

What do we know about Aphra Behn's life?

Birth and childhood:

Aphra Behn was born before the days of birth certificates or census returns - so it is more difficult to be sure about information for "ordinary" people. It is likely, though, that she was the Aphra Johnson born to Bartholomew Johnson, a Canterbury barber and his wife, Elizabeth Denham, on 10th July 1640.

Bartholomew Johnson was in a good way of business in Canterbury, paid his taxes and served on some local committees. A worthy man who seems to have made little impact on the world. His wife Elizabeth appears to have come from slightly higher up the social scale. She was a "wet nurse" to a grand family, the Colepepers. This means she was nanny to their children from their earliest babyhood, going on to give them their first lessons. It is likely that Aphra and her brother spent much of their time with their mother and foster brothers and sisters, and they seem to have remained close for the rest of their lives.

All her life Aphra was to be a Royalist in sympathy. This may have started early, as she appears to have been asked to carry letters during the time of the Commonwealth, when she was in her teens. This was the time between the execution of Charles I and the Restoration just over ten years later - the time when Britain was going through its republican experiment, trying out different ways forms of government without a sovereign. Throughout the period the defeated Royalists never ceased to plot and plan to bring back Charles II, waiting in France and, to them, the rightful king. So there was plenty of work for innocent looking young girls delivering letters between the plotters.

Spying Career

Sometime in the early 1660s the young Aphra Johnson became a spy for the British government. She was probably introduced into the right circles by her foster brother, Thomas Colepeper. This was just after the restoration of the monarchy with the return of Charles II as king. Although the new regime sensibly decided not to pursue too many of the grudges of the past twenty years, equally they were keen to keep a watch over people who might want to bring back a republic. So the young Aphra Johnson was sent to spy on one of these, in a part of South America then known as Willoughbyland (soon to be taken over by the Dutch and renamed Surinam).

Very little is known for sure about this expedition. Many years later, in her book "Oroonoko", Aphra Behn told what was probably an imagined story of a slave uprising, and wrote in the first person. This narrator was the daughter of the governor of thirty six islands, and Behn almost certainly intended her readers to assume that this character was her, and that she was of aristocratic status. Certainly her first biographer did so. The reality is much more likely to have been that Behn herself was indeed a professional spy in her own right, and that she was travelling with her widowed mother and possibly her brother. This first mission appears to have gone well - she was probably away for around a year. The sea voyages would have taken around two months each, and Aphra then spent time socialising, travelling in the country and finding out as much as she could about William Scot, the regicide's son she had been sent out to shadow.

Evidently that first mission was considered enough of a success to persuade the spymasters to send Aphra abroad a second time. Again William Scot, now in Antwerp, was the quarry. And again Behn travelled with her mother and brother. But this time the mission ended in failure. The target was to persuade Scot to spy for England, and, ideally, to get him to return to London. But Scot was far too canny an operator for the young Aphra, who may also have made the mistake of falling in love with him. Certainly he strung her along, feeding her small items of information to keep the spymasters moderately happy. But Aphra got desperately short of money, and the spymasters had no intention of paying her bills. So in the end she had to borrow the money to come home, so seriously in debt that one of her creditors was threatening her with prison. So she had to start again.

London and success

Somehow, perhaps with the help of her foster brother Thomas Colepeper, perhaps with that of the spymaster Killigrew, Aphra Behn was introduced into London theatre circles. By the mid 1660s there were two licensed theatre companies, the King's and the Duke's, each with its own premises, company and repertoire. Each had opened in the early days after the Restoration - there had been no public theatre in the days of the Commonwealth. London had taken again to theatre going, and those who could afford it would see almost every play that was staged. But as only a few thousand people in London were theatregoers, this meant that many new plays were needed. It seems that part of the responsibility of a playwright at this time was a close involvement in the rehearsal process, acting essentially as director - although the leading actors had a lot of influence on the process. It is clear, too, that the initial script of the play was often changed substantially during rehearsals.

Aphra Behn probably started by copying out scripts (all by hand, of course) for other writers - parts were needed for each member of the cast. She may then have gone on to writing "practice" plays for the drama school that had been set up to train the new actors. Before the civil wars only men and boys had appeared on the professional stage, and by this time it was over twenty years since the theatres had closed when the fighting started. So there were only a few, older, surviving male actors and no actresses when the theatres reopened.

It was in 1670b that Behn's first play opened, staged by the Duke's Company. "The Forc'd Marriage" is a tragicomedy featuring multiple love stories and a story of jealousy. It, and her next two plays, did only respectably well, although evidently well enough to keep Behn writing and the company management happy to keep staging her work. She also helped to make ends meet by writing poetry which was printed and sold in sheet form, and to translate French works into English.

It was when she started writing social comedies such as "The Rover" that Behn's plays began to be really successful. At this time, too, she began to publish and sell the scripts of her plays. This was an additional source of income. It is likely, though, that Aphra Behn needed to work hard to make a living throughout her life: she left her final play, "The Widow Ranter", drafted out but with its final scene unfinished at her death.

Politics

Aphra Behn grew up among Royalists, and kept their view of the world throughout her life. This meant a number of things. Firstly, she was personally loyal to the Stuart kings, first Charles II and then James II. His removal and replacement by his daughter Mary and her husband William was evidently very unwelcome to her – she seems to have been writing poems loyal to James even after he left the country, and Aphra turned down a request to write a poem welcoming William and Mary – although she did produce a piece welcoming Mary alone. Evidently the joint sovereignty was the step too far.

At first sight this aspect of Aphra's view of the world appears surprising – it is clear that she believed that there was a social class of “natural” rulers, including the Royal family, the nobility and gentry. Responsibility and taking power are what they are there for. To make sense of this, it is necessary to remember not only that Aphra's family and friends as she grew up were Royalist, but that her teenage years were overshadowed by the effects of the wars. These included not only strife and uncertainty but food shortages, housing shortages (according to one estimate around a third of all housing was destroyed in the west country and midlands) – and a higher proportion of the population was killed in the civil wars than was to be killed in the First World War. There was also a long period of disruption, poverty because of failed businesses and family and relationship breakdown because of political differences.

So, to Aphra Behn, anything was better than civil war, and if avoiding it included excluding everyone but the elite from power, so be it. One of her plays, “The Roundheads”, mocks everything to do with the Commonwealth government. And in “The Widow Ranter” the attempts by anyone not born to rule to have any kind of political power are not only ineffective but corrupt and ludicrous.

Personal Life

Sometime in the 1660s Aphra Johnson changed her name to Aphra Behn – the name change took place between 1664 and 1666. She probably married a merchant of Dutch origin called Johan Behn. Very little is known about him: his name appears as having been captain of a ship named the King David on various transatlantic voyages. We do not know whether the voyages were to transport sugar or slaves or both. It seems likely that this was Aphra's future husband – he may possibly have been captain of the ship on which she returned from Surinam. Whatever the truth of this, Mr Behn did not stay in Aphra's life for long. We do not know if they parted deliberately or if he died. It could well be that his was one of the lives claimed by the Great Plague that killed so many Londoners in 1665.

Whatever the truth, Aphra remained Aphra Behn for the rest of her life. There are no records of her ever having had children, and certainly she never remarried. The status of widow was helpful, as a widow was regarded as being independent – a “femme sole” who did not need to be obedient to a husband or father. And there is no suggestion she ever married again. And neither did she

take a “protector” – a powerful lover who would pay the bills and keep her out of trouble. There is evidence that in her later life she did have relationships, possibly with women as well as men. It may well be that some of her love poetry was written in response to what was happening in her own life. But we will never know for sure.

Aphra Behn only lived to be 48. In the last few years of her life she mentions bouts of illness in letters to friends, once saying she was too ill to hold a pen. Some people take this to mean her hands were swollen by dropsy, which may in turn point to heart failure. It is likely that she was trying to finish her final play, “The Widow Ranter”, when she was unwell, as it was left with the final scene only sketched out on its author’s death – see the relevant section

Death and Burial

Aphra Behn died on 16th April 1689 – only a few days after the coronation of William and Mary in Westminster Abbey. We do not know exactly where she died or what caused her death. At the time at least one of her friends blamed the medical treatment she had been having – and it is quite possible that any doctors she consulted had indeed made her worse rather than better. It is also true, though, that at this time there was little that could be done to treat heart failure.

There does not appear to have been a will, which suggests that Aphra did not have property such as a house to leave. It is likely that in the last years of her life she was making enough money to get by. But at this time most Londoners rented their homes. And in theatre circles being sociable was expected – so any money she did have is likely to have been spent on socialising and on the clothes that were so necessary to keep up a good appearance in London.

Aphra Behn’s grave is in the East Cloister of Westminster Abbey. Some people have suggested that some of her friends tried to get permission for a grave in Poets’ Corner, and that this is the compromise. However, it was after this that it became usual for the great and good of the literary world to be buried there. Burial in the cloister was a lesser favour, and was in the gift of the Dean. And the Dean of the day, Thomas Sprat, was a play goer with scientific and literary interests. And this is likely to be the explanation. The funeral was a modest one, in keeping with most of those held for the dead being buried in that area of the Abbey. There were no extra payments for candles or for members of the clergy to be present.

It is tempting to imagine Aphra Behn’s funeral as having been full of her theatre friends. They would probably have travelled up river by boat. Many funerals at the time took place in the evening, and that would have made it easier for them to attend, after a performance. For a grand funeral it was usual to serve wine and wafers after the service: for Aphra Behn it is easier to imagine the mourners going to the pub to drink to her memory.

The grave is covered by a simple black marble slab, inscribed with her name and the words

Here lies a proof that Wit can never be
Defence enough against Mortality

There is nothing there of religious hope, and nothing, either, about Aphra Behn's parentage, antecedents or status.

Aftermath

In the years immediately following her death, Aphra Behn's name continued to be a famous one. Her plays were regularly staged, especially "The Emperor of the Moon", which was so popular it was regularly on the schedule for a Friday 13th when both cast and audience needed to be reassured nothing would go wrong. Her last play, "The Widow Ranter", fared less well, being staged only once, in November 1689, still unedited and with a badly chosen cast. It has never had a production since.

With the coming of William and Mary, the Restoration age began to fade away. One of the legacies of the Civil Wars had been to remove many of what had been the usual rules. In some aspects of life the result was chaos, but it did mean greater freedom for some people. Among these suspended rules were those dictating the behaviour expected of a woman and, with it, the freedom she could have, what she could do and what she could say. Aphra Behn, along with a very few others, was able to live, and to write, with a freedom that would not have happened in previous year – and would not do so again for centuries.

For the doors were soon to close again. By the early years of the eighteenth century theatre audiences began to demand "politer" plot lines. Behn's outspoken heroines were no longer in the mode. And, worse still, they had been created by a woman. Partly as a result of her erotic poetry and salty wit but mostly because she had been female, Behn's name became a byword for lewdness. By the middle of the century an elderly lady was embarrassed to think she had ever read Behn's work, back in her young days. And by the nineteenth century critics did not discuss her work at all.

It was not until the twentieth century that Virginia Woolf wrote about Behn as a trail blazer. And even she did not recognise the quality of Behn's writing. Some progress has been made since: and it is now up to use to help spread the word.