

“Literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women. Married against their will, kept in one room, and to one occupation, how could a dramatist give a full or interesting account of them?”  
Under such circumstances, does the dramatist find it hard to devise interesting female characters? Answer with reference to the plays of one period pre-twentieth century.

That many women have been married against their will and kept to one room, I do not doubt. That plays have been written about them is equally commonly occurring. However it is in the plays in which the dramatist either takes the women out of their enclosure or allows them the freedom within that prison to speak as they please that interesting female characters occur. This is often seen in the plays of the Restoration period, particularly the comedies. The Restoration period was the time period after Charles II came to the throne after Cromwell's Commonwealth of England. Due to the many moral restrictions during that time, once the king had returned and they were lifted, the plays then became rather more morally lax, often leading to larger and more interesting parts for women. Women, in fact became so important as to be able to write the plays themselves, like Aphra Behn, who wrote many plays, including *The Rover* which I shall look at later, and who Virginia Woolf immortalised in *A Room of One's Own* as being the forerunner of Austen or Brontë and being ‘most scandalously but rather appropriately’ buried in Westminster Abbey.

The restoration comedies often have women who are expected to be married to a certain man, or are already married and kept to one room. There is also an expectation of chastity and fidelity attached to women, while men are applauded for their cuckolding of another man. However, that is not to say that any of these women are uninteresting, indeed the women are often the driving force of the play. In George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* Harriet not only fights against the marriage her mother arranged for her but also persuades her to allow her to marry the man she had chosen for herself. In Act three, Scene one she says ‘Shall I be paid down by a covetous parent for a purchase? I need no land; no, I'll lay myself out all in love.’ This shows her independence of mind as her question ‘Shall I be paid down...?’ indicates her anger at her mother for arranging her marriage. The use of the word ‘paid’ suggests a rather modern idea of arranged marriages and how women were treated, as nothing more than livestock to be auctioned off by their parents. That Harriet realises this and says she ‘need(s) no land; no’ indicates her willingness to not be forced into anything for money, and that she does not need it, making her independence of mind very apparent. While Harriet is interesting, independent of mind and very adroit in battles of wits that she later competes in with Dorimant, the man she loves, she does not, as Pat Gill says in her essay *Gender, Sexuality and Marriage* ‘Harriet never deviates a hairsbreadth from the rules of decorum or the wishes of her mother’<sup>1</sup> This complete obedience to her mother, and the protection of her reputation as a chaste woman is, in effect, her prison, and the room that she cannot get out of. The phrase a ‘fallen woman’ appears more in later literature, such as in George Eliot, Tennyson, and in Victorian literature and art, however the idea of it started much before, and comes through even in the laxness of restoration Comedy. In order for Harriet to be a heroine,

for her to be able to change Dorimant's lifestyle from a rake to a gentleman she must be totally in line with her social expectations, she cannot be unfaithful and she must be chaste and generally obedient to her mother. This means that while an interesting account can be made of her, through her wit, and mind and independence of spirit, she is constrained by her class and the morals of the time, limiting her prospects of branching out as a character and developing in any way that would be counter-intuitive for the audience of the time.

While Harriet keeps herself bound by her own chastity, women in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* are not often so constrained; however that very lack of control often leads to them being in worse situations than any of those that Harriet Woodville gets into. The three main heroines are Hellena, her sister Florinda and the prostitute Angellica. All three pursue the men they love, occasionally getting into awful situations. At the end of Act four Florinda, having almost been seen in a page's costume escapes through a door where she is found by a man named Blunt who, along with his friend Frederick almost rapes her. Florinda's protestation against her rape, such as 'Dare you be so cruel?' and 'Alas, Sir, must I be sacrific'd for the Crimes of the most infamous of my Sex? I never understood the Sins you name.' show both her lack of power against the men but also her innocence; 'I never understood the Sins you name'. This is only resolved when she mentions the name of another man whom they are all friends with; Belville, an English soldier, and pulls out a diamond ring that proves who she is. Frederick replies with 'twou'd anger us vilely to be truss'd up for a Rape upon a Maid of Quality, when we only believe we ruffle a Harlot.' This shows again what was seen previously with Harriet; that the woman's virtue was the only thing protecting her, and without it men would be allowed to do as they pleased with her, a 'Maid of Quality' against a 'Harlot'. This is one of the doors that shut women in, which is possibly clearer here than in *The Man of Mode* as Aphra Behn was female. Her husband died, and she supported herself through her writings, however her reputation did not undertake the transition. As Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own*; girls who would want to write and live on their own earnings with the reason the 'Aphra Behn had done it' would get the reply 'Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better!' This shows that Behn was not unknowing of the misfortunes that would befall women if their virtue was lost, and yet her heroines do not lose theirs, or, if like Angellica theirs is already lost, they are recovered in the end by men who would look after them, and bring them out of where they had fallen. This loss of independence of her characters can be seen as a counterbalance to Behn's own financial stability and independence, that Behn did not want her characters to have what she had, but allow themselves to be married for their money and not for any love on the man's part. This can be seen in Hellena's marriage to Willmore, who only agrees to marry her once he understands the size of her fortune. Hellena also gives up the idea to become a nun in order to marry Willmore, even though she understands that he will be unfaithful to her, and she to him. Hellena says; 'the Three hundred thousand Crowns my Uncle left me (and you cannot keep from me) will be better laid out in Love than in Religion'. This sort of monetary bargaining, as the sort that Harriet tried so hard to avoid, comes again here, but the woman is using her money to marry instead of railing against it, showing that the women understood that the doors of financial freedom were shut to them, as well as those of sexual freedom. But, as they

understand the doors and work around them the women show themselves to be interesting and complex characters, and just as intelligent as the men. <sup>iiii</sup>

Woolf says that 'Literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women'. Women have not been equal, are still often not equal to men in our literature, they are looked down upon, reduced to minor roles, not allowed out of a single room or occupation, but that does not mean that they are any less interesting, vivid or important to the plot than men. I have just looked at two plays in which women drive the plot, make decisions on their own behalf, and make those decisions based on what would be best for them, stability over love, and in both these plays doors have been shut on women. In *The Man of Mode* that door was Harriet's own propriety, in *The Rover* the decisions of the men, and the choices that the women make on their own behalf. And yet in both these plays I cannot see how the literature is impoverished. The women are witty, intelligent and have their own minds and feelings; they do as much for the plot as the men, they just do it rather more subtly. I do not think that the doors that are shut on women do anything to the power or the richness of the literature, if anything it may even enhance it. If women had always had equality with men many books and plays that deal with that subject would not have been written. While it would have been a rather more fair and just society that would have grown around a theme of equality, would any of the literature that deals with equality had the impact and the importance that they have today? Women may have been allowed to write more, that door would have been open to more women, and we therefore may have had more Brontës, Austens, Behns, we cannot now know that. In restoration comedy I cannot say that the literature is impoverished by the doors women have had shut in their face, rather I say that the doors that were shut have given women the wiles to see their voice come through louder than if the door had always been open. However, I do agree that it is beyond our counting to be able to understand it, for how can we count that which we have never known? How do we count the Shakespeares, Defoes, Kiplings and Frosts that were not allowed to write because of their sex? We cannot. But we can look at the literature that we do have, written by men and women alike and see the words and voices of women in them, coming from behind shut doors or not, and the voices come loudly through, allowing us to hear them and to understand what they are saying, through the richness of the literature that we do have.

In conclusion while literature may not be so rich due to the doors that have been shut, not allowing women to get through, the literature that we do have allows womens' voices come through anyway. In restoration comedy the voices come through strongly, although the women are limited in occupation, and enclosed in whatever prison is formed, for or by them, their intelligence and wit makes them interesting and brightly coloured for any to see on stage, whether now or in ages past.

---

<sup>i</sup>[http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/companions/popups/pdf\\_viewer.jsf?cid=CBO9780511999369A015&hithighlight=on&ref=false&pubCode=CUP&urlPrefix=cambridge&productCode=cco](http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/companions/popups/pdf_viewer.jsf?cid=CBO9780511999369A015&hithighlight=on&ref=false&pubCode=CUP&urlPrefix=cambridge&productCode=cco)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.studentpulse.com/articles/268/aphra-behns-the-rover-evaluating-womens-social-and-sexual-options>

---

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198119746.001.0001/acprof-9780198119746-chapter-6>