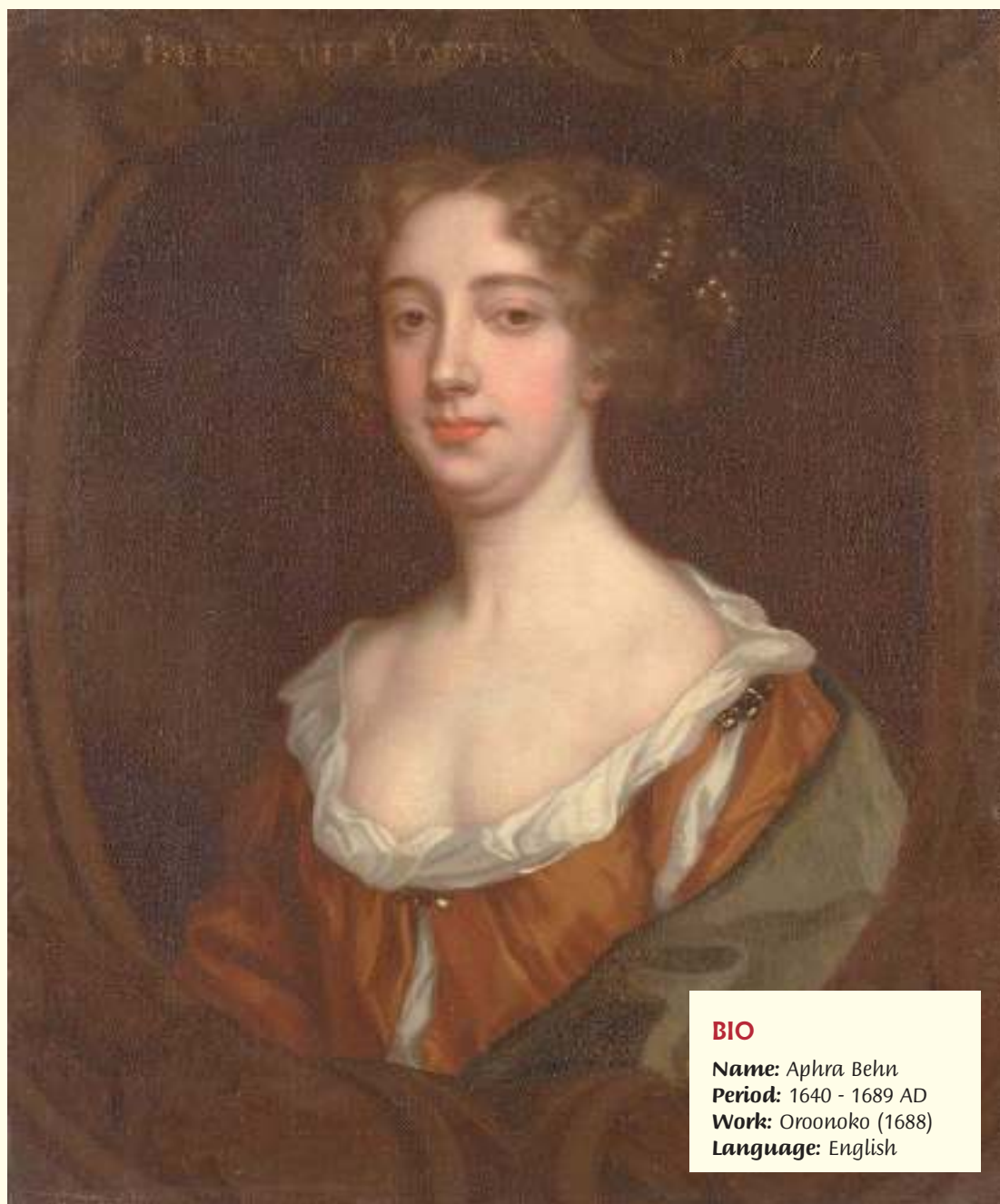


PAGES FROM THE PAST

A pioneer wearing many hats

One of the first English women to earn a living through writing, Aphra Behn was a poet, writer, playwright and a translator of science and French romance. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of her life was that she was also a spy in the Netherlands and South America for King Charles II. She was very influential, and her life was a roller-coaster of ups-and-downs in 17th Century England. Here's her story

Anusha Parthasarathy

**BIO**

Name: Aphra Behn
Period: 1640 - 1689 AD
Work: Oroonoko (1688)
Language: English

"Aphra Behn", by Anglo-Dutch artist Peter Lely PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

About Aphra Behn

Details on Aphra Behn's personal life are scant, because she meant to leave it that way. She was born Aphra Johnson, possibly near Canterbury in 1640 AD. Not much is known of her parents - one story goes that her father was a barber and mother, a wet nurse, and another is that her father's name was Cooper. Although it is sure there was a Johnson in her early life, it is uncertain if he was her biological or adopted father.

Aphra travelled with Johnson and his wife to the West Indies in 1663, where he passed away. Aphra and her mother lived in Surinam for several months, and this left a lasting impact on her. Her most famous work "Oroonoko" is about her time there and her friendship with a prince of the indigenous people.

When she returned to England in 1664, Aphra married Johan Behn, a merchant from Hamburg. The couple separated later that year, but her professional writing name remained Mrs. Behn.

By 1666, Behn was attached to the court of King Charles II and was a spy in Antwerp. Her code name was Astrea, and it is said that the cost of living as a spy was shockingly high and that Charles II was a slow payer (if he paid at all). She returned to England under a lot of debt and petitioned the king for payment, but was unsuccessful. So she began to work as a scribe for the King's Company and Duke's Company. Her first play "The Forc'd Marriage" was shown in 1670. She eventually went on to become a successful comic writer.

A woman with few like-minded contemporaries, Aphra was a trailblazer at a time when women wrote as a hobby and their work was accompanied by a warning that it was written by a member of the 'fair sex'. She was unapologetic and did not ask for acceptance, constantly working outside gender-based roles.

Aphra wrote 19 plays in all, becoming one of the most popular and sought-after dramatists in Britain. In her final years, her health began to fail due to poverty and increasing debt, although she wrote as ferociously as ever. Aphra died in 1689.



A sketch of Aphra Behn by English illustrator George Scharf
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



A handout of a 1776 performance of "Oroonoko". PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Excerpt

This poem by Aphra talks about love's power over humankind.

O Love! that stronger art than wine,
Pleasing delusion, witchery divine,
Won't to be prized above all wealth,
Disease that has more joys than health;
Though we blaspheme thee in our pain,
And of thy tyranny complain,
We are all bettered by thy reign.
What reason never can bestow
We to this useful passion owe;
Love wakes the dull from sluggish ease,
And learns a clown the art to please,
Humbles the vain, kindles the cold,
Makes misers free, and cowards bold...

Did you know?

Virginia Woolf, in her iconic book "A Room of One's Own", mentions what women owe Aphra Behn. She says, "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds."