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Critiquing conventional assumptions about gender in Aphra Behn's 'To the Fair Clorinda' and in John Donne's 'Sappho to Philaenis'

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Abstract:

How can literature of the 17th century become relevant to our contemporary ideas about gender and sexuality? This essay explores how Aphra Behn's 'To the Fair Clorinda' and Donne's 'Sappho to Philaenis' resist conventional assumptions about gender, as it focuses on the poems' themes of hermaphroditism, gender fluidity and queer love. This resistance appears through processes of fragmentation and doubling as well as subversion of poetic form. Rather than exploring what the writer intended to portray, this discussion attempts to explore the complexities of gender and sexuality by drawing on recent concepts and ideas about gender and queer theory, and aims to develop a more modern reading of the poems where male and female binaries are obliterated and where these poetic figures break free from any heteronormative expectations.

In the poems of Aphra Behn ‘To the Fair Clorinda’ (‘Clorinda’) and of John Donne ‘Sappho to Philaenis’ (‘Sappho’), various assumptions about gender are addressed and disputed. Considering the persecution of queer people during the Early Modern period, the exploration of such topics in these poems suggests a rising interest in ideas and concepts concerning gender and sexuality. In this essay, rather than focusing on authorial intent, I will discuss how the poems reflect gender using our understanding of gender theory today to allow more modern readings of the poems to emerge. Through examination of the poetic technique of fragmentation, the theme of doubleness, and poetic form, I will explore to what extent these two poems resist conventional assumptions about gender.

In ‘Sappho’ the fragmentation of the women’s limbs during their lovemaking can be read as a literal depiction of the separation between the sexuality and gender of the body. The repetitive listing and emphasis on “likeness” (47) in the phrases “lips, eyes, thighs” (45), “Hand to strange hand, lip to lip” (49), “breast to breast, or thighs to thighs” (50) create what Maus calls “gender disorientation” (Maus 275) since through the use of fragmentation, and the absence of biologically gendered body parts as well as the use of the word “strange” in line 49 which heightens this effect of alienation from the body, the women’s bodies become increasingly genderless. During the Early Modern Period however, gender and sexuality were embedded into society as highly interconnected concepts which enabled greater perpetuation of gender and sexual norms. This idea is still quite common in our society today as Butler points out: “under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality” (Butler 6). Thus, Donne’s use of fragmentation here is more likely to be suggesting a parallel of poetic genius between him and Ovid or “the intellectual relationship” between poets as argued by Grisé (45) and Goldberg (173-4), rather than making a revolutionary statement about gender. However, through a modern lens, by stripping the women of their gendered bodies, the poem denies the possibility of “policing

gender" and thus refuses to yield its power to strengthen hegemonic models of heterosexuality. Instead, the poem can be read as encouraging the acceptance of this queer couple by portraying them as genderless human bodies which would also liberate them from the societal assumption of the time that homosexual intercourse sought to imitate heterosexual practices (Grisé 9). This allows focus to fall on the pure desire which the bodies feel, rather than their gender or sexuality, encouraging the readers themselves to ignore gender binaries and prompting them to imagine all possible couplings of human bodies in this collage of fragmented limbs.

In Behn's poem, Clorinda's image is increasingly fragmented by the vagueness with which her gender is described. The figure of the "Fair lovely Maid" (1) which opens the poem, by the end becomes an "Image of the Maid" (21) while throughout the poem the poetic voice constantly attempts to find "a Name that more approaches Truth" (3) which essentially admits that the names which do follow cannot be taken as accurate truths. As a result, the attempted process of gendering Clorinda throughout the poem, is in turn what fragments and breaks down her gender further while at the same time revealing the complexity of gender itself. On the one hand, by breaking down the "deluding Form" of Clorinda into "multiple bodies" (Frangos, 23) and personalities, "Lovely Charming Youth" (4), "Nymph" (11), "beauteous Wonder" (18), the poem resists the increasing societal urge to define and fit a person into a single mould based on gender norms. On the other hand, the process of gendering captured in this poem alludes to the abilities of a "successful stage actress" (23) as Frangos suggests, echoing Butler's theory of gender performativity and questioning the assumption of gender as an innate production rather than a social reproduction.

Similarly, in 'Sappho' Donne parallels Philaenis to a "stage actress" through her description in the lines, "may thy cheeks' red outwear scarlet dye/ And their white, whiteness of the Galaxy" (59-60). Here however, instead of fragmentation, there is a sense of

doubleness created through the repetition of the colours which allude to stage makeup. The vivid restatement of "red" becoming "scarlet" or the caesura highlighting the "white, whiteness", enhances their dramatic quality, stressing heteronormative expectations about the performativity of gendered bodies while also expressing the absurdity behind them: the expectation of women to be both, red and white, sensual and pure, blushing and innocent, despite the fact that blushing implies knowledge that would have been associated with impurity.

Doubleness in 'Clorinda' however is a much more prevalent theme throughout the poem as the poem's language constantly fluctuates between the two binaries to convey her hermaphroditism. By collocating nouns and adjectives which juxtapose each other's gendered associations, Clorinda's "gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all" (Butler 7), since she fulfils the gender stereotypes for both binaries with the phrases "Lovely Charming Youth" (4) "Youth" (7), "Nymph" (11) "beauteous Wonder" (18), while her gender ambiguity is further enhanced by her being addressed in the second person throughout the poem, thus avoiding any gendered pronouns. In these ways, the poem encourages the dissociation of sexuality and gender and "destabilizes the supposedly natural associations of masculinity with maleness and femininity with femaleness," allowing a non-heterocentric view of sexual desire (Frangos 36). However, the juxtaposition of these gender determinative words, and the divergence which these cause from the binary genders, invites a broader conceptual understanding of gender as a spectrum and demands new classifications (relating to today's gender-fluid, non-binary and genderqueer identities), while also signalling towards the inefficacy of language to conceptualise the complexity of gender. The theme of doubleness, however, extends beyond Clorinda when exploring Behn's final phrase, "*Aphrodite* the Friend" (23), which is both ambiguous and multi-layered in meaning. Following Ballaster's claim that "Aphrodite is both the goddess of love, and the lover of

Aphra" (76), this makes sense not only relating to the goddess' ascribed powers, but also contextually to the poem if we assume that the second part of the name ('-dite') derives from the verb 'δίνω' (dino) meaning 'to give', since Aphra has "given" herself to Clorinda, echoing the phrase "made love to me". However, since a single etymology of the name 'Aphrodite' has not been agreed upon amongst scholars and "attempts to explain it so have been generally abandoned" (West 134), one could also relate the suffix '-dite' with the word 'διττή' (diti) literally meaning double or having two forms. Following this possible etymology, another layer of doubleness is revealed: Behn, like Clorinda, also embodies traits from both binaries despite her female biology. That the poet breaks the fourth wall of the poem by also marking herself as being outside of the gender binary therefore has a double effect in the poem's resistance to the idea of gender binarism: the attempt of the poem to force the reader to acknowledge gender's complexity now steps into the reality of the poet and her contemporaries as it turns into an active attempt to dismantle gender rather than simply remaining a literary experimentation on paper.

This resistance is also found in the poetic form and main narrative theme of 'Clorinda' which liken it to a Petrarchan sonnet, as Behn tells a story of unrequited love in iambic pentametre, with a two-part first stanza and a closing sestet. The only difference however is that the first stanza is lengthier than that of a Petrarchan sonnet (17 lines rather than 8). The use and subversion of this traditional form of poetry by Behn seems to not only resist possible gender assumptions like the inferior poetic skill of women but also resists gender discrimination as the poem becomes the vessel through which non-heteronormative genders and sexualities can participate in poetic history. Moreover, the additional length of the poem might once again be an indicator towards the insufficiency of language to express and explore non-binary gender(s).

In contrast, the lengthiness but also the free-verse form used in ‘Sappho’ seem to echo what all the depictions of Sappho during the Early Middle Ages had in common, “that Sappho was seen as a woman who was controlled by her passions and whose excessive desire spilled over into “unnatural” activities, be they poetic, political or sexual” (Grisé 49). This could be one of the explanations that the form seems to evoke, which also reinforces the gender assumption that women are generally more emotionally turbulent and overly dramatic compared to men. However, through a modern reading, the form communicates the truth behind these women’s love and desire for each other as the free-verse form, portrays Sappho’s despair spilling out, pleading Philaenis to return to her just like any other male, lyric poet would have.

These two poems thus resist conventional assumptions about gender by using fragmentation to separate the biological body from the gendered one, and poetic form to resist assumptions about women’s excessive nature while also allowing for non-heteronormative genders and sexualities to participate in poetic history. In addition, the theme of doubleness links to ideas of gender performativity as being socially reproduced while expressing the absurdity behind the heteronormative expectations of society. A modern reading of these poems thus offers a variety of ways in which the contemporary reader might come face to face with the complexities of gender which today’s society and language still often struggle to embrace.

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