

Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, and Sylvia Plath: “a passionate journey” towards “a
revolution in female manners”

Giada Cacciavilni

**Copyright ©2010 Giada Cacciavilni.
This text may be
archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy,
provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is
charged.**

ABSTRACT: Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, and Sylvia Plath were artists who struggled during their lives to express their thoughts and ideas. In addition to this, being women, they found it hard to be recognised as writers and their fight against social conventions and norms is now considered of huge importance since they managed to open doors for women that came after them. Katherine Philips started a feminine revolution which was taken over by Aphra Behn, and by Sylvia Plath about three centuries later. The three authors rebelled against the feminine mystique of their time and the subsequent domestication of women. In addition to this, they refused to be men’s shadows and raised a new awareness of women as active subjects that could finally use their voices to express themselves. The aim of this essay is to explore and interpret the ways in which these three women managed to subvert the prescribed role that society had in store for them by touching on different topics related to gender and the relationship between men and women. I will focus on their outlook on marriage and on women’s roles in society.

Katherine Philips: rejecting society's women.

Katherine Philips (1632-64) certainly wished she had more control over her life. Yet, by looking at her life, one may claim that she did pretty well considering the age she was living in and the harsh restrictions women were subjected to. Needless to say, Katherine could not choose her husband, but she managed to educate herself “at a time when women were the most illiterate group in society” (Limbert, 30) and, most importantly, she fulfilled her dream to be a writer, in a period where women were expected to write for themselves and not to go beyond that. Among her themes are friendship, marriage, and political issues, such as the state of England. She treated them with irony and, especially in the poems about friendship with other women, on the platonic level. The author often depicted herself as naive and her work as unimportant, and she treated her subjects “in a manner acceptable by her society” (Limbert, 36). By doing all this, she protected herself on paper, and she built a space that was both within society and outside of it, allowing herself to be a woman author and to communicate what she felt.

Katherine Philips can be considered one of the first feminist women poets since, among the topics of her lyrics, she strongly rejects the idea of marriage and claims it can correspond to segregation and repression. This can be seen in poems like “To one persuading a woman to marriage”, where the persona is addressing a man who wants to ‘trap’ a woman into marriage. The woman in question is someone who is not afraid to speak her mind and to express her will. The persona affirms she is a “public deity” (line 5) that is not likely to become “a petty household god” (line 8) and adjust to the man’s way of life and possible repression. The woman gives the impression of being an inspiring and strong being whose beams are “more bright and large than [the sun’s]” (line 16) and, as a consequence of this, difficult to shut in a cage and control. Katherine Philips is referring to those women who, against the will of society, are not afraid of having a will of their own and of going beyond those virtues so treasured by society as feminine and proper – such as silence, chastity, and obedience. These women will not be silenced, nor obey.

Katherine Philips continues her personal outlook on marriage in “A marryd state affords but little ease” where the persona claims that being a wife is difficult, having to please her husband at all times. In addition to this, by not marrying, a woman would not regret choosing to remain single since she would avoid things such as violence from her husband, fear, pain as a consequence of childbirth, and distress as the effect of child-care. In other words, by choosing to be an “apostate” (line 12) and to forsake the social creed of repression, a woman would be free and able to rebel against the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society. In the final line of the poem, a reference is made to “leading apes in hell” (line 16), which was considered to be the main activity of maids and spinsters, who would play with men and drive them crazy – “to hell”.

In “No blooming shall ever make me err”, the persona makes a list of those qualities she considers essential in a man in order for her to marry him. Apart from claiming there are not many around, this man should own a “beauty of the mind” (line 2) and “sence” (line 4) rather than material possessions. In addition to this, he should be wise, faithful to both her and his country and he should somehow enjoy education.

Aphra Behn: “my pen is a pistola”.

Considered the first woman to live by her pen, Aphra Behn (1640-89) supplied English literature with revolutionary concepts and works such as “The Disappointment” and “The Golden Age”, allowing women to desire and highlighting how the repression of women can be compared to colonization. Behn’s women are anything but modest; they are scandalous, active, and willing. The libertine made use of a masculine genre, the pastoral, and went so far as to question and subsequently destabilize the gender roles and sexuality of her time. The author, and women, are empowered as opposed to men, that are often depicted as impotent and passive. Behn is forward-thinking and “a precursor of gender studies.” (Crook)

In “Song from Abdelazar”, Behn refers to a masculine “thee” as opposed to a feminine “I” and focuses on how love has features characteristic of both men and women. “[Love] took his sighs and tears” (line 9) and “his languishments and fears” (line 11) from the feminine I-persona and “pride and cruelty” (line 7) “and every killing dart” (line 12) from man. Yet, Behn implies that love is much more of a masculine nature: he

is powerful, a tyrant, and a sadist that causes pain and suffering. He corresponds to a destructive force, and to dantesque sceneries. The reader may understand that Behn is playing the victim's role, claiming her heart is alone and hurt, and the man's triumphant and liberated; yet, she seems to be creating a subtext in which she is actually empowering and motivating women to fight against male rule. Behn's political agenda makes its appearance in this poem by showing that political gender has influenced something as emotional and gender-blind as love.

In "To Alexis in Answer...", Aphra Behn concentrates on how the slightest mistake in terms of sexual behaviour could cost a woman her entire reputation. As a matter of fact, no matter the amount of inner and outer beauty a woman has been graced with, as soon as she surrenders to desire and passion, she will turn into a "real ill" (line 14) and her man will not waste any more time with such a sinful being. Behn criticizes the way in which men and society rule women's lives by controlling their sexuality and gender behaviour and reinforces this idea in the fourth stanza when it is claimed that men can literally "fly if honour take [women's] part" (line 21) but they will throw them out as soon as women "yeild" (line 24) to their own impulses. The persona in the poem affirms that man was born "with that inconstancy...to love the absent, and the present scorn" (lines 15, 16) so why should women hanker after something they know will end as soon as men say so?

In the last few lines of the poem, Aphra Behn warns the young woman of men's intentions as her lover may be "like Alexis" (line 36). The persona addresses young women who are subjected to men's courtship and advises them to take Alexis as an instance of what may happen to them. A double interpretation arises from the last line of the poem where Behn affirms that the lover "a fatal lesson...has learned/After fruition ne'er to be concerned" (lines 40, 41). As a matter of fact, firstly, a man may have learned to have sex just for the sake of it, without being too affected. Secondly, the lover may have got used to not being interested in the consequences of having sex with a woman, such as pregnancy.

In "Song to a Scottish Tune", the libertine author highlights how a woman loses her freedom and her independence when she gives in to a man's proposals. The I-persona is a young woman who feels obliged to marry "Jemmy", a lovable, optimistic, and cheerful man, due to his constant happy mood, generosity, and good manners. The young woman describes how his "finding sweets in every smart" (line 7) made her say "yes" and, at the same time, lose her freedom. She describes how all his moves and actions were dedicated or directed to her but that in spite of all this, she could not do anything but blame herself for her loss of independence. Another evidence of this can be found in lines 11 and 12, where the woman seems to be invoking help from Heaven as she does not feel anything for him while she feels she should as Jemmy is a respectable and respectful partner: "And every sigh a heart would move, guded faith, and why not mine?". In the penultimate stanza, Jemmy proves to be the perfect lover since "the gayest songs he would sing, on purpose to delight me" (lines 19, 20), "every grace displayed" (line 21) so much so that she feels obliged to "vow" (line 24). Yet, the speaker expresses doubt and reads as if compelled by social patterns of marriage and traditions when, referring to all he has done for her, she states "which were enough I trow to conquer any princely maid" (lines 22, 23). Indeed, her tone reinforces the idea that she is not really in love with him but rather agrees to marry him since that is what a

woman should do according to the mainstream and especially if the man appears to be so respectful and sweet as she describes him to be.

In the last eight lines of the poem, Behn depicts the I-persona as a lost woman, who will not be able to take care of herself without the protective presence of her husband – “then what becomes of me?” (line 32). Yet, the author of *Oroonoko* is making use of irony and she is actually showing that following social norms is not always a safe choice. Indeed, by disregarding the rules, women are able to *be* alive, experiment, and bet on their future. However, by paying attention to what they should be or do may appear to give comfort and security, but in reality they are living a shallow existence behind a façade, dominated by a fake being.

Sylvia Plath: a genius in a man's world.

Sylvia Plath (1932-63) shared with Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn an outstanding characteristic: they were all women “poet[s] who lived and wrote almost before what might have been [their] time.” (Wagner, 17). Plath lived in an age dominated by housewives, their electro domestics, and patriarchy's expectation to see a woman at home and perpetuating the species rather than getting a PhD. She was also a contemporary of Betty Friedan, who would write extensively on these topics in the feminist masterpiece *The Feminine Mystique*. Plath died in 1963, the year in which the work was published but it is symptomatic how both women were determined “not to accept relief from any ready-made dogma” (Wagner, 17).

Like Philips and Behn, Plath struggled with “the anxiety of authorship” (Gilbert and Gubar as quoted in Wagner, 16) but, like the two Renaissance poets, she managed to create her own room and voice as a woman writer in a hostile environment; she became active, gained control and self-awareness for herself and the women of the future. All this came through pain, suffering, mental and marital breakdowns, and confrontations with the harsh issues of the past.

The American author clearly saw how patriarchy defined two kinds of women according to whether they followed the norm or not. In “Two Sisters of Persephone”, Plath describes two girls: firstly, a woman who is a failure, and secondly, a woman in full bloom. The first one is depicted as a dark figure sitting inside the house without ever being in the light and working on brainy mathematical problems. She is “sallow” (line 25), bitter, as opposed to the second one, a free being living in nature, constantly touched by the sun and life. The persona implies that, being husband-less and “wry virgin to the last” (line 26), the first girl's only partner will be those worms that will feed on her body. By contrary, her sister is considered a real woman since she has a husband and she “bears a king” (line 24). Plath harshly criticizes how patriarchy judges women according to their status with respect to men and considers them able to “beam” only when they are by their men's side and fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers.

Plath stresses this idea in “The Applicant” where women are portrayed as obedient, a complement to men, who, “being wifeless, [are] missing something, some primary possession.” (Dobbs, 18) Women are depicted as a support to men's existence so as to stress their presence as secondary characters in society. Plath also highlights men's

anxiety to form a family due to social expectations; she depicts them as “crying” and as having their “last resort” in marriage.

The author stresses women who act like puppets: “A living doll, everywhere you look.” (line 33) that can “bring teacups and roll away headaches/And do whatever you tell it” (lines 12, 13). The use of “it” is symptomatic of women’s objectification throughout history. Plath thus lays emphasis on a situation with which she herself was familiar depicting how women were considered machines rather than human beings: “It can sew, it can cook,/It can talk, talk, talk”, “It works, there is nothing wrong with it.” (lines 34, 35, 36) The poem is useful to see how the author considered marriage to be a kind of *pardah* and a mutilation for women as it meant their complete loss of will and identity. Plath’s disappointment following her marriage is recurrent in her poetry and it shows the internal struggle she and many other women have always lived through, trying to choose between career or family.

Plath aimed to become an independent self throughout her life and poetry represented a means of relief from oppression. In “Daddy”, she claims “every woman adores a Fascist” (line 48) and that “[she] may well be a Jew” (line 35), making a comparison between ethnic oppression and gender oppression and stressing the authoritarian nature of marriage. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood also transmits a sense of fear towards marriage, described as a dictatorship and a means of enslavement, perhaps what Plath herself possibly felt during her marriage with Ted Hughes: “So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state.” (as quoted in Dobbs, 20) Through the poem, Sylvia Plath metaphorically kills her father, who died when she was only a child, and, by doing so, she liberates herself from her husband and all men. She makes reference to how she got married to find a new father figure – “A man in black with a Meinkampf look” (line 65) – and how her partner stole her essence and put her in a cage – “The vampire who said he was you/And drank my blood for a year” (lines 72, 73). Plath will later affirm: “Living apart from Ted is wonderful – I am no longer in his shadow”. (as quoted in Wagner, 192)

Conclusion

After analyzing a part of the poets’ work, it is possible to draw many conclusions as far as their commitment to their craft is concerned. Firstly, the three poets showed women *can* write. In addition to this, they thought women could write while being active in terms of their position in society. They believed in women’s power to create their own path, let go of social patterns and transgress boundaries imposed by patriarchy. They thought that this was possible through writing and especially through poetry, an incomparable means of expression. Indeed, poetry would give them the chance to let their sensitivity and deepest frustrations, joys, and thoughts flow on the page. Moreover, it would allow them to build an intimate space, characterized by irony, challenge, intuition, experimentation. They definitely represent an inspiration for all women since their work and personalities were ground-breaking then as much as they are now. Yet, and most importantly, they “redefine[d] woman’s position in poetry: to become the subject who desires and speaks” (Mermin, 351). Philips, Behn, and Plath taught women not to be afraid to express their beliefs and rebel against what is keeping them from the “light”.

Bibliography

- Butscher, Edward, ed. *Sylvia Plath: the Woman and the Work*. New York: Dadd, Mead & Company, 1977.
- Crook, David. "Aphra Behn and Sexual Identity: Ambiguity and Gender Swapping in Poetry" <http://home.sport.rr.com/instantcomma/Aphra%20Behn.htm> Accessed: 27/08/2008 11:09
- Dobbs, Jeannine. "Viciousness in the Kitchen": Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry" from *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (Autumn, 1977), pp. 11-25. *Modern Language Studies*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3194361> Accessed: 20/05/2008 06:21
- Lant, Kathleen Margaret & Sylvia Plath. "The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath" from *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (Winter, 1993), pp. 620-669. University of Wisconsin Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208804> Accessed: 10/05/2008 12:53.
- Limbirt, Claudia A. "Katherine Philips: Controlling a Life and Reputation" from *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, (May, 1991), pp. 27-42. South Atlantic Modern Language Association <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3199957> Accessed: 29/05/2008 04:11.
- Mermin, Dorothy. "Women Becoming Poets: Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Anne Finch" *ELH*, Vol. 57, No. 2, (Summer, 1990), pp. 335-355. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- "<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873075>" <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873075> Accessed: 22/04/2008 03:46.
- Philips, Bill & Susan Ballyn, Martin Renes. *An Anthology of English Poetry, 1550-1750*. Universitat de Barcelona, 2007.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Crossing the Water*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Wagner, Linda W., ed. *Sylvia Plath. The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Young, Elizabeth V. "Aphra Behn, Gender, and Pastoral" from *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century, (Summer, 1993), pp. 523-543. Rice University. "<http://www.jstor.org/stable/451012>" Accessed: 25/05/2008 08:12