

CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY: APHRA BEHN'S *THE FORCED MARRIAGE*

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Abstract

Aphra Behn's The Forced Marriage (1670) challenges patriarchal norms in Restoration England by centering women's perspectives within a tragicomic framework. Written when women first appeared on stage as performers and playwrights, the play critiques arranged marriages and highlights the silencing of female voices in matters of love. Through Erminia and Galatea, Behn depicts women's resistance to paternal authority and their determination to choose freely, contrasting male characters driven by jealousy and impulsive emotion. Drawing on familiar Shakespearean motifs, Behn reshapes conventional tragicomedy to empower her heroines with rationality and agency. While often criticized for themes tolerated in male dramatists, Behn redefines the stage as a space where women can challenge social constraints. The Forced Marriage thus emerges as a pioneering work that subverts gender hierarchies and anticipates feminist arguments about women's autonomy.

Keywords: Aphra Behn, *The Forced Marriage*, patriarchy, Restoration drama, women's autonomy

Introduction

Aphra Behn wrote *The Forced Marriage* (1670) at a time when England had undergone a significant change following the Restoration of 1660. Attitudes towards women were changing and this had an influence on theaters as well. Behn's portrayal of coerced marriage anticipates later feminist critiques of compulsory heterosexuality (Gallagher, 1989). Women could now portray their own sex in the theaters instead of men or boys as in earlier plays. This meant the advent of an opportunity to register their own feminine perspective in the plots. Formerly eschewed topics i.e. sex and gender became popular with the public. Behn's female characters negotiate power in ways that destabilize patriarchal order (Todd, 2000). Aphra Behn embraced this post restoration license in theater and heralded the female perspective through her plays. Aphra Behn's plays frequently expose the contradictions of patriarchal authority, especially in *The Forced Marriage* (Todd, 1993). It is one of most searing explications of the institution of marriage and the matrimonial dynamics as negotiated by gender role expectations. She can expertly dramatize female resistance to male dominance, revealing the limited autonomy of women under early modern patriarchy (Hughes, 2004). It speaks volumes of her keen insight in patriarchal notions of gender and is one of the earliest examples of its portrayal in a literary work.

Behn is master of her craft and weaves different threads of meaning in her work and her play *The Forced Marriage* stands out for its bold take on the institution of marriage and how it enacts control through deeply ingrained patriarchal structures. It is a fascinating window into that era and how the gender dynamics have evolved throughout the years.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is grounded in the social conditioning of gender normativity and gender role expectations as sustained by patriarchal power structures. Behn's play is no less than a watershed moment for mounting a resistance to received ideology despite facing backlash for

her work at the time. Critics were less accommodating to Aphra Behn for her plays though men dramatists were applauded for the same themes in their plays. Wiseman argues that Behn complicates marriage as a patriarchal institution rather than affirming it (1998). Eighteenth century poet Alexander Pope judged her for the licentiousness of her characters even though it was common with men authors too. Scholars emphasize that Behn exposes marriage as a site of both oppression and negotiation (Gallagher, 1989). Notwithstanding the opposition, her plays enjoyed success and Behn was unperturbed with accusations of vulgarity in her plays. Behn's early play sets the stage for a lineage of women dramatists confronting patriarchy (Ritchie, 2005). She wrote in the preface to her another play, *The Lucky Change* (1686):

'All I ask is the privilege for my masculine part—the poet in me (if any such you will allow me)—to tread in those successful paths my predecessors have so long thrived in. . . . If I must not, because of my sex, have this freedom, but that you will usurp all to yourselves, I lay down my quill, and you shall hear no more of me, no not so much as to make comparisons, because I will be kinder to my brothers of the pen than they have been to a defenseless woman' (Goodman et al, 2013, p. 147).

As noted by Ezell, Behn's dramatic strategies provide an early feminist challenge to male-centered narratives (1999). Her creative spree was not held back by dissidents, and she went on to write profusely penning 18 plays. *Oroonko* (1688) is particularly well known for its quest for racial equality and has often been contrasted with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Behn also emerged as the first female author who earned her living through her works. Spencer is of the view that the constant struggle between duty and desire in *The Forced Marriage* illustrates the constraints of arranged marriages (1986).

As noted by Hughes and Derek in *The Theater of Aphra Behn*, Behn begins the play with the king, pleased with the recent victory in battle, wants to acknowledge the valor of his commander Alcippus with a bride, Erminia (1996). The latter does not wish to be married to Alcippus as she is in love with the prince Philander, the king's son. Galatea, the king's daughter, is love with Alcippus. Although the complicated battles of hearts are resolved by the end of the play, Alcippus's resolve is tested as he gets entangled in envy for Erminia .

Discussion and Analysis

Action of the play is set in motion when the king celebrates the heroism in the battle of his son Philander and young Alcippus. Both the men in turn compliment each other for the victories as a token of mutual respect and appreciation. The king announces his decision to make Alcippus the new general of the army, the latter is reluctant to accept in the presence of the old general Orgilius, who happily accepts the new turn of events and is quick to acknowledge Alcippus's bravery and competence for the position. According to Ballaster (1992) Behn undermines the absolutist authority of the husband through irony and satire.

The atmosphere of the scene quickly changes into despair when the King asks Alcippus how he could pay him more in terms of reward and this new annotated general makes the bold request of asking to be married to the old general's daughter i.e., Erminia. Now it is a request that both the king and her father are too glad to give this nod of assent. On the other hand the audience is intimated through separate asides that both Erminia and Philander demonstrate their complete shock and horror at this news.

In a new turn of event when everyone leaves and there is only Alcander and Pisaro, the friends of Philander and Alcippus, respectively. They suggest that Erminia had been treacherous in her conduct and may have implicitly invited Alcippus to ask for her in marriage and thus desert the prince. In line with the values of patriarchal conditioning, she is considered and declared a party to a marriage notwithstanding her wishes to the contrary. No one bothers to ask for her consent in the first place. When Erminia meets Princes Galatea, the two women rue their fate as women who are totally helpless in the face of deeply entrenched patriarchal

values that are beyond their control. Despite their love for separate men, they cannot go against the values set by men.

From our modern view point the dialogue of the two men is a stark reminder of how gender roles are conditioned, and their only resource is their private misery and the solace of sharing a sealed fate. Behn masterfully gives them speeches that underscore their helplessness and lack of personal agency. Erminia's father cannot believe how she could fall in love with someone without his explicit consent. When repeatedly subjected to the reminders of her duty as women, she has no other course but accept her wretched lot. In the meantime, the two adversaries brandish swords at one another after learning that they have a romantic interest in the same woman. The princess is saddened to learn that her brother, the prince, wanted to kill Alcippus; it is then that the brother discovers she is in love with his adversary. There will be some respite despite the plot's complexity and the tightening of the screws. The prince, who loves her, and his sister, who loves Alcippus, are both relieved when Erminia promises that she will marry him but never sleep in his bed.

However, Alcippus does not intend to allow such an arrangement; he does not trust his bride and has grown envious of the prince. Pretending to go on a mission, he intends to come back and spy on his wife. The prince has pleaded to meet Erminia in the interim. His presence is discovered by the irate spouse, who reappears out of the blue, as is customary in such dramas. Following a good deal of savagery and swordplay, the King steps in and reveals that Erminia has always loved the prince and has remained true and chaste to him in spite of the wedding ceremony. Alcippus resigns Erminia to the prince and pops the question after being pleased by the princess's constant affection for him and eventually affected by such devotion. The drama ends happily with the approval of the King and Erminia's father, the elderly general.

Aphra Behn's *The Forced Marriage* is not the most original in terms of its source content. According to Ballaster Behn used comedy to mask yet simultaneously reveal her critique of patriarchy (1996). It bears resemblance with several plays preceding hers. She, however, masterfully and quite effectively reinvents themes and wraps them with the critical reevaluation from a woman's perspective. The satire in *The Forced Marriage* reveals the fragility of patriarchal authority (Ritchie, 2000). The most obvious influence is the tragedy *Othello*, which was popular on the Restoration stage. The return of the heroine from death may recall Shakespeare's earlier and non-tragic study of jealousy, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Hughes 42).

As *The Forced Marriage* was Aphra Behn's first play, she stuck to techniques associated with sentimental tragicomedies that audiences knew well. Such plays contained standard prologues and high-flown speeches given to the central characters. The play embodies contradictions of Restoration politics and gender ideology (Hughes & Todd, 1996). Aphra Behn broke with the conventions with her earliest plays. She used the prologue to announce to the audience that the author was a woman and that women will use their wit as weapon. The characters in the play are at the mercy of Behn's tragicomedy style and do not stand out for their individual attributes except for her women characters who, although expressive emotionally, yet endowed with initiative to take matters on their own hands and act for themselves. They exercise reason in the face of a conflict and submit to authority with a leeway for rebellion. Men, on the other hand, rush to conflict and are governed by base emotions losing site of saner choices. In the play both Erminia and Galata come off as judicious and sensible. Behn was able to turn the tables on patriarchal conventions where emotion is associated with women and reason with men. Behn's position as a professional female playwright itself challenged gendered hierarchies of authorship (Todd, 1989).

According to Goodman, in the 17th Century, arranged marriages were the norm and generally accepted as *fait accompli* where the couples, especially women, had no say at all.

Behn presented a scenario in *The Forced Marriage* where two women protest to their prospect of arranged marriages with men they are not in love with. The representation of women's constrained choices echoes feminist concerns about autonomy (Ezell, 1993). The King and the old general eventually come to terms with the choices of their daughters for the life partners instead of their imposed verdicts. The heroine's resistance reflects a Foucauldian interplay of power and subjectivity within patriarchal discourse (O'Donnell, 2000). The old general's daughter and king's daughter Galatea defy paternal expectations and marry for love instead of position or power. Behn wielded the subject of female empowerment rather effectively.

After the restoration of King Charles II to the British throne in 1660, the French influence in arts was palpably noticeable as observed in the works of post restoration British authors. The iambic pentameter was cast aside for Alexandrine along with rhyming couplet pattern as opposed to blank verse. The nature of French language makes it more amenable to use in the couplet form while it is ill suited to English given its extensive vocabulary. Behn found some middle ground by employing blank verse as well as sharp witty couplets as witnessed in *The Forced Marriage*. The play's ending resists easy patriarchal closure, leaving room for ambiguity (Spencer, 1993).

Conclusion

While on the surface the play does not deviate from prevalent writing form and the choice of subject matter, it does offer a fresh viewpoint that is her own and missing in the plays of her contemporaries. The play highlights how patriarchal power is exercised through marital coercion (Backscheider, 1993). The traditional pattern of arranged marriages for couples as per the sole discretion of their parents, especially so in the case of women, is vehemently challenged right away as she introduces characters caught in predicaments where they are not in love with the partner that their parents want them to marry. Galatea is set upon marrying the newly promoted young general Alcippus even though he is not from her social class and, similarly, Prince Philander wants to marry Erminia who does come from his aristocratic class. Quite opposed to the dictates of the time, both the women want to exercise their choice for husbands as men get to choose their brides. Akin to the plots of the plays of this type where miscalculations, mistaken identities reign the plot, Behn succeeds in weaving through an idea of independence for women in governing the affairs of their lives.

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