

# Aphra Behn and the Crisis of Stuart Monarchy

Dr John West in conversation with Dr Joseph Hone

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**Joseph Hone:** I'm sitting here in Jesus College Fellows' Library with Dr John West, and we are surrounded by a few plays from the Restoration. Quite a few of them by Aphra Behn. Who was Aphra Behn, John?

**John West:** Behn was a British writer of the seventeenth century. She was born (we don't know her exact date of birth) she was born sometime in the early 1640s, she actually has quite a mysterious life. Her biography is quite patchy and that's partly because we think she may have spent sometime abroad during her lifetime. Some biographers think she may have spent time in Surinam in South America. She may also spent time as a spy for the British government.

**JH:** A spy?

**JW:** Yes, a spy after the Restoration in the early 1660s. So she has this very exciting life but it's a life that we don't know that much about until she becomes arguably the first professional woman writer in Britain in the seventeenth century.

**JH:** So a traveller, a spy, a playwright, and a woman. Was this common in the seventeenth century? Do we get lots of female playwrights and poets in the period?

**JW:** When we get to the later seventeenth century into the early 18th-century we start to see more female writers. But up until this point most women writers tended to write in manuscript. It was quite rare (not at all unheard of) but it was quite rare for women to print their works. And that's partly because, for a seventeenth-century woman, there was a link between print and prostitution. So that's why it's quite a remarkable thing for someone like Behn in the late 1660s and into the 1670s and 1680s, having that work printed and sold. She's principally known today as well as a dramatist, for very successful plays in the Restoration period like *The Rover*, for example, but the thing I want to focus on today really is her poetry. She was also a prolific poet. She wrote in many different forms. She wrote famous love lyrics. She produced translations of classical works. And she was also a very important political poet. She produced probably her largest amount of political poetry in a very concentrated period of time: in the mid to late 1680s, from 1685 through to 1689. She writes on all the major political events of that period. So in Behn's work you can chart the major events of the Stuart monarchy in this period of four or five years. And that's really important because it's in those four or five years that the Stuart monarchy is entering a period of profound crisis.

**JH:** So how does she defend the Stuart monarchy now that it's coming under fire?

**JW:** Well like a lot of other poets at this time who are trying to write in favour of James, she focuses on the figure of the king and his political power. But I think what's particularly interesting about Behn's poetry is how she often ends up focusing on the figure of the consort.

It is the queen or queen consort who in a way helps to preserve and maintain and secure the power of the Stuart monarchy. And it's also the queen consort who in a way imbues Behn with the power to write her own poetry. So for example Behn writes a poem on the 1685 coronation; and she describes James II's queen Mary of Modena as a primary source of poetic inspiration: 'Divinely you restore our fainting skill, / Inspired a chaste and flowing quill', she says. And in that same poem Mary of Modena is crucial to commanding obedience from the subjects of the king. So in the poem on the coronation, Mary's is a kind enchantress. She actually subdues the nation with her eyes, with her looks. Behn describes how the 'noblest Warriors wanderings stood her killing eye's stern heart tenderness betrayed'. I mean, if you think about Behn's drama, the female characters in Behn's drama are often the subject of a male gaze, and that's often very threatening thing; it threatens violence; it threatens rape. In this poem that is reversed. It's the gaze of the queen on her male subjects that subdues them. And I think she's trying to get this idea of queenly power being the force behind the Stuart throne.

**JH:** This seems quite contrary to what we might find in other poems praising the Stuarts, other Stuart panegyrics. But does this focus on the consort take Behn's poetry in unexpected directions in any other ways?

**JW:** Yes, I mean in 1685 coronation ode she's focusing on a new queen, somebody who is rising to power alongside her husband of course. But Behn is interesting because she's also at that point in time, in 1685, she doesn't just right about James and Mary. She also turns her attention to Catherine of Braganza, Charles II's widow. And what she is talking about, what Ben is talking about in the poem, is a queen's grief for the death of her husband. And yes her husband was a king, and yes that king has now been replaced by James, but what this poem does is kind of personalise the political. And strikingly, towards the end of this poem, Behn makes an analogy between Catherine's grief and that of Mary, mother of Jesus, at the cross. So she describes Catherine's grief alongside that of Mary: 'So the blessing virgin of the world's great loss came and beheld then fainted at the cross and me thinks I see you like the Queen of Heaven to whom all patience and all grace was given when the great Lord of life himself was laid upon her lap all wounded pale and dead'. whereas, in the coronation poem Mary of Modena, the new queen, is described wielding a kind of enchanting power over her subjects, this is a poem where Behn is thinking about, I suppose, women's resilience in the face of personal loss. It's a far more personal poem.

**JH:** And there was also some interesting Catholic sounding imagery in that passage. Can you tell us a bit more about that? About the figure of the Virgin Mary?

**JW:** Yeah, yeah. I mean, Behn herself probably was a Catholic. Behn interestingly then revisits that imagery in some of her later poems of 1688, but in a far different way. So in 1688, Behn writes two poems on the: first, the pregnancy of Mary of Modena, and then Mary of Modena's giving birth to James Francis Edward Stuart, the warming-pan baby. And the warming-pan baby (or the warming-pan scandal as we sometimes know it) is the subject of one of our other films. And in the second of those poems she describes Mary of Modena as the Virgin Mary, but this time giving birth to a kind of Christ child, the person who is going to enter the world and rescue the world and save the world from its sins.

**JH:** So if Behn's a Catholic, and if she's spending a huge part of her career defending this new Catholic Stuart dynasty, she must have had a very difficult time in 1688 when William and Mary

of Orange effectively oust that Stuart family from Britain. So how does she adapt to the Revolution of 1689, that sees this Catholic dynasty exiled?

**JW:** Yes, Behn remains loyal to James II at a time when many other poets many other writers decided to jump ship and support the new monarchs, William III and Mary II. And that does obviously put her in a very awkward position. She produces two poems in 1689 in response to the events of late 1688 and early 1689. They are both printed quite early in 1689 (we are talking mid-February through to March, I think), so around the time that William and Mary were being offered the crown and accepting the crown of Britain. So the first poem is *A Poem to Reverend Doctor Burnet*. Just say a little bit about who Burnet was: this is Gilbert Burnet. He is a Protestant minister. He arrives in England with William of Orange's fleet in November 1688. And Burnet is important because he's really the principal propagandists of the Williamite Revolution. And he, so the story goes, writes to Behn and says: can you write a poem for the new monarchs, William III and Mary II?

**JH:** Which says a lot about Behn's reputation at this time. She is obviously a poet that politicians want on their side.

**JW:** Absolutely, you know. She's clearly a go-to person. Now Behn writes a poem in response to Burnet. But it's a very interesting poem because it's poem explaining why she's not going to write a poem about William and Mary of Orange, or William III and Mary II. So it's a poem about not writing a poem. And in a sense she starts by appearing very humble. And yet half way through the poem she stands back and say no: I will retain my loyalty, loyalty to James II.

**JH:** It's quite an abrasive phrase, especially in this moment. And we have recordings of Burnet's coronation sermon and from Behn's poem to Burnet available elsewhere on the website for you to listen to. But you mentioned a second poem, John, from 1688-89. What was that?

**JW:** Yes, so Behn also wrote a poem to Mary of Orange, the new Mary II, who was the daughter of James II. Now it's all very well for Behn to turn around to Burnet and say I'm not going to write a poem for William, because in a sense he's only a Stuart by marriage to Mary, so he is almost slightly askance to the true lineage of Stuarts. Mary is definitely a Stuart as far as Behn is concerned, the true king, James II, so the idea of not writing for her might have been a far more difficult thing for Behn to contemplate, because that might really have challenged her sense of loyalty to the Stuarts. So she does write a poem to Mary on her arrival in England in February 1689. And in this poem Behn again, as she had done in several other poems to queens, to consorts, over the previous few years, she focuses in on the physical appearance of the queen; she focuses in on the face of the queen. But she does so here in order to trace the lines of her father in her face. So she describes, you know, 'your virtues should forgive while we adore that face that awes and charms our hearts the more. but if the monarch in your looks we find behold him yet more glorious in your mind 'tis there his godlike attributes we see'. Behn is saying here that she sees in Mary's face the image of her father, James II. She is describing a true Stuart lineage.

**JH:** But there's a curious tension here, isn't there. Because if Behn is an adherent of James II and she's praising James II in features of his daughter, that would surely have brought to mind, for contemporary readers, that James II is alive and well over in France. The daughter is in many ways that deposer of this king! So how does Behn deal with that tension? Or doesn't she?

**JW:** It's difficult. As you say, the poem is kind of double-edged in that sense. It's praising Mary; it's saying that she is the daughter of a true king. And yet, as you say, Mary is essentially

deposing her own father. So Behn, by saying I can see the lines of your father in your face; I can see his features; I can see you are your father's daughter; she's kind of reminding Mary (if Mary read this poem, of course), she's reminding Mary that she should in a way remain loyal to her lineage. And I think one of the things Behn might just be clutching at in this poem is the possibility (however faint it may have been at this point in time) that Mary could take the throne alone, and that by doing that the Stuart lineage could just about be preserved.

**JH:** So this is a poem about a history that never happened? In some ways.

**JW:** Yeah, yeah.

**JH:** So what became of Behn after the Revolution, when all of the dust had settled?

**JW:** Well Behn actually dies in the middle of 1689 in her late 40s, of natural causes. So we don't know. It's very interesting to speculate what Behn may have ended up doing had she lived for longer. Would she have reconciled herself to the new regime? Would she have gone into exile into France with James and his exiled court, and maybe written Jacobite poetry from the Continent? Or would she have done something like what Dryden did? You know, would she have said that she retained her loyalty to James II but remain in England as a kind of internal exile, if you like?

**JH:** Retired?

**JW:** Yeah, a retired writer who maybe would continue writing for the stage and might slot in sort of covert criticisms of the new monarchs into her work, as Dryden did in the 1690s. Her poetry up to 1689, up to her death, her political poetry from that late Stuart period from 1685 to 1689 really exemplifies the highly wrought politics of that period, and the very ambiguity of some of these poems probably reflects the confusion and the uncertainty that a lot of people in the country felt over those years.

**Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark):** Ashmole G.15 1; G. Pamph. 1747(9); Johnson c.70.