



CRITICISM

VOLUME

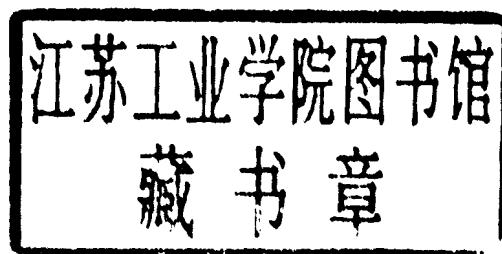
88

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 88

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Aphra Behn

1640?-1689

(Pseudonym of Aphra Johnson or Aphra Amis; also Aphara, Ayfara, and Afray; also wrote under the pseudonyms Astrea and Astraea) English poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, and translator.

For further information on Behn's works and career, see *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 13.

INTRODUCTION

The first Englishwoman to earn a living with her writing, Behn composed poetry that challenged conventional gender roles and dealt openly with female desire.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The details of Behn's birth and parentage are not known with certainty, however, a birth date of 1640 has been proposed by a number of scholars. The first well-established fact associated with Behn's early life is that around 1663 she and her family sailed to Surinam in South America, where her father was to serve as lieutenant-governor; however, he died on the voyage. Recent scholarship has disputed this information about Behn's father, claiming that he was actually a barber in Kent, rather than the prospective lieutenant-governor of an American colony. In 1664, Behn returned to England and married a man of Dutch descent, and there is some evidence that Behn was a woman of means who was a popular figure in Charles II's court. Her husband died shortly after their marriage, though, and Behn was apparently left in rather dire financial circumstances, prompting her to attempt to earn her living through her writing. Although her work was successful, she was criticized for the bawdy nature of much of her writing; Behn claimed that she was unfairly attacked by critics because she was a woman. In her later years, Behn suffered from a prolonged illness, exacerbated in part by her impoverished circumstances. She died in 1689 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

MAJOR WORKS

A great deal of Behn's poetry appears within her plays, and the pieces are often referred to by early critics, sometimes pejoratively, as songs rather than as poems. She also wrote a number of occasional pieces—commemorating various events in the lives of the royal family—many of which are contained in *Poems upon*

Several Occasions, with a Voyage to the Island of Love (1684). Behn produced a number of works in the pastoral form and four elegies, including one on the death of John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, and one on the death of Edmund Waller. However, the poems that have attracted the most attention, from her contemporaries as well as from modern critics and readers, have been those that deal with love and sex, often with the same uninhibited approach taken by her male counterparts, but written from the perspective of a woman. These include "The Willing Mistress," about female passion; "The Disappointment," about male impotence; and "To the Fair Clarinda, Who Made Love to Me, Imagined More than Woman," about a lesbian relationship.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Behn's work was criticized by her contemporaries for its explicit references to female sexuality, despite the fact that some of her male counterparts—in the spirit of libertinism that characterized Restoration England—produced poetry even more outrageous than hers. Bruce Thomas Boehrer notes the difference in the contemporary reception of Thomas Nashe's "The Choise of Valentines" and Behn's "The Disappointment," both on the subject of sexual impotence. Boehrer suggests that Behn, whose pornographic poem was commonly attributed to the Earl of Rochester, may be "both the victim and the beneficiary of a literary tradition that has by definition excluded her: as the literary anomaly whose work is coopted by others, and as the woman who is free to create precisely because she need not please another with her pen." Nonetheless, Behn's bawdy verses and dramas earned her a considerable reputation; according to Dorothy Mermin, "Behn's notoriety survived into the nineteenth century as both example and warning" to other women writers who came after her. But while her verse was more shocking than those of other women writers, such as Katherine Philips and Anne Finch, Mermin reports that Behn's poetry was more squarely situated within the literary tradition—despite her lack of education in Greek and Latin, which severely limited her access to classical works.

Behn's erotic verse addressed to women has been discussed by a number of critics, among them Arlene Stiebel, who contends that the conventions of masking allowed Behn to present lesbian content in the guise of innocent affection. According to Stiebel, Behn's verse

is so complex in its use of these conventions, that it “allows the audience to go away satisfied that no breach of decorum has been made. It permits us to deny, dismiss, or marginalize that which we do not wish to acknowledge, and exempts the poet from social condemnation while bestowing critical acclaim for her ingenuity.” One of the poems frequently examined as an expression of homoerotic desire is “To the Fair Clarinda, Who Made Love to me Imagined More than Woman. By Mrs. B.” Anne Russell suggests that the poem should be studied in the context in which Behn herself placed it within the collection *Lycidus* (1688), edited by Behn and containing her own poetry as well as the poems of others. According to Russell, since Behn placed her poem immediately after “To Mrs. B. From a Lady who had a desire to see her, and who complains on the ingratitude of her fugitive Lover,” Behn’s poem should “be read as a response to another woman poet’s expression of desire, and not merely as a poem which exists in a vacuum.” David Michael Robinson identifies the poem as a “lesbian-affirmative text” contending that it is “a work that amusingly and daringly manipulates antilesbian ideology, turning it against itself in order to justify and celebrate love between women.”

While operating within traditional forms, Behn often challenged not only the forms themselves but the power structures they implied. Elizabeth V. Young contends that in “The Dream,” the poet “invokes the conventions of pastoral to emphasize the power and pervasiveness of deception in the creation and maintenance of male and female identity.” Although she only produced four elegies during her career, Behn challenged the conventions of that form as well, reports Young: “In suggesting that poems about dead infants are as important as and in some ways more essential than poems about dead poets and the men who replace them, Behn subtly validates the expansion and domestication of subject matter that would come to characterize the writing of eighteenth-century female poets.” Behn’s contributions to verse satire have also been studied by Young, who concludes that they “not only show her familiarity with the masculine conventions of satire but also reveal her original contributions to the development of the complex theory and practice of satire that characterizes a major component of eighteenth-century literature in England.”

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Covent Garden Drolery [editor and contributor] (poetry and prose) 1672

Poems upon Several Occasions, with a Voyage to the Island of Love 1684
Miscellany: Being a Collection of Poems by Several Hands. Together with Reflections on Morality, or Seneca Unmasked [editor and contributor] 1685
The Case for the Watch (poetry and prose) 1686
La Montre; or, The Lover’s Watch (poetry and prose) 1686
Lycidus; or, The Lover in Fashion [editor and contributor] (poetry and prose) 1688
The Lady’s Looking-Glass, to Dress Herself By; or, The Art of Charming (poetry and prose) 1697
The Works of Aphra Behn. 6 vols. (poetry, dramas, and novels) 1915
Selected Writings of the Ingenious Mrs. Aphra Behn (poetry, novels, dramas, and essays) 1950
The Uncollected Verse of Aphra Behn 1989
Poems of Aphra Behn: A Selection [edited by Janet Todd] 1994

Other Major Works

The Forced Marriage; or, The Jealous Bridegroom (play) 1670
The Amorous Prince; or, The Curious Husband (play) 1671
The Dutch Lover (play) 1673
Abdelazar; or, The Moor’s Revenge (play) 1676
The Town Fop; or, Sir Timothy Tawdrey (play) 1676
The Rover; or The Burnished Cavalier, Part I (play) 1677
Sir Patient Fancy (play) 1678
The Feigned Courtesans; or, A Night’s Intrigue (play) 1679
The Roundheads; or, The Good Old Cause (play) 1681
The Second Part of the Rover (play) 1681
The City Heiress; or, Sir Timothy Treat-all (play) 1682
The False Count; or, A New Way to Play an Old Game (play) 1682
Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister. 2 vols. (novel) 1684-87
The Luckey Chance; or, An Alderman’s Bargain (play) 1686
The Emperor of the Moon (play) 1687
The Fair Jilt; or, The History of Prince Tarquin and Miranda (novel) 1688
The History of the Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker (novel) 1688
Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave (novel) 1688
The Lucky Mistake (novel) 1689
The Widow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia (play) 1689
The Histories and Novels of the Late Ingenious Mrs. Behn (plays and novels) 1696
Love Letters to a Gentleman (letters) 1696
The Plays, Histories, and Novels of the Ingenious Mrs. Aphra Behn. 6 vols. (plays and novels) 1871
The Novels of Mrs. Aphra Behn (novels) 1969

CRITICISM

Bruce Thomas Boehrer (essay date fall 1989)

SOURCE: Boehrer, Bruce Thomas. "Behn's 'Disappointment' and Nashe's 'Choise of Valentines': Pornographic Poetry and the Influence of Anxiety." *Essays in Literature* 16, no. 2 (fall 1989): 172-87.

[In the following essay, Boehrer discusses Behn's notorious poem, "Disappointment," noting that it was often attributed to John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester.]

Once upon a time
I composed in witty rhyme
And poured libations to the muse Erato.

Merope would croon,
"Minstrel mine, a lay! A tune!"
"From bed to verse," I'd answer; "that's my motto."

—John Barth

In the dedication to his notorious pornographic verse narrative "The Choise of Valentines," Thomas Nashe defends his work from charges of "loose unchastitie."¹ His argument is twofold; first, he claims to write of universal experience, and second, he argues that it is only proper to write of love's successes as well as of its failures:

Ne blame my verse of loose unchastitie
For painting forth the things that hidden are,
Since all men acte what I in speche declare,
Onelie induced by varietie.
Complaints and praises euerie one can write,
And passion-out their pangu's in statelie rimes,
But of loues pleasure's none did euer write
That hath succeeded in theis latter times.

(Dedication, 5-12)

Nashe's claims invite close scrutiny in at least two respects. To begin with, there is the assertion of at least relative originality for a poem whose sources clearly encompass a good measure of the erotic literary tradition in England (including Chaucer's *fabliaux* and Marlowe's Ovid) and post-classical Europe in general.² For any claim Nashe might make to priority in his verse is immediately qualified by its open, self-acknowledged dependence upon tradition and precedent (as well as by the ironic enjambment of lines 11-12 themselves). Even a contemporary reference to "The Choise of Valentines" like Gabriel Harvey's mention of it in his *Four Letters* presents the work in a derivative light; Harvey associates it with "the fantastical mould of *Aretine* or *Rabelays*," and (straining to place the poem in the worst possible company) asks, "Who euer endighted in such a stile, but one diuine *Aretine* in Italy, & two heavenly *Tarletons* in England?"³ Thus Nashe has good reason to moderate his claim to originality; if his poem is a

seminal one, as it claims to be, it is also in its turn clearly and heavily derivative—no more the begetter of tradition than its repository.

But on an equal footing with this equivocation is Nashe's insistence that he writes of "loues pleasure's"; for the principal pleasures described in the poem are in fact (as David Frantz has observed) premature ejaculation and the sexual exhaustion of the male protagonist, who must see his place in bed usurped by a dildo.⁴ Nashe distinguishes his verses from the "Complaints and praises" of the Petrarchan tradition—endowing them (and his narrator) with an exaggerated and boastful sexual vigor that eventually surmounts the initial premature ejaculation; yet no amount of virility is sufficient to the conditions of Nashe's poem, and the work thus culminates in an extended complaint against "Eunuke dildo" (263), who has excluded the hero from his beloved as effectively as could any program of Petrarchan idealization. Again here, as in the question of Nashe's originality/indebtedness, the poem husbands a fundamental anxiety; if indeed all men act what Nashe in speech declares, "The Choise of Valentines" emerges as testimony not to love's success, but to its resounding failure, to the enduring inability of men to satisfy women in bed. And what "all men" (significantly not women) act—what Nashe inscribes as the central gesture of his poem—is in fact no act at all: the penis's (and the pen's) passivity.

In this respect "The Choise of Valentines" is a particularly instructive poem to study, for it collocates the processes of coition and composition, and it illustrates the degree to which both may be seen as anxiety-provoking, given a model of sexual and literary behavior that equates authority to self-assertion. For if we accept—with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar—that within the western literary tradition "'the ideal of contemplative purity' is always feminine while 'the ideal of significant action is masculine,'" then we may see Nashe's text as having compromised its sexual nature—and hence its identity—at two crucial points. Nashe's hero is incapable of properly performing the male sexual task, and "The Choise of Valentines" itself, permeated and derivative, cannot support its own claims to originality. The immediate consequence of this inconsistency, sly and ironic as it may be, is that both author and hero boast a good deal: of the power of their passion, of the inordinate labors they have had to undergo, of the "thanks" (314) that they deserve for their pains. Indeed, there is nothing to separate the voices of author and narrator in Nashe's poem, and the two roles of copulation and narration merge indistinguishably within the folds of the verse. Thus Nashe may conclude his work with the sexually ambiguous claim, "Thus hath my penne presum'd to please my friend" (Epilogue 1); what "friend," after all, is Nashe pleasing, and what kind of pleasure does one receive from a pornographic narrative? Yet Nashe himself, when

accused by Gabriel Harvey of having written "The Choise of Valentines," resorts to equivocation not unlike that with which he has previously laid claim to literary originality: "Well, it may be so that it is not so; or if it be, men in their youth (as in their sleep) manie times doo something that might have been better done, & they do not wel remember."⁶

In responding to Harvey, Nashe would characterize "The Choise of Valentines" as something he had done—if at all—poorly, practically in his sleep; the poem becomes one of that "tribe of fops / Got 'tween asleep and wake" that are such an object of Edmund's scorn in *Lear*. Yet for Nashe's contemporaries, the poem seems to have been practically an appendage of its author—perhaps artificial, but modelled upon the male member, and clearly of its author's fashioning; its popular title was "Nashe's Dildo," and Nashe's trickiness in dealing with questions of authorship combines with the virulent personal attacks of Harvey to suggest how easily poem and author could be interlocked. In contrast, Aphra Behn's poem "The Disappointment," dealing with the same subject as "Nashe's Dildo" and, in its day, equally notorious, presents something of a paradox, given any equation of *auctor* with *opus*; for if it was a celebrated work, it was certainly not a celebration of authorship; nor was its author (in this instance) celebrated. Indeed, Behn's "Disappointment," far from being regarded as an extension of her person, was in fact repeatedly appropriated to the *corpus* of another author: John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, in numerous early editions of whose works it appears.⁷ And thus the common theme of "imperfect enjoyment" (as impotence came to be known in seventeenth-century England) supplies us with a peculiarly edifying spectacle: that of a male poet all but disowning his own work, while a female poet must struggle to retain her title to a similar production.⁸

How can the erotic literary conventions which evoked such a distinctly personal and self-conscious response from Thomas Nashe conduce to such a distinctive self-effacement in the case of Behn? How are Nashe's and Behn's strategies of authorship determined as responses to such conventions? And how is the implicit relation between authorship and insemination refigured by these responses? Questions of this sort all point to the central datum of sexual difference; if Behn responds differently to Nashe's situation than does Nashe himself, it is at least in part because she is a woman, without access to Nashe's model of literary creativity or to its attendant anxieties. In this respect her work is comparable to the "Eunuke dilldo" that supplants Nashe's persona in "The Choise of Valentines"—indeed, the corporate persona of a whole Renaissance subgenre of pornographic verse. And thus Behn may finally emerge as both the victim and the beneficiary of a literary tradition that has by definition excluded her: as the literary anomaly whose

work is coopted by others, and as the woman who is free to create precisely because she need not pleasure another with her pen.

I

Nashe identifies Ovid as "the fountaine whence my streames doe flowe" (Epilogue 5), and Ovid's importance for European verse pornographers is hard to overestimate. In this respect, he occupies the position of prime precursor—in Harold Bloom's sense of the term—to both Nashe and Behn, and his elegy "At non formosa est" plays a crucial role in what Michel Foucault has called the process of "producing the truth of sex."¹⁰ For in this poem, Ovid manages a Bloomian maneuver with respect to himself; contrasting a moment of sexual impotence to his own previous potency, he refigures that impotence as artistic fertility. In the process, he distances himself from himself; if we agree with Bloom that poetry is generated through a sequence of "revisionary ratios" (14-16) (or, in Gilbert and Gubar's revision of Bloom, "strong action and inevitable reaction" [xiii]), we may in this instance see the revisionary sequence as projected onto the poet's own body. Ovid the accomplished profligate serves as the precursor-figure for Ovid the unsuccessful lover, who competes with his precursor precisely by transforming his sexual inadequacies into literary achievement. And this transformation once accomplished, it is difficult to repeat without appearing merely derivative; Ovid thus bequeathes his physical impotence to Nashe in the form of discourse.

Hence it is no surprise that Ovid, like Nashe, should be not only impotent, but also a braggart. For the gesture whereby he denies his impotence must also assert his virility; given the conditions of his rhetoric, Ovid without an erection cannot be Ovid:

At nuper bis flava Chlide, ter candida Pitho,
ter Libas officio continuata meo est;
exigere a nobis angusta nocte Corinnam
me memini numeros sustinuisse novem.

[Yet boarded I the golden *Chie* twice,
And *Libas*, and the white cheek *Pitho* thrice.
Corinna crau'd it in a summers night,
And nine sweete bowts we had before day-light.]¹¹

And indeed, the poet proceeds ultimately to blame his impotence upon external influences, upon the intervention of spells and spirits:

Quid vetat et nervos magicas torpere per artes?
forsitan inpatiens fit latus inde meum.

[Why might not then my sinewes be inchaunted,
And I growe faint as with some spirit haunted?]

(35-36)

For it is only by this externalization and objectification that he can cleanse himself of his own physical frailty; to maintain the fiction of the poet as maker, Ovid must deny his own unmaking.

An unmaking that is specifically an unmaning: the central question in "At non formosa," repeated in various ways, is simply, "How dare I call myself a man?":

A, pudet annorum: quo me iuvenemque virumque?
nec iuvenum nec me sensit amica virum!

[I blush, that being youthfull, hot, and lustie,
I proue neither youth nor man, but old and rustie.]

(19-20)

And when the question is not being posed, it is being answered, in the least satisfactory fashion possible: "Neque tum vixi neque vir, ut ante, fui" ["Neither was I man nor livèd then"] (60). That is the burden of Ovid's complaint; he is not as he was, and he is no man:

Illius ad tactum Pylus iuvenescere possit
Tithonosque annis fortior esse suis.
haec mihi contigerat; sed vir non contigit illi.

[Yet might her touch make youthfull Pylus fire
And Tithon liuelier then his years require.
Even her I had, and she had me in vaine.]

(41-43)

Ovid's is a dilemma not only of sexual performance, in other words, but of linguistic performance as well. The lover who, at the beginning of the poem, calls him master ("dominus," or, in Marlowe's translation, "sire"¹²) ends up not knowing what to call him at all; and the poet/narrator's insistent self-questioning leaves his reader in similar doubt. If Ovid is not a man, what exactly is he? The text offers no absolute answer, only a series of distinctions: between the old, virile Ovid and the new, impotent one; between the power of his sex and the power of debilitating enchantments; between Ovid the man and Ovid the dead weight, tree-trunk, ghost:

Truncus iners iacui, species et inutile pondus,
et non exactum, corpus an umbra forem.

[Like a dull Cipher, or rude block I lay,
Or shade, or body was I who can say?]

(15-16)

It is a string of distinctions that ultimately leads the poet to separate himself from himself, via the synecdochic figure of his penis; thus "At non formosa" culminates with an address to the offending member—an address that would be closely imitated in later imperfect-enjoyment verse:

Quin istic pudibunda iaces, pars pessima nostri?
Sic sum pollicitis captus et ante tuis.
Tu dominum fallis.

[Lie down with shame, and see thou stirre no more,
Seeing thou wouldst deceiue me as before.
Thou cousenest me.]

(69-71)

And here, in the reemergence of the noun "dominus," we may see the poet's identity restored. Restored as mastery over the penis, the other self: Ovid finally refigures his precursor as the wayward prick—and vice versa—with himself as its lord.

It is through this kind of Disneylike anthropomorphism (to borrow a phrase from Stanley Fish) that Ovid is ultimately able to recast a sexual failure as a poetical success. The process is one of double self-separation; distinguishing his impotent, unmanly self from its virile precursor, the poet then separates his present self from the unmanly penis, thereby reasserting his prior virility. The result is that Ovid remains (or re-becomes) man, while the male member itself is refigured as sexually other; the "I am not what I was" of Ovid's opening lament is transformed into the "You are not what you were" of the complaint to his penis. And the problem with the poet's penis is that it is a male organ behaving in a female fashion; Marlowe's Ovid likens his impotent self to "a dull Cipher," while Remy Belleau's "Impuissance" images the poet's member as absorbed by a horrific *vagina dentata*,¹³ and Rochester, in his "Imperfect Enjoyment," curses his penis by wishing it to "waste away" while others do its business:

May'st thou to rav'nous *Shankers*, be a *Prey*,
Or in consuming *Weepings* waste away.
May *Strangury*, and *Stone*, thy *Days* attend,
May'st thou ne're *Piss*, who didst refuse to spend,
When all my joys, did on false thee depend.
And may *Ten thousand* abler *Pricks* agree,
To do the wrong'd *Corinna*, right for thee.¹⁴

It may be mere coincidence that the woman Rochester cannot satisfy bears the same name as the one who shared "nine sweete bowts" with Ovid in a single night, but it is a coincidence that comments usefully upon the structures of influence that dominate the later poem. For Rochester is essaying a literary form that Ovid has already vigorously possessed and impregnated. Thus he seeks to outdo Ovid even as he succumbs to Ovidian convention and expression; indeed, Rochester may be unable to please Ovid's Corinna, but he claims to have done well by legions of other willing women, reviling his penis as the

Worst part of me, and henceforth hated most,
Through all the *Town*, a common *Fucking Post*;
On whom each *Whore*, relieves her tingling *Cunt*,
As *Hogs*, on *Gates*, do rub themselves and grunt.

(62-65)

Ovid's "pars pessima nostri" may have outdone itself here, yet it nonetheless initiates Rochester's crude rant, placed both literally and figuratively at the forefront of

his exaggerated claims to virility. Likewise, Mathurin Regnier, one of the more distinguished of the seventeenth-century imperfect-enjoyment poets, advertised his "impuissance" openly as an "Imitation d'Ovide,"¹⁵ and the common influence of Ovid's performance anxiety unites Regnier with Nashe, Rochester, and their fellows. Each of these poets repeats the motion of my epigraph "from bed to verse"; moreover, that motion proceeds equally (as Barth's "witty rhyme" suggests) from bad to worse, as each poet seeks to cover the giant bed—and literary achievement—of his precursor. And regardless of how many women Rochester may subdue, in bed or in rhyme, the one he cannot master bears Ovid's mistress's name.

II

Yet despite the partially disabling influence of Ovid, "Nashe's Dildo" may be viewed as a minor success of sorts, for it does remain distinct from the other Ovidian imitations that preceded and followed it, principally because of the novel way in which it transforms the poet's conventional rebuke to his penis. (Scholarship has not generally associated Nashe's work with the related pieces by Belleau, Regnier, Rochester, Behn, et al.; and this fact alone testifies to the poem's relative success.) If, as has been suggested, "The Choise of Valentines" is Nashe's bid for "comparison with the *Elegies* of Ovid . . . , and so with the recent and brilliant translation of them by Marlowe" (Nicholl 93), it wanders farther from the path of strict imitation than do most other works of its ilk; and in doing so, it betrays a noteworthy measure of political sophistication. For the dynamic of self-assertion in "Nashe's Dildo" both acknowledges and subverts the Ovidian relation of poet to precursor/self. Rather than acquiesce in an Ovidian celebration of the phallogos that is equally a celebration of the self, Nashe places the phallus—and the word—beyond himself; if he, like Ovid, finds himself damned to the hell of impotence, it is a hell improved (in Bloom's words) by his own making.

For Ovid, Rochester, Belleau, Regnier, Marlowe, and the anonymous author of the "Regrets d'une Jeune Courtisane Grecque sur l'impuissance d'un vieil Courtisan François,"¹⁶ literary self-assertion anthropomorphizes (in the process both exteriorizing and effeminizing) the penis; in certain other cases (to be discussed later) the poet asserts himself by complaining not to his effeminate penis but rather to the woman who is the object of his desire. But in Nashe's case the complaint is directed not at an image of the female other which serves to define the poet as man, but rather at an external standard of manliness that is itself both inimitable and non-male:

If anie wight a cruell mistris serue's,
Or in dispaire (unhappie) pine's and steru's

Curse Eunuke dilldo, senceless, counterfet,
Who sooth maie fill, but neuer can begett.

(261-64)

Deprived of male fertility (and anxiety), the dildo is better equipped to "please" its "friend" than is any pen or penis, and indeed its lack of masculine identity is essential to its status as a pleaser of women. Thus Nashe's poem decenters Ovidian conventions that define both sex and pleasure in terms of the male protagonist; it is the woman, not the man, who denounces the penis in "Nashe's Dildo," and the narrator's "mistris Francis" (64) finally assigns the masculine pronoun—and a good deal of praise—not to the male member she addresses, nor even to the man of whom it is a part, but rather to the dildo that replaces it:

Adiew faint-hearted instrument of lust,
That falselie hast betrayde our equale trust.
Hence-forth no more will I implore thine ayde,
Or thee, or men of cowardize upbrayde.
My little dilldo shall suplye their kinde:
A knaue, that moues as light as leaues by winde;
That bendeth not, nor fouldeth anie deale,
But stands as stiff, as he were made of steele,
And playes at peacock twixt my leggs right blythe,
And doeth my tickling swage with manie a sighe;
For, by Saint Runnion he'le refresh me well,
And neuer make my tender bellie swell.

(235-47)

Nashe's poet/narrator immediately defines the dildo as competitor—not merely for the favors of women "friends," but also for a species of figurative sexual sovereignty:

Poore Priapus, whose triumph now must fall,
Except thow thrust this weakeling to the walle.
Behould how he usurps in bed and bowre,
And undermine's thy kingdom euerie howre.

(247-50)

And indeed, the connection between sex and politics (and the sexual politics of reading) manifests itself clearly at this moment in Nashe's narrative; for the agent of Nashe's poem and the agency of Nashe's discourse are no longer male. Unlike Rochester, who can castigate his flaccid, effeminized penis for its inability to pleasure a woman ("Of course a eunuch/woman cannot satisfy a woman"), and unlike Ovid, whose notion of pleasure seems entirely exclusive of the female, Nashe finds himself bound to an appetite for sexual (and textual) pleasure that he cannot serve without sacrificing his male identity.

In other words, Nashe has encountered a sort of anxiety that the Ovidian formula largely displaces or ignores. Where Ovid/Rochester/etc. formulate their inadequacies in the subjunctive ("I would have satisfied her had I been myself"), Nashe opts for the indicative, for the

shamefaced admission that he is not a fit instrument for women's pleasure. And if Nashe then retracts this admission, hiding it behind adolescent boasts of sexual prowess, his gesture in doing so may be seen as the last gambit of a sensibility seeking to establish itself as its own object of pleasure—and competition:

Regarde not Dames, what Cupids Poete writes.
I pennd this storie onelie for my self,
Who giuing suck unto a childish Elfe,
And quitte discourag'd in my nurserie,
Since all my store seemes to hir [Francis], penurie.

(296-300)

This bit of bet-hedging typifies Nashe's equivocation whenever he is called upon to acknowledge his poem; for if he has penned the "Dildo" "onelie for [him] self," he cannot in the same gesture have "presum'd to please [his] friend"—unless he and his friend are in fact one, the compound female object/subject of the dildo's ministrations. And thus, confronted by the infinite ineluctability of female desire and pleasure, Nashe finally redefines himself as the sexual other, the non-male: "I am not as was Hercules the stout, / That to the seauenth iournie could hould out" (301-02). Of his female audience/lover/self, Nashe then comments, "Sufficeth, all I haue, I yeald hir hole" (307), and the multiple quibbles upon "hole" in this line summarize the sexual polysemy of Nashe's text; is Nashe whole or hole, and does he yield his (w)hole to his mistress's whole person, or to the hole at her person's center?

Nashe, in other words, pursues a model of sexual discourse that is far more threatening than Ovid's, for it points to a precursor-figure that is both exterior and sexually opposite to the self. Rather than alluding safely to past priapic exploits—as Ovid's speaker does—Nashe's Tomalin acts those exploits out within the text of his poem, and finds them insufficient. "Eunuke dilldo," with its ambiguous gender, mediates between a masculine narrative and the feminine desires that man is—by virtue of his sexual identity—unable either to comprehend or to satisfy or even to articulate. And if Nashe ultimately disrupts this system of difference, refiguring himself as female (or at least as sexually ambiguous), we may see this disruption as an ultimate surrender to the old Ovidian anxiety: the need to make the self encompass and subdue everything, including its other. Thus mistress Francis herself is retroactively male; the sexual ambiguity of her name is compounded by reference to her "mannely thigh" (103). And thus the poet/narrator's impotence emerges finally and paradoxically as his claim to glory:

I paie our hostess scott and lott at moste,
And looke as leane and lank as anie ghoste.
What can be added more to my renowne?

(309-11)

For the poet's renown—such as it is—must rest upon this point: that he has confronted the inaccessibility of female desire, and come away whole.

III

Aphra Behn's "**Disappointment**" displays marks of influence that are as unequivocal as any in "The Choise of Valentines"; indeed, Behn's poem has been characterized as little more—and in fact somewhat less—than a translation.¹⁷ Again, in this case, the ultimate indebtedness may be to Ovid, but Behn's proximate source is a French poem of forty stanzas entitled "L'occasion perdue recouuerte" and at one time attributed to Pierre Corneille (although authorship has more recently been settled upon the shadowy figure of Benech de Cantenac).¹⁸ And "**The Disappointment**"'s weakness as translation (if Behn's work is to be regarded as such) lies mainly in its brevity and anticlimax; for it in fact recovers only the first thirteen of Cantenac's stanzas, silencing the rest (and providing a later, anonymous writer the opportunity to translate the French poem in its entirety).¹⁹ Yet this silencing of the original text (itself a radical strategy in a subgenre that regularly identifies and even boasts of its origins) invests Behn's work with structural principles that oppose and subvert those of Cantenac's poem; in "**The Disappointment**" we may see a vigorous female poet encounter and decisively overcome a feeble male precursor. And Behn achieves this success by dislocating the anxiety of influence itself, dissociating it from its operative metaphors of sexual and martial competition. For Behn, as female poet, poetry can be many things, but it cannot be "battle between . . . father and son . . . , Oedipus and Laius at the crossroads" (Bloom 11); her job is to make it something else.

Thus Behn concludes her version of "L'occasion perdue" precisely at the moment when the original poem's hero embarks upon his conventional penile complaint:

Quelque ennemy de la Nature
Trouble mes sens et ma raison,
Et de son funeste poison
Souille une flamme toute pure;
Peut-estre sont-ce aussi les dieux
Qui, se voyans moins glorieux,
M'ont voulu rendre misérable.

[Some Traytrous Enemy to Nature's Laws
Troubles my Sense, And Reason thus confuses,
And with the dismal poyson which he uses
Soyls the pure flame of which Love was the Cause.
It may be that some Powers above, the Gods,
Finding themselves less blest than I, by odds
Continue all this to make me miserable.]²⁰

It is a lament that in Behn's poem goes unuttered; and, following the pattern of progressive externalization and effeminization with which the Ovidian tradition neutral-

izes its own anxieties, this lament ultimately blames the hero's impotence—the female behavior of his penis—upon the influence of the nearest woman:

Mais, que dis-je? ils [les dieux] sont innocens;
Cloris, elle seule, est coupable.
Elle seule a charmé mes sens.

[*But I mistake, I know their [the gods'] Innocence.
'Tis Cloris only, only she culpable,
'Tis she alone that thus has charm'd my sense.*]

(15.8-10)

This final objectification and transference of the poet's anxieties—the transformation of the complaint to the penis into the complaint to the woman—appears in a number of later imperfect-enjoyment poems. Charles Beys thus explains to his mistress that

Mon défaut vous est Glorieux,
Ne le prenez pas pour vn crime;
Vn feu lancé de vos beaux yeux,
A bruslé toute la victime.

[My infirmity is glorious to you, nor should you take it for a crime; a bolt of flame cast from your lovely eyes has entirely burnt its victim.]²¹

And thus also Sir George Etherege's "Imperfect Enjoyment" ends on a note of courtly accusation: "Phillis, let this same comfort ease your care, / You'd been more happy had you been less fair."²²

Whether complimented or accused, the female figure, whose glory increases as the male poet's diminishes, thus becomes the impotence-inducing precursor against which an entire series of neo-Ovidian erotic poems reacts. And if we conceive of those poems as a vehicle for male sentiment and expression, then Behn's decision to end her "Disappointment" as she does becomes politically coherent. For not only does this anticlimactic conclusion avoid blaming the woman for the man's imperfections; it equally avoids the original poem's subsequent, cuckolding assertion of male vigor (the *recouvrement* of Cantenac's title), and it renders the hero of the piece literally silent, deleting Cantenac's extended passages of direct discourse. Behn initially revises Cantenac's poem, in other words, by deleting its most prominently genderized elements; that process complete, she then proceeds to work variations upon what remains.

The result is a poem that—as Judith Gardiner accurately observes—"does not contrast an incident of the man's humiliating impotence with his earlier or later exaggerated vigor" (74). Instead, "The Disappointment" effectively marginalizes the male experience of anxiety and humiliation, concentrating upon the ironies whereby manly poetry is made. Thus Behn, like Nashe, festoons

her verse with references to classical mythology; but the most crucial of those references discredits itself, as Behn's shepherdess reaches for her lover:

Cloris returning from the Trance
Which Love and soft Desire had bred,
Her timorous Hand she gently laid
(Or guided by Design or Chance)
Upon that fabulous Priapus,
That Potent God, as Poets feign.²³

For Behn's text affirms what is to her literary precursors the most inadmissible and anxiety-laden of possibilities: that Priapus might be "fabulous," that potency might be "feigned," and feigned by poets.

Nashe's Priapus may be unable to thrust the weakling dildo to the wall, yet its owner ultimately claims thanks for his priapic exploits. For Behn's Lysander, however, there are no thanks, nor is there occasion for speech itself. Instead, Behn's "hapless swain" becomes himself a surface for the imposition of female language, a creature of female fashioning; and in this context the familiar Ovidian reproach to the gods acquires new valences: "But Oh what envying God conspires / To snatch his Power, yet leave him the Desire!" (8.9-10). The answer to this question, within the context Behn has fashioned for it, must be, "No god at all, and certainly no 'potent god' of a Priapus"; and Margaret Ferguson has noted the complex ironies in Behn's last reference to the gods:²⁴

The Nymph's Resentments none but I
Can well Imagine or Condole:
But none can guess Lysander's Soul,
But those who swayd his Destiny.
His silent Grievs swell up to Storms,
And not one God his Fury spares.

(14.1-6)

For Lysander's destiny is swayed by the poet herself, who thus replaces the potent, feigned Priapus as the central deity of her work.

It is Lysander's final grief, then, to occupy a world created and populated by women—and both Behn's and Nashe's poems suggest this grief to be embedded in the discursive patterns that are his enabling condition. Thus Cloris may protest, "*Cease, Cease—your vain Desire*" (3.5), and contrary to expectation (or perhaps even to intention) the nymph's prayer is answered. Indeed, it is the *free exposure* of the female body—its promotion as a separate and independent discourse—that unmans Lysander:

He saw how at her Length she lay;
He saw her rising Bosom bare

.

She does her softest Joys dispence,
Off'ring her Virgin-Innocence