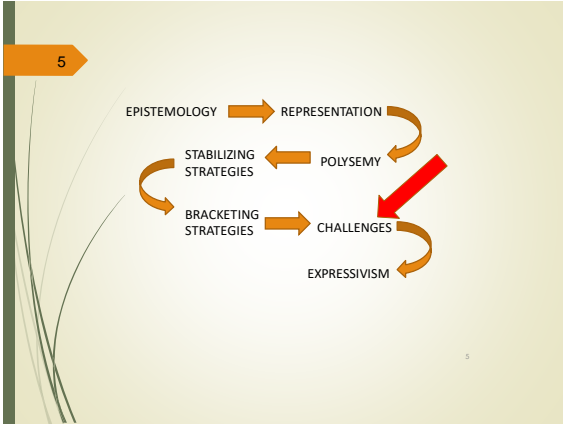
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**QUESTIONS**

WITRB the AUTHOR and the WORK?

WITRB the AUTHOR and SOCIAL CONTEXT?

WHAT DOES ART "REFLECT?"

What is the significance of TRADITION?

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**CHALLENGES** posed by BEHN

- ▶ VOICE OF THE OUTSIDER;
- ▶ IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL FORCES: gender, poverty, education

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## TAKING THEORY TO TASK

- ARNOLD'S claim that criticism brings us the best that is thought and written;
- HUME'S claims regarding judgment and standards of taste;
- WILDE'S privileging of the AUTHOR

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The power of the "MOMENT" (686)



ARNOLD

The power of the "MAN" (686)



BUT  
What if  
you  
aren't a  
MAN?

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THE  
PROBLEM  
OF  
**ACCESS**



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**ACCESS TO TRADITION**

"All I ask, is the Privilege for my Masculine Part the Poet in me (if any such you will allow me) to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have long thriv'd in, to take those Measures that both the Ancient and Modern have set me, and by which they have pleas'd the World so well" (337).

ACCESS to "the best that is known and thought in the world" (Arnold 691) is LIMITED for the female artist.

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**SCANDAL!  
ACCESS TO MIMESIS and CRAFT**

"Old Lawyer's Wife, who goes [off stage] with a Man she never saw before, and comes out again the joyful'st Woman alive" (335).

"I see nothing unnatural nor obscene; 'tis proper for the Characters" (335).

"they so naturally fall into the places they are designed for, and so are proper for the Business" (336)

I'M not scandalous; the WORLD is!

CLAIM to the same **ACCESS to MIMESIS** as that granted male authors:

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**ACCESS TO JUDGEMENT**

BEHN challenges her critics to exercise what HUME will later call JUDGEMENT:

"an unprejudiced Person that knows not the Author, to read any of my Comedys and compare 'em with other of this Age" (334-35)

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## The DOUBLE STANDARD

In good HUMEAN form, she does a lengthy comparison of her plays to the acclaimed dramas of her day and of the past:

"All these I name as some of the best Plays I know" (336).

- All contain elements for which she herself has been condemned but which are allowed in those plays "written by Men" (336):

"such **Masculine Strokes** in me, must not be allowed" (336)

*Ad hominem* attacks: connected to her IDENTITY as an AUTHOR

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## Her DEFENSE: The female author's DOUBLE BIND

"an unprejudiced Person that **knows not the Author**, to read any of my Comedys and compare 'em with other of this Age" (334-35)

"That had the Plays I have writt come forth under any Mans Name, **and never known to be mine**, I appeal to all unbyas'd Judges of Sense, if they had not said that Person had made as many good Comedies, as any one Man has writt in our Age, but a Devil on't the Woman damns the poet!" (336).

In order to make the claim that her art is good, she must **DISCLAIM** her authorship of it.

In order for a HUMEAN judgement to be **VALID**, it must in this case **EFFACE THE AUTHOR**.

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Claim AUTHORSHIP as a WOMAN



ERASE FEMALE AUTHORSHIP



"the Masculine Part the Poet" (337)

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## ACCESS TO AUTHORITY

### MALE CRITICS

- Dr. Davenant (member of Parliament, Theatre patron);
- Sir Roger L'Estrange (Publisher and Licensor);
- Mr. Killigrew (Master of the Revels) (335)

### FEMALE CRITICS

- "Ladies of great quality"
- "unquestioned Fame"
- "whose Quality and Vertue can sufficiently justifie" their taste (336)

Absent network of FEMALE critics and TRADITION of Female critical and intellectual authority → reliance on the authority of MALE critics

The female author is CRITICALLY HOMELESS without COMMUNITY or TRADITION to draw on.

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On the one hand: must EFFACE herself as a woman to claim a place in a MASCULINE tradition of AUTHORSHIP



On the other hand: she makes a case for her own FAME:

"I value Fame as much as had I been born a Hero" (337)

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## CHALLENGES



ARNOLD: TOUCHSTONES, "The best that is known and thought in the world":

**BUT** what if we don't have the "best" because significant voices are ABSENT or UNVALUED?

HUME: The Standards of Taste and the "healthy" eye:

**BUT** what if the "standards" are set by ONE GROUP that does not understand or value the expression of other groups?

WHO makes the STANDARDS determines WHO IS VISIBLE in the literary canon.

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## CHALLENGES 2: DAUGHTER OF CHALLENGES

WILDE: the privileging of the AUTHOR's expression:

**BUT** what if the author cannot fully express the self because the circumstances of criticism make that author INVISIBLE or force her to speak someone else's language in order to be heard?

BOCCACCIO: do the WORK to attain public fame and private improvement:

**BUT** what if the circumstances of criticism actively IMPEDE or EFFACE the artist's public expression and private improvement by limiting ACCESS to the means of expression?

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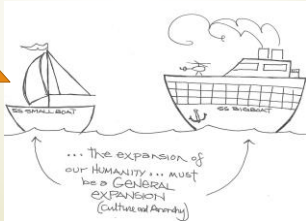
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## CHALLENGE: PONY-UP, COWBOYS

- BEHN's criticism does not NEGATE the assertions of other critics
- BUT it does demand that they LIVE UP to their CLAIMS.

The rising tide lifts ALL boats.



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### WHAT IS ART?

A mimetic reflection of the world shaped by the demands of decorum and craft.

### WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND THE WORLD?

Conflicted: Its MIMETIC nature is complicated by social circumstances that distort the relationship between the world, the author and the observer. I.e. prejudice.

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WHAT DOES ART REFLECT?

The world as it is which is, in Behn's view, hilariously contradictory, bawdy, lively and corrupt.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL USE OF ART?

To entertain: "for Playes were certainly intended for the exercising of mens passions not their understanding" ("Epistle to the Reader" from *The Dutch Lover*, 331).  
To confer Fame on the author.

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WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE AUTHOR?

Complex: On the one hand to faithfully and skillfully reflect the world for the purposes of entertainment; to seek a place, a tradition, a voice.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE READER?

Complex: To be entertained. To judge the work on its merits.

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