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Sexual Desires Interpreted into Power

BY MARTHA MACKENZIE

The difference in sexual desires for men and women in seventeenth-century poetry demonstrates a disparity between men and women's perspective on power at the time. Such poets as John Donne, Aphra Behn, and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, portray these differing viewpoints in their works. In writing of homosexuality, Donne and Behn each take a unique position on what this kind of relationship means in terms of power. Donne writes of male homosexuality while Behn writes of female homosexuality. The perception of power also differs for Behn and Rochester in that their poems portray differing views of sexual relationships. Rochester is rudely frank while Behn is quietly subtle in her portrayal of events. Though Donne, Behn, and Rochester all write of male and female sexual desires, they each translate these desires differently concerning the notion of power.

At this time, it was not uncommon to regard homosexual love between two males as superior. A sexual relationship between two males was seen as pure spiritual love, while sex between a male and a female was solely for reproduction. As John Donne describes this difference in his poem *Air and Angels*, he writes, "Just such disparity / As twixt Air and Angel's purity, / T'wixt women's love, and men's will ever be" (*Air and Angels* 26-28). Donne considers the angel to be pure while the air that it needs to become physical is tainted. He uses the angel as a metaphor for a male's love. The air, then, is a symbol of women's love. By extension then, he is regarding a male's love as more pure than a woman's love. This largely attributed to the exclusion of women and thus defined the elite power men held in society. As Susan Lanser says, "[...] homosocial bonds without relying on the exchange of women... in excluding women, consolidated male power" (2). Through these homosexual and homosocial bonds, men were affirming the power they held in society. Rochester also viewed these homosexual bonds as beneficial. Jonathan Kramnick explains, "Rochester was comfortable describing sexual relations with men because... these relations did not yet carry the negative stigma of effeminacy but were, rather, signs of libertine extravagance" (8). Both Donne and Rochester upheld these relations between men to be a good thing in society. But homosexual relations between women were becoming more and more public through

the works of female writers, including Aphra Behn, and therefore began to jeopardize this power that the men claimed to have.

At this time, women were regarded as mere complements to men. However, women such as Aphra Behn, overrode this idea. In writing about homosexual bonds between two females, Behn took control of her own power and threatened the stability of society. As Susan Lanser points out:

Men could elevate male bonding without refusing marriage or the sexual hierarchy on which public and private life were based, but for women to advocate female bonds instead of marriage threatened the larger order that defined women as men's complements if not their inferiors. This challenge is arguably intensified by the figuration of female friendship in the tropes of physical desire. (3)

Male homosexual relationships could be justified, because males still held the power over women. However, with the rise of publicizing female homosexual relations, women were beginning to substantiate their own power in society.

No longer were these women depending on their men as completely as they had been. Women took the power into their own hands and followed their sexual desires to be with other women. Susan Lanser points out, "I will suggest that female friendship emerged through women's agency as a powerful resource in the struggle for autonomy and authority" (1). Women began to find their own means of power through their sexual desires toward other women. Aphra Behn describes these desires in her poem, *To the fair Clarinda, who made Love to me, imagined more than Woman*. Behn begins the poem with the lines:

Fair lovely maid, or if that title be
Too weak, too feminine for nobler thee,
Permit a name that more approaches truth:
And let me call thee, lovely charming youth. (1-4)

Here, Behn suggests that women are becoming stronger through their ties to one another. She wants to call her lover something other than "Fair lovely maid" as this title seems to be "Too weak" and "too feminine" for this woman (*To the fair* 1-2). Behn describes this love as being "innocent" (13). She claims the women are not going against any law. But if they are to be accused of wrongdoing, Behn says the lovers will "form excuses" (15). She holds to her idea that this love is real and it is worthy.

She believes that the love between women is superior to the love between a man and a woman. Behn takes a blatant stab at men when she writes, "For who, that gathers fairest flowers believes / A snake lies hid beneath the fragrant leaves" (*To the fair* 16-17). The "fairest flowers" that Behn speaks of represent women (16). She compli-

ments women by portraying them as the beauty of nature or as flowers. Behn then goes on to symbolize a man as "A snake" (17). This snake is the symbol of the snake in the Garden of Eden. It is a sign of temptation. Behn says that though women are tempted by this snake, or by men, they shall resist. A woman's love is superior to that of a man's. As Susan Lanser puts it:

Like discourses by men, women's writing often stressed the superiority of friendship over marital ties. As men had based a homosocial exclusivity on the claim that women were unfit, now women held up men's poor treatment of them and the unequal system of marriage as evidence that in female intimacy lay women's best hope. (3)

Many times women disguised their sexual relations with other women in fabricating a different kind of relationship. For example, one woman might be disguised as the servant for another woman, though the women were really lovers. Another example of this was in calling the women mere friends, as Lanser points out. With friendship as a convenient mask, women at the time were carrying on sexual relations with each other.

Behn and Rochester both write about sexual relations between lovers in their poems. They take similar anti-Puritan views. They both describe sexual relations as being purely for pleasure. In opposition to Andrew Marvell's "coy mistress," Behn and Rochester make their characters sexually charged and extremely forward. However, each expresses these desires in a different manner. Rochester uses vivid imagery while Behn makes the sexual acts in her poems subtler. While Rochester continually gives the power to his male characters, Behn puts the power in her female characters' hands.

Rochester is infamous for his raunchy, almost pornographic poetry. His sexual imagery is over the top at times. It is as if Rochester is simply going for shock value. For example, in his poem, *A Ramble in St. James's Park*, he writes, "Each job of whose spermatic sluice / Had filled her cunt with wholesome juice" (Rochester 93-94). This illustration of the sexual act is hardly necessary and yet lines like these are found throughout Rochester's work. Rochester tends to portray the women in his poems as dirty with many partners. He writes, "When your lewd cunt came spewing home / Drenched with the seed of half the town" (Rochester 113-114). These women are mostly prostitutes who are paid to have sex.

The men who sleep with these women then, ultimately hold the power in Rochester's poems. The males are the ones who have the money to pay these women. The males desire the sexual act, while the prostitutes mostly want the money. The males control the situation because they possess the money. In essence, the men control the women's desire for money while satisfying their own sexual desires.

Rochester describes the male desire as instinctual and almost animalistic. He ends the poem, *A Satire Against Reason and Mankind*, with the line, "Man differs more from man, than man from beast" (Rochester 221). This is a comment on the different

classes of society of the time, as well as on the desires of men. Rochester implies that men basically act out of their “beastly” instincts to have sex with women. Though the men’s desires are almost out of their control, they still hold the power over the women in the sexual relationship.

Behn takes a different approach in describing these sexual encounters. In her poem, *Song “I Led my Silvia to a Grove,”* she writes:

A many kisses I did give,
And she returned the same,
Which made her willing to receive;
That which I dare not name. (13-16).

Though Behn is obviously portraying a sexual relationship, she is not disclosing the intimate details like Rochester. The closest she comes to illustrating what goes on between the lovers is in her use of the word “kisses” (13). That is the only taste that we get of any sex. She ends this poem with the line, “Oh! Who can guess the rest” (Behn 24). Behn is subtle in her description of sexual acts while Rochester is extremely blunt.

Behn and Rochester did agree, however, that love ruined the pleasure of sexual relations. In her poem, *The Disappointment*, Behn writes:

Ready to taste a thousand joys,
The too transported hapless swain,
Found the vast pleasure turned to pain;
Pleasure which too much love destroys: (71-74).

Behn and Rochester don’t think that love and sex mix. As Rochester says in his poem, *The Imperfect Enjoyment*, “But when great Love the onset does command, / Base recreant to thy price, thou dar’st not stand” (59-60). These two lines describe a man who who cannot get an erection with the woman he loves because of this love.

Behn and Rochester both write of impotence in their poetry, however each sees this impotence differently. As Lisa M. Zeitz and Peter Thoms describe it, “The male tradition itself is, of course, concerned with the representation of masculine identity; unlike its male counterparts, however, Behn’s ‘The Disappointment’ is not about impotence so much as it is about the power at a number of levels” (501). Behn portrays the loss of an erection as the loss of power. She says, “But Oh what envying god conspires / To snatch his power, yet leave him the desire!” (*The Disappointment* 79-80). The man is left with his sexual desire but he doesn’t have the control to do anything about it. He has essentially lost the power over the situation. For Behn:

[A] narrative that is ostensibly about [...] a man’s failure of physiological control provides the opportunity to examine a wider dynamics of power, authority, and social role-playing that permeates and perverts the relations between the sexes. (513)

The man is not the only one with desires. Furthermore, his desires have left him unable to act and ultimately without power.

Rochester describes this dilemma in a different light. Instead of depicting impotence as the loss of power, Rochester plainly describes it as the temporary loss of function. He does not connect the loss of a man’s function with the loss of a man’s power. He rather “distances himself from his current failure by repudiating his penis” (Zeitz 512). Rochester reasons that it isn’t the man’s fault that he cannot get an erection, but rather the penis is to blame. The male narrator of Rochester’s poem, *The Imperfect Enjoyment*, describes his penis as “Thou treacherous, base deserter of my flame, / False passion, fatal to my fame” (45-46). Rochester maintains the man’s power with this distinction.

He also makes the male the narrator purposefully, giving him back his power. In his poem, *The Imperfect Enjoyment*:

The speaker *is* the male lover, a strategy in which the loss of physical vigor is more than counterbalanced by the provision of narrative authority. While the lover fails to control the unfolding of the sexual encounter, he recovers power in narrating, and thereby in exerting some artistic control over the events. (Zeitz 511)

The power is put back into the male’s hands by giving him the opportunity to “rage” against his penis and to justify his impotence in the poem (*The Imperfect* 30).

Behn gives the power to the women in her poems. She makes her narrators female, allowing them to maintain the secret of their sexual desires as they please. As Jacqueline Pearson says, “Aphra Behn’s fiction, then, creates highly individualized, often female, narrators, and uses them to foreground issues of gender and power [...]” (184). In giving her females the power to narrate the poem, Behn is giving females the power to narrate the events of the poem, including sexual acts. Rochester, on the other hand, gives this narrating power to the males in his poems that then describe the women as “cunts” and “common fucking posts” (*A Ramble* 78 & 63).

Though both Behn and Rochester wrote poems of a sexual, desirous nature, the public received them differently because of their gender giving them unequal power as poets of the time. Behn makes her narrators female because it is the only way she can gain power for females. Her own voice, as a woman poet, does not count for much in her society. As Jacqueline Pearson puts it, “the female writer and narrators themselves, [are] powerful within the confines of fiction, and powerless outside” (184). Behn did not have much say as a woman, so she gave all of her female characters as much power as she could by making them the narrators of her poems.

Rochester had much more power as a poet simply because he was a man. Though his poems were of a vulgar nature, it was justified by his Libertine lifestyle. He was a smoker, a drinker, a ladies' man, etc. As a man he had the power as a poet. On the contrary, Bishop Burnet commented on Behn's poetry in saying, "she is so abominably vile a woman, and rallies not only all Religion but all Virtue in so odious and obscene a manner, that I am heartily sorry that she has writ any thing [...]" (*Rudrum* 1098). The mere fact that Behn was female left her with little power. She wrote of the same sexual themes as Rochester, however both were received very differently as male and female poets.

Sexual desires are inherently powerful. As Jonathan Kramnick points out, "Sex is sociality gone awry, as a cross-section of the social order blends at its most sensitive points of contact" (6). This is evident in seventeenth-century British poetry. John Donne and Aphra Behn point out the differences in opinion of male homosexual desires versus female homosexual desires. They portray what these differences in desires mean in terms of male versus female power.

Aphra Behn and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, also have differing views of sexual desire. While Behn attests to the women holding the power in her poetry, Rochester leaves all power in the males' hands. Rochester uses explicit language, Behn's word use is more toned down. Both did concur that love and sex did not work and ended up in impotence. However, both Behn and Rochester interpreted this impotence into differing views of power. Though both are published poets of the time, Behn was regarded as inferior to Rochester simply because she was a woman. Kramnick further says, "As we have seen, the category of action is no less implicated in the thick of seventeenth-century discourse than passion. The term describes the churning procession of the will from thought to formulated behavior in the world" (5). As thoughts, these sexual desires, or passions, of men and women became different behaviors, and thus turned into different perceptions of power held by each.

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