

Aphra Behn and After

Teaching Resource



News and False News

It was while Aphra Behn was a child, in the civil war years, that the first newspapers were published in England. – this was made easier by the abolition of the Court of Star Chamber in 1641, meaning that the legislation that had controlled printing had vanished. The Royalists began with “Mercurius Aulicus”, based in Oxford, with the Parliamentary “Mercurius Britannicus” starting out a couple of years later. Both sides mixed news reporting with strong doses of propaganda, and each side sought to suppress the other’s publications. As the Royalist cause was defeated at the end of the 1640s, their papers vanished, and by the time of Charles I’s execution, Parliament was seeking to suppress all newspapers. Any criticism was unwelcome. In the years of the Interregnum the Commonwealth the authorities attempted to keep sole control of news distribution – the official newspaper was “Mercurius Politicus”, edited by one Marchamont Nedham, who had been only too pleased to write for anyone who would pay him during the civil wars. Throughout the war and commonwealth years there were unofficial publications, - ballads and propaganda – sold at street corners as well as handwritten newsletters passed from hand to hand.

The young Aphra Johnson seems to have spent the 1650s in Kent, probably accompanying her mother to the households where she worked as a wet nurse –(link with biography). Aphra certainly acquired a good education, possibly sharing the tutors of the Sidney children at Penshurst Place. Although she regretted she never learned more than basic Latin, the letters she sent back from the Low Countries (link) It is likely that, as she got older, Aphra was entrusted with some of the news, messages and letters that were passed round among the Royalists in the South East, some in code, some as ordinary letters, some by word of mouth. It was during this period that there was a series of plots laid by, among others, the Royalist secret society, the Sealed Knot, to bring back the king. None of them came to anything, but there was much planning and exchanging of secret messages between the Royalist leaders in different parts of the country.

After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the new regime tried hard to take control of the news. Printing presses were licensed and unofficial publishers prosecuted – if they were caught. It was still very common for groups of people to subscribe to a newsletter sent at intervals from abroad – this had been done for many years. It was at this time that Aphra Johnson appears to have needed to earn her own living for the first time. Her father Bartholomew disappears from the public record (link) at this time – it is likely that he died, leaving his widow and children with little money, and that Aphra’s step brother Thomas Colepeper helped her to find work with the security services (link), travelling first to Surinam and then to the Low Countries in an attempt to persuade William Scot (link) to return to England. By the time Aphra, now Behn’s first play was staged, her past as a spy was well-enough known to be a selling point: “the poetess, too, they say, has spies abroad...”, followed by heavily facetious references to masks. But by now Aphra Behn was a buyer of news.

Aphra Behn lived in London for the last twenty years of her life. During that time she wrote and staged at least nineteen plays, most of which use the London of her day as material – sometimes London is in disguise. Behn’s final play, “The Widow Ranter” is set in colonial Virginia. Many of the

characters are Londoners and behave as such. This is a complicated play with at least five storylines. But among those stories is a historical one – an uprising led by Nathaniel one. At least the bones of the story are historical, although Behn takes immense liberties with the known facts. We know, for example, that the real-life Bacon left his wife at home in England, wanted worse treatment for native Americans, led the burning of Jamestown and finally died in his bed of dysentery.

Activity 1

What parts of the historical record did Aphra Behn change to make the story of Bacon more attractive to audiences?

Imagine and write a version that stays closer to the historical facts. Discuss, and demonstrate how you can make this as attractive to audiences as Behn's version.

Activity 2

Using the description of the overthrow of James II and arrival of William and Mary, write an account of the same event, from the point of view of a sympathiser with either side.

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