LADY WHO LIVED BY HER WIT

By ABIGAIL ANN HAMBLEN

IN 1862, a certain Julia Kavanagh published a little book called *English Women of Letters*. It contains biographical sketches of ten writers with critical appraisals of their best-known works, and it is a companion volume to the same lady's *French Women of Letters*. These books, according to their author, have an identical purpose: "to show how far, for the last two centuries and more, women have contributed to the formation of the modern novel in the two great literatures of modern times. . . ."

The first contributor on the English side is, according to Miss Kavanagh, a writer of Restoration times, one Aphra Behn. One feels that this critic of the Victorian era almost unwillingly includes Mrs. Behn in her list of literary figures. "Pure her mind was not, but tainted to the very core," she remarks grimly, adding (and the reader can almost hear her sniff of righteous disapproval). "She loved grossness for its own sake, because it was congenial to her."

Miss Kavanagh makes it very clear that grossness is not congenial to *her*; time and again she mentions her subject's coarseness: "Mrs. Behn's indelicacy was useless, and worse than useless, the superfluous addition of a corrupt mind and vitiated taste." At least the women of *France* when "they took up a pen, did their best to ennoble women, and compel men into delicacy." Alas for poor Aphra Behn who did the very opposite—she "sank woman to the level of man's coarseness." Yes, Aphra Behn, her biographer sorrowfully concludes, "reached a grave consecrated by neither honour nor fame." When in 1871 Hippolyte Taine writes his great history of English literature he gives Mrs. Behn but a phrase—he calls her a spy and a courtesan—and passes her by.

But since Miss Kavanagh, and since Taine, other, more charitable, comments have been made about this seventeenth century beauty with the dashing pen. For indelicate or not, "courtesan" or not, Aphra Behn is not to be forgotten: she is the first English woman to earn her living as a writer. Long after her, in England, came Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen and George Eliot—great names that dazzle, talents that make her efforts seem childish until one remembers that the English novel, as such, had not been evolved when Aphra Behn lived and worked. 1740, which, with the publication of *Pamela*, marks the beginning of the English novel—1740 was exactly one century after her birth.

Aphra Johnson (or maybe the name was Amis) was born in either Canterbury or Wye. No one is quite sure. In one of her novels she claims to have lived in Surinam as a child. Her father, she says, was appointed Governor-General of the island. This "fact" is not verified by a perusal of the records: neither the name of Johnson nor that of Amis occurs in the list of Governors-General. The Encyclopedia Britannica says that her father was John Johnson, a barber.

At the age of eighteen, Aphra (or, perhaps it was Afra, or Aphraia, or Ayfara)—this girl, then, was in England, and in 1664 married a London merchant of Dutch extraction, named Behn. He died in 1666, and somehow his widow got to court, and to the notice of the king. This king was, of course, Charles II, and his court was the Restoration court, and the very fact that Mrs. Behn fitted in there tells something of her spirit. As for her looks, Miss Kavanagh, in a generous mood, describes her as "a handsome dark girl, with a clear forehead, fine eyes, a full and merry mouth, an animated though voluptuous countenance, and a quick and ready tongue."

These charms she used to advantage when her monarch sent her to Holland as a sort of Mata Hari. The war with the Dutch was on, and any information she could pick up would be useful. The "animated but voluptuous" countenance of Mrs. Behn was not unnoticed even in that traditionally phlegmatic country. She obtained priceless, horrifying, and quite incredible information: DeWitt planned to sail up the Thames to London itself! Back at court she found herself disbelieved, laughed at, pushed aside, and worst of all, not even reimbursed for her trip. She spent a short period of time in debtor's prison, during which time, presumably, she pondered on the fickleness of mankind. Also, she must often have turned her thoughts to the problem of earning a livelihood. She was poor and alone, with but one resource aside from the rather precarious one of her beauty—an energy of wit that could somehow get itself down on paper.

Thus it was that necessity drove her to become an author, a successful one. She was of the Restoration era; she knew it thoroughly; therefore she could give it what it wanted, and so succeed. And succeed she did: she wrote plays, "novels," verse, so suited to the taste of the times that she was able to live on the proceeds, besides gaining considerable praise from her contemporaries.

Of all she wrote, one work seems to stand out. Critics and historians are agreed that Mrs. Behn's reputation as a novelist

(perhaps as a writer) rests upon *Oroonoko*, or *The History of the Royal Slave.* Though it was not published until 1688, it has had more notoriety than the other novels for several reasons. One is that some scholars link it with a sort of prophecy of Rousseauism and the supremacy-of-nature school; then, too, others see in it an appeal for the abolition of slavery. And still others believe that from it can be gathered certain facts about its author's life.

The story (which the author assures her readers is a true one) centers about the character of Oroonoko, a prince of Comantien. This royal African loves a maiden of his land who, during his absence, is taken into the harem of the aged king, his grandfather. Oroonoko manages to make the girl his wife; this so enrages his grandfather that he sells her into slavery when Oroonoko has gone to war. Later, by the treachery of an English captain, Oroonoko himself is sold into slavery. He is taken to Surinam, where Mrs. Behn is supposed to have known him personally. The remainder of the story concerns his joy at finding his beloved, his chafing under the restriction of slavery, and his attempt at leading an uprising. This attempt leads to his very inhuman treatment at the hands of a cruel lieutenant-governor.

It is an amazing tale. It has in it love and fighting and intrigue. The descriptions are rich and elaborate; by sheer gorgeousness of word and phrase, the author makes Oroonoko visible to her reader: "He had an extreme good and graceful Mien, and all the Civility of a well-bred great man." "The most famous Statuary could not form the Figure of Man more admirably turn'd from Head to Foot." She evokes the tropical lushness of Surinam where " 'tis eternal Spring, always the very months of April, May, and June," where beauty is showy and sensuous. The purples and scarlets, the scents of orange groves and nutmeg trees, creep into the animated style of the tale, artless as that style seems.

Vigorous has been the debate as to whether or not *Oroonoko* is a forerunner of the Rousseau school of thought, that philosophy which advocates the nobility of the savage, the joys of the "return to nature." Also uncertain is the *purpose* of the novel. Is Mrs. Behn lashing out against the institution of slavery? Or is she simply telling the rather lurid history of a black man in bondage? Opinions as to this point vary.

A conclusion as to Aphra Behn's aim in writing *Oroonoko* must therefore be left up to the individual reader. If it is indeed a piece of propaganda in favor of the dignity of natural

man, it is the most un-self-conscious propaganda ever penned. As for slavery, there is certainly no direct moralizing to the effect that it should be abolished, and it would not seem to be in the author's power to be subtle. Moreover, it should be remembered that Mrs. Behn was a whole century away from the era of passionate social reform.

Then there is the matter of the tale's factual basis. Is it, or is it not, as the author says, a true account? Some critics take Aphra's assurances at their face value, and insist on the historicity of the royal slave and all the incidents of his life. Others are equally certain that the whole tale is simply a product of its author's fertile brain, a brain well nourished on continental romances. And still a third group steers a cautious middle course, having the opinion that part of the novel is fiction, and part history.

Thus it goes. *Oroonoko* has provided literary historians with a pleasant game—rather like a puzzle with the answer lost. Mrs. Behn's other novels have not caused nearly so much discussion, though here and there can be found a critic who has something good to say about *The Fair Jilt*, or *The Nun*, or *The King of Bantam*. In the main, however, they are dismissed as highly coloured, sensational tales, sauced for a taste not quite so fine as that of today.

That they *did* suit the taste of her time is known. If they had not, Aphra Behn would have been in debtor's prison many times. No, she was able to live on the proceeds of her pen because she gave her age what it wanted. In one way, these books help us to judge partially at least, just what kind of age it was.

Much has been said as to why or why not Aphra may rank with significant figures of English literature. She has been ranked with Bunyan and Defoe. She has been credited with adding to English fiction just the verve and snap that it needed. Even the sour Miss Kavanagh sums up her views of *Oroonoko* with the statement that "Its rude and careless strength made it worthy to be one of the first great works of English fiction."

More than three hundred years have passed since Aphra Behn wrote her last. The "coarseness" which so offended the Victorians has faded somewhat. The highly colored sentences, once so admired, have become quaint. The old scandalous stories have become dim. Hardly anyone reads Mrs. Behn any more; no one cares whether or not she was indelicate in her language, or whether or not she took lovers. The critics' voices are a thin, confused blend of perfunctory analyses, rather wry admiration, and disapproval.

"Neither honour nor fame" attend Aphra's grave, though it is in Westminster Abbey. Her beauty, her voluptuousness, have long since vanished beneath the flat black marble slab. Her writings have almost ceased to speak to men; her name gives off but a subdued sparkle. "Time," as she says in *Oroonoko*, "lessens all Extremes, and reduces 'em to Mediums, and Unconcern. . ."