The Age of Aphra Behn: Restoration Literature

In this course we will read a selection of exciting and significant works of Restoration literature, including a number of Restoration stage comedies, and explore how they contribute to the creation of new literary modes and to the formation of modern notions of personal identity. We will give particular attention to the career and works of Aphra Behn, England’s first widely successful female professional writer.

The “restoration” of King Charles II in 1660, after two decades of turmoil (turmoil that included such disruptive events as the English civil wars, the execution of Charles I, the formation of a Puritan Republic under Oliver Cromwell, and a period of wild social experimentation) was widely celebrated by all sectors of a society (even many former republicans) tired of constant ideological conflict. Compared with the self-denying ideals of the 1640s and 1650s, when both plebeian and aristocratic social and sexual license was attacked (even Christmas was banned for a few years!), the Restoration period (roughly 1660 to 1700) was a time of great social and sexual indulgence. With the easing of restraints on personal behaviour, social ideas, and even literary expression (Cromwell, for example, had closed the theatres; Charles re-opened them), Restoration literature both represented and helped to create an exciting, dynamic, and experiment-rich burst of energetic cultural expression.

The literature of the period has something for just about every interest: the sexual satire of court wits such as Rochester and Etherege; the reflective poetry of Katherine Philips; defences of women scientists by Margaret Cavendish; witty celebrations of female autonomy and desire (by Aphra Behn and Cavendish); new ideals of individual and colonial heroism (Milton’s Adam, Behn’s Oroonoko) and comic satires of those ideals (Dryden’s Mac Flecknoe); new genres (such as the novel, travel narrative, biography, and autobiography); new kinds of published authors (such as women and the middling ranks); new media (widely disseminated print forms such as the newsbook and the broadside); the appearance of the professional writer (Grub Street); new modes of old genres (women actors were now allowed on stage for the first time, leading to a female-dominated system of theatrical stars and to an increasingly heterosexualized stage); and new literary relationships to classical Greek and Roman literature and learning, relationships which—according to some critics at least—see “Athenian” or forward-looking, modernizing writers in conflict with “Augustan” or backward-looking, reactionary writers.

These diverse literary and cultural trends, set in motion by the upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century civil wars in England, may remind us a bit of the miscellaneousness of the scatological debris flowing down the gutter in Swift’s “A Description of a City Shower”: “Sweepings from Butchers’ Stalls, Dung, Guts, and Blood, / Drowned Puppies, stinking Sprats, all drenched in Mud, / Dead Cats, and Turnip-Tops come tumbling down the Flood.”
This is not Restoration and eighteenth-century literature as it has traditionally been taught—a period of literary decorum, rococo neo-classicism, and sentimental effusions. Instead, the wild, levelling dynamism of Swift's city is a fitting metaphor for the social and literary energies of the oft-hidden side of the literature of the period 1660-1700, and beyond.

Rather than approach our readings by way of a chronological survey, I have grouped the material under four headings—the new woman; the libertine; the new science; and anti-colonialism. In each unit we will sample both venerable classics and upstart contenders to the canon, and consider how shared literary techniques and concerns, and shared social questions, serve to organize the texts within each unit. One writer in particular—Aphra Behn—will be singled out for attention across all four units.

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Logistics:

Contact Information:
  Office: Hagey Hall 257; Phone: 888-4567, ext. 2416
  Office hours: 1:00-3:00 Monday and 5:00-6:00 Wednesday, or by appointment

Required Texts:
  Robert DeMaria, Jr., ed., British Literature, 1640-1789: An Anthology, 2nd ed. (Blackwell)
  Silvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson, eds., Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader (Broadview)
  Gamini Salgado, ed., Three Restoration Comedies (Penguin)
  Fredrick M. Link, ed., Aphra Behn, The Rover (Nebraska)

Recommended Texts:
  Joseph Gibaldi, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5th ed. (MLA)

Assignments:
  Attendance and active preparation for and participation in class discussions and exercises (10%); in-class midterm essay or 15-minute class presentation on a Restoration cultural or historical topic (your choice = 20%); 7-page paper (30%); and a final examination (40%).

  Students ARE REQUIRED to prepare course readings ahead of the relevant classes. Class exercises will include regular breakout groups on five key aspects of Restoration literature: libertine sexuality, women's consciousness, self-fashioning, Puritan and Royalist ideologies, and Athenian and Augustan aesthetics (a sign-up sheet for the breakout groups will be circulated in the second week of classes). Class presentations, for those who choose
to deliver one, will be scheduled for dates starting in the sixth week of classes; a sign-up sheet for topics and dates will be circulated in the second week of classes.

For those who choose to write it, the midterm will be held on October 25. The paper MUST be handed in to the instructor at the start of class on November 22. Due to my administrative and research responsibilities and other factors such as class sizes, I am not able to mark papers handed in at other times. For this reason, papers handed in before, during, or outside of the November 22nd class, in the absence of a serious personal medical reason, will be graded 0 (zero). Papers must be typed, double-spaced, and fastened with a staple (DO NOT use plastic report folders or other fasteners or covers); if using a word-processor, laser print your paper and do not use right justification (i.e., leave the right-hand margin jagged, as it is in this document). A page is 250 words. Papers must follow the format laid out in the MLA Handbook, 5th ed. Uncompleted assignments will be graded 0 (zero).

Finally, it is expected that students will follow at all times both university and department regulations on plagiarism (in particular, all work apart from group assignments must be your own, and the words and ideas of others must appear within your work inside quotation marks and with complete citations in foot- or end-notes).

NOTE: Please keep a photocopy of any paper you submit, and NEVER hand a paper or any other assignment in by sliding it under (or sticking it to) my office door.