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A Study of the Language in Aphra Behn's *The Unfortunate Happy Lady: A True History*

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I

Poet, playwright, novelist, and translator, Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was probably the first English woman to earn her living solely through writing. After John Dryden, she was the most prolific dramatist of the Restoration. It is for her pioneering work in prose narrative that she achieved her place in literary history.[1] Her father was a gentleman by birth, of a good family in the city of Canterbury in Kent. At thirty years old, Behn began to write plays. She wrote sixteen plays, most of which were successful and some of which are still performed today. One of these is *The Lucky Chance*, first produced in 1687. Her first smash hit was *The Rovers* (1677), which she brought out anonymously.

After her long and successful production of plays, Behn turned to prose fiction very late in her writing career. She is also one of the founders of the English novel. *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-87) was very popular. It is based on a real scandal in which an English nobleman eloped with his sister-in-law. The female novelist "is known for her sexual freedom, her frank (even coarse) language, and her criticism of her double standard that gave men sexual freedom, but insisted that women remain chaste."[2]

Behn set out to stake a claim on man's traditional territory and is not an author who suffers fool silently. She is one of the women who are notable for their resistance to the subordination of women.[3] "She realizes that the language and subject matter of her plays transgress male privilege; hence she comments that 'such Masculine Strokes in

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1 Ruth Nestvolt, "Aphra Behn and the Beginnings of a Female Narrative Voice," n. pag., online, http://www.lit-arts.net/Behn/voice.htm, 31 Dec. 2001.
2 Robert W. Uphaus and Gretchen M. Foster, ed., *The 'Other' Eighteenth Century: English Women of Letters 1660-1800* (East Lansing: Colleagues Prs., 1991) 51.
3 Robert W. Uphaus 7.

me, must not be allow'd,"[4] Virginia Woolf admires the female writer: "All women ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds."[5]

Like Behn's first novel *The Adventures of the Black Lady* (1663), *The Unfortunate Happy Lady: A True History* (1698) is one of the novels to which she "gave a London background and which truly represent the world in which she lives."[6] Paul Salzman comments "*The Unfortunate Happy Lady* is more like a Restoration comedy in its use of London settings, realistic dialogue and unexpected plot."[7] After their parents' death, the heroine is deceived into being abandoned in a brothel by her brother in the novel. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was considerable of seduction of country girls, whether maid servants or not, by the rural gentry; their abandonment by their families and, in consequence, their move to London, where they became particularly vulnerable to the arts of the procuress. Poverty, whether chronic or temporary, forced many girls into the ranks of London prostitutes.[8]

This thesis shows the fascination and characteristics of Behn's narrative strategy and her way of representing the language of her contemporary men and women, through *The Unfortunate Happy Lady: A True History.*

II

Ian Watt argues that the characters in a realistic novel owe their individuality to the degree of realistic presentation. "Realism" is expressed by a rejection of traditional plots, by particularity, emphasis on the personality of the character, a consciousness of duration of time and space and its expression in style.[9] The last characteristic of realism in the novel is "the realistic point of view in language and prose structure."[10] The language in realistic literature should show accuracy and authenticity, and the novel can do away with formality and rhetorical figures.

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[4] Robert W. Uphaus 6.
[5] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984) 61.
[6] B.G. MacCarthy, *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists 1621-1818* (New York: New York Univ. Prs., 1994) 133.
[7] Paul Salzman, introd., *An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Prs., 1991) xxv.
[8] Bridget Hill, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (1984; London: Routledge, 1993) 26-27.
[9] Ian Watt, *The rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974) 13.
[10] Watt 30.

Behn's style is very functional in that her narrator tells what she sees and what has been reported to her. She is said to have narrated her story orally many times and this is the impression the reader gets in her work, as she often addresses her audience. The female novelist does not also use too rhetorical devices but writes in plain language, associated with elements of the drama. It follows that in her novels there is immediacy between the reader and the narrator and some transparency in their report.[11] We have such a beginning as follows in *The Unfortunate Happy Lady: A True History*:

> I cannot omit giving the world an account of the uncommon villainy of a gentleman of a good family in England, practiced upon his sister, which was attested to me by one who lived in the family and from whom I had the whole truth of the story. I shall conceal the unhappy gentleman's own, under the borrowed names of Sir William Wilding.... (529)[12]

This passage makes the narrative resemble an ongoing conversation with her readers and lends her tale an everyday tone. Her adopted language and style support the realism and novelty of her works and their narrator. The narrator sometimes employs intrusive authorial voice in the climax scene, with an interjection like "alas" as stated-below.

> The dear, sweet creature thought she had happily got into the company of angels, but, alas, they were angels that had fallen more than once. (534-35)

Behn transforms the act of writing into a kind of speaking, a direct yet intimate address to the reader.[13]

In the narrative, Behn effectively expresses the characters in the novel, in elegant variation such as "the young debauchee" for Sir William Wilding and "his sweet innocent sister" for Philadelphia so that the writer expresses her feelings toward the characters. We find many pieces of elegant variation suitable for the scenes in the novel. The Lady Beldam who is a procuress leads Philadelphia to a beautiful apartment.

> "This, Madam," said she, "is your apartment, with the antechamber and a little withdrawing room." "Alas Madam," returned the dear, innocent, unthinking lady, "you set too great a value on your servant.... (532)

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[11] Anne-Kathrin Rochwalsky, "Credibility and Realism in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," n. pag., online, http://www.lit-arts.net/Behn/rochwals.htm, 31 Dec. 2001.

[12] Aphra Behn, "The Unfortunate Unhappy Lady: A True History." *An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Fiction*, ed. Paul Salzman (Oxford: Oxford Unv. Prs., 1991) 527-562. The number in parentheses is the page number cited in this edition.

[13] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994) 10.

Here Philadelphia is called "the dear, innocent, unthinking lady," as if Behn felt pity for her troubled circumstances that she is seduced into i.e. a brothel by her brother. We have many pieces of elegant variation for Philadelphia: "the sweet innocent," "the beautiful innocent," "the sweet lady," "the dear, sweet creature," "the fair, afflicted lady," "the fair unfortunate," "unhappy Philadelphia," "the beautiful, dear creature," "the designed victim," and "the beauteous and compassionate Philadelphia."

On the contrary, her rascal brother is called negatively: "the barbarous man," "the treacherous brother," and "Philadelphia's unkind brother." Fortunately, the brother clears his bad name near the end of the novel: "The poor prodigal was the feeding on the relief of the basket...." (548)

III

In this section, we will see some pieces of language from the novel, that characterize Behn's way of representing the contemporary language of her world's men and women. Fiction works in the constitution and reproduction of social life so that we gain information of the language of the times n the novel.

First, we look into the polite speech and the vulgar speech in terms of social class. Class is a category of identity and social grouping, that organizes social hierarchies, individual identities, and cultural relations of power. Secondly, we see the use of the archaic forms of the second person singular pronoun "thou" to know the language in romance.

All the words, sounds, and constructions-- features of language which can be used to identify the speaker as being a certain type of human being--good or bad, educated or uneducated, caring or arrogant, old or young, clever or stupid, English or American, black or white.[14] There is enormous variation on every level of language. Where there is variation, there is evaluation. We evaluate the variants offered by our language as right or wrong, high or low, good or bad, nice or ugly, and so on.[15] The language use can be divided into the good, correct and accepted; and the bad, incorrect and unaccepted.[16]

(1) The polite speech

The heroin of the novel is "Philadelphia, a young lady of excellent beauty, education, and virtue."[17] She has a brother who is very extravagant and leaves her to the Lady

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[14] Lars-Gunnar Andersson and Peter Trudgill, *Bad Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 3.
[15] Anderson and Trudgill 4.
[16] Anderson and Trudgill 28.
[17] Behn 530

Beldam, "his reverend and honourable acquaintance". The woman is actually a procuress of a brothel in London. When the young brother and sister reaches the old Beldam's place, he introduces his naïve sister to the old woman in a polite manner and language.

> "O! cry your mercy, good my Lady Beldam," said the young debauchee, "I had like to have forfeited my title to your care in not remembering to leave you an obligation. There are three guineas, which I hope will plead for me till tomorrow. So your Ladyship's servant humbly kisses your hand." "Your Honour's most obedient servant, most gratefully acknowledges your favours. Your humble servant, good Sir William," added she, seeing him leave her in haste. (531)

Here the wicked young man and the old lady finish a certain contract successfully, and they part in a very ironical but courteous way. "Your Honour's most obedient servant" is a polite greeting-cum-set phrase among the upper class people in the eighteenth-century. Philadelphia is always obliged to her brother saying "A thousand thanks, my dearest brother."(532)

Philadelphia does not know the truth and even appreciates the Lady Beldam's kind reception. The venerable woman approaches the young woman very formally.

> "If I mistake not, Madam, you were pleased to call Sir William brother once or twice of late in conversation. Pray be pleased to satisfy my curiosity so far as to inform me in the truth of this matter. Is it really so, or not?" Philadelphia replied, blushing: "Your Ladyship strangely surprises me with this question, for I thought it had been you're your doubt that it is so. Did not he let you know so much himself?" "I humbly beg your pardon, Madam," returned the true offspring of old mother Eve, "that I have so visibly disturbed you by my curiosity, but indeed Madam, Sir William did not say your Ladyship was his sister when he gave me charge of you, as of the nearest and dearest friend he had in the world." (533)

Here the Lady Beldam asks a private matter of the naïve girl in an absolutely indirect way, with "I humbly beg your pardon, Madam." Philadelphia addresses her hostess by the mode of address "Your Ladyship," which is derived from old and courtly-genteel jargon. The jargon is among "terms from the specialized vocabulary of the courtier, to create verbal elegance independent of the court or of any specific noble or royal person."[18] We have as other courtly-genteel jargon the words " honour" and "favour."[19]

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[18] Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700-1800 Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1998) 69

[19] McIntosh, *Common and Courtly Language: The Stylistics of Social Class in*

"Alas Madam, ... you set too great a value on your servant, but I rather think your Ladyship designs me this honour for the sake of Sir William" (532)

"And Madam, ... be pleased to accept this trifle as an humble acknowledgement of the great favour you do this lady and the care of her which you promise" (532)

(2) The Vulgar speech

Gracelove tries to take Philadelphia to an other safe place, and pretends to rendevous with her in London. The lady Beldam, as hostess of the brothel, notes that they should be back before the night.

"Well, my son," replied old Beldam, "you may take her with you, but you remember your bargain." "O, fie mother," cried he, "did you ever know me false to you?" "No, no, you smock-faced wag," said she, "but be sure you bring her again tonight, for fear Sir William should come." "Never doubt it! Come with me," cried he, "you'll see a strange alteration, I believe." (541)

The old woman makes fun of the young gallant by calling him "you smock-faced wag." The address "smock-faced wag"[20] means "effeminate, smooth-faced wag." She sometimes speaks in a sexual expression.

"So, Madam," said Beldam, "how does your Ladyship now? I find the sight of a young, handsome gentleman has worked wonders with you in a little time. I understand you are going to take a walk with my worthy friend here, and 'tis well done." (541)

In the course of time, Beldam shows herself at her best as a hostess of the brothel. Gracelove calls the Lady Beldam "mother" when he is requested to come back to her brothel.

"You won't stay late, Mr Gracelove?" said the mother of mischief. "No, no," replied he, "I will only show the lady a play, and return to supper." "What is the play tonight?" asked the old one. "The Cheats, mother, The Cheats," answered Gracelove." "Ha," said Beldam, laughing, "a very pretty comedy indeed." "Aye, if well played," returned he. (542)

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "mother" means "A term of address for an elderly woman of the lower class." (s.v. *mother* 4.a.).[21] Gracelove and

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18th-Century English Literature (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Prs., 1986) 69. In the book, McIntosh shows those words as "technical terms derived from the social environment of the court."

[20] The *OED* shows the first citation of the phrase "smock-faced" is 1693, and shows the last citation of the word "wag" meaning "a youth, young man" is 1672.

[21] J.A.Simpson & E.S.C.Weiner, prepared, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed.

Beldam's conversation intimates that they are a customer and his hostess of the brothel. In spite of her education, Philadelphia sometimes makes a sloppy contraction such as "o' tune."

> "Don't you love music, Madam?" asked the old Lady Beldam. "Sometimes, Madam," replied Philadelphia, "but now I am out o' tune myself." (535)

The phrase "out o' tune" is "out of tune," and the contraction is a vulgar use. Eighteenth-century grammarians often criticized the common people's habit of shortening words as vulgar.[22]

(3) The use of the archaic forms of the second person singular pronoun "thou"

We find the characters sometimes use the archaic forms of the second person singular pronoun "thou," especially in the lovers' dialogue. Those pronouns sound different from the second person pronoun "you," and are effectively used in the characters' speech.

English once had the distinction between the second person singular *thou-thy-thee* and the plural *ye-your-you*. But the singular forms were replaced by the plural forms by 1600 except on a few occasions, and *ye* was replaced by *you* by the end of the seventeenth century. The special usage of the pronouns "thou," "thy," and "thee" seems to have been established in the seventeenth century. A.C.Partridge observes "From the beginning of the seventeenth century a switch to either may be significant emotional change in a speaker."[23] Otto Jespersen mentions "thou" was actually becoming the emotional pronoun; the marker of familiarity or even intimacy or affection between the interlocutors, or conversely of anger and contempt.[24]

The use of the pronoun "thou" in the fiction is limited to the emotional one. The characters change the pronoun "you" into "thou" when they utter very excitedly or feelingly.

Philadelphia and Gracelove become a couple, and he has to part with her on business. The young fellow calls her many a time and presents her a rich diamond ring.

> "Well Madam," said he, "I must leave you for some months—perhaps for a whole year. I have received letters of advice that urge the necessity of my going to Turkey. I have not a week's time endeavour so dreaded a separation as I must suffer.

(Oxford: Clarendon Prs., 1989)

[22] Susie I. Tucker, *English Examined* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1961) 120.

[23] A.C.Partridge, *Tudor to Augustan English* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969) 24.

[24] Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of English Language* (Leipzig: B.G.Teubner, 1923) 232.

Therefore, thou beautiful, thou dear, thou virtuous creature, let me begin now. Here, thou tenderest part of my soul," continued he, giving her a rich diamond ring, "wear this till my return." (544)

The pronoun "thou" repeats efficiently as the marker of his affection for her. Philadelphia finds her staying in a brothel and crying for Gracelove's help.

"Don't you know, then, that you are in a naughty house, and that old Beldam is a rank procuress, to whom I am to give two hundred guineas for your maidenhead?" "O Heaven," cried she kneeling with tears gushing out from her eyes, "thou asserter and guardian of innocence, protect me from the impious practices intended against me." (540)

The lady Beldam tries to make Philadelphia comfortable by speaking with intimacy and merry.

"A little, harmless mirth will cheer your dropping spirits, my dear," returned t'other, taking her by the hand, "Come! There are all my relations, as I told you Madam, and so, consequently, are their husbands." "Are these ladies all married, Madam?" Philadelphia asked. "All, all, my dear soul,' replied the insinuating mother of iniquity, 'and thou shalt have a husband too, ere long." (535)

The old woman changes her tone emotionally with the phrase "thou shalt." The pronoun "thou" often coincides with an interjection such as "faith" as in the below.

"Faith, I love thee, thou pretty creature. Come, let's be better acquainted—you know my meaning." (539)

We have other instances:

"My dear Gracelove, cried she, "I drink to thee, and send thee back thy own ring with Phildelphia's heart." (552)

"I will, poor creature," returned he, "methinks I now begin to see my crime and thy innocence in thy words and looks." (540)

We see some pieces of Aphra Behn's writing strategy and the language representing her contemporary people's speech through *The Unfortunate Happy Lady*. This fiction is a short story, but seems to have been among very popular novels, as well as her dramas, in her days. The fascination of the novel comes from Behn's writing strategy and genius for representing the then language, as well as from her eventful career. She was an acute and sensible observer in the society and enlightened her readers, as well as she entertained them. That is why Behn gained the position of the first professional woman writer to earn her living through writing.