A Frightening Yet Beautiful Monster: Aphra Behn as 17th Century Authoress

Of the Greek myth, Medusa, feminist theorist Helene Cixous wrote: “Too bad for them [men] if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren’t men . . . But isn’t this fear convenient for them? Wouldn’t the worst be . . . that women aren’t castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (885). Although Cixous’ scathing critique of patriarchal thought offers a unique reading of the Medusa myth for modern feminists, one must wonder if Aphra Behn, a female author living in the seventeenth century had come to the same conclusions long before. As a gentlewoman and renowned beauty, Behn could have led a respectable life of wifedom (Goreau 53). She chose a different course however, by becoming a playwright once her first and only husband died. Restoration critics, shocked that a female of her standing would publicly display her work, smeared her plays as well as her reputation with crude jests and jealous reviews. Despite their rancor, however, Behn became a remarkable success, writing and producing seventeen plays in only two years – more than all of her male colleagues combined (Goreau 4). It is not impossible, therefore, and actually highly probable that Behn not only knew about but identified with Medusa. Through a biographical examination of her life as well as one of her most popular plays, *The Rover*, Behn leaves a subtle but persistent trail of breadcrumbs that suggest that she not only incorporated this myth into her work, but viewed it as a metaphor for
her life; a metaphor for Behn trespassing as a frightening yet beautiful monster in a literary world dominated by men.

In order to understand how this myth functions in *The Rover*, one must first know the basic structure of the myth itself. As it is told by Ovid, Medusa was once a beautiful maiden (Wilk 18). She swore a vow to the goddess Athena to remain chaste for the remainder of her life and serve as a priestess in her temple. One day, the sea god Poseidon saw Medusa’s beauty and lusted after her. In the temple itself, a shrine to maiden virtue, Poseidon raped the young priestess. Furious with Medusa, Athena cursed her so that her skin transformed into scales and her luxurious golden hair molted into a tangle of snakes; furthermore, Athena cursed Medusa so that any man who gazed on her would be turned to stone. When the hero Perseus is sent by the king of Seriphos to retrieve Medusa’s head, it is only through looking at her reflection in his shield that he is able to approach her and cut her head off.

In Aphra Behn’s lifetime, the Medusa myth was more often used as a symbol of Hell and its horrors rather than a moral tale denouncing the ravishment of female virtue. As Stephen Wilk notes in his book titled *Medusa: Solving the Myth of the Gorgon*, the English poet John Milton populated his version of Hell in *Paradise Lost* with Gorgons and made reference to the Medusa’s severed head in his 1634 masque, *Comus* (198). The grotesque and bloody story seemed to strike a chord with English audiences as well as the rest of Europe. Entertained more by spectacle than moral, a total of twenty-five operas were produced before the year 1800 that used the Medusa myth for dramatic effect (Wilk 198). As a woman who received an education that focused on the contributions English authors and poets had made to the country’s canon, Behn would have been aware of Milton’s allusions to this classical myth. Through her subsequent works and life, however, it is probable that the myth held an entirely different meaning for her than for her
contemporaries.

Unlike the men of her age who saw in Medusa a hellish monster, it is probable that Behn saw instead a woman who was brutally injured by a patriarchal society. This opinion might have been further cemented, in fact, because of the nature of Behn’s education. Behn, unlike the men of her time who shared her intellect, was not allowed to attend a university. At such institutions men were taught in the classics – in Latin and in Greek. Because of her gender, Behn was denied the opportunity of attending this kind of a university. Her status as a member of the upper-class, however, allowed her to receive at least what could be called a gentlewoman’s education. Women at the time were expected to learn the basics of reading and writing so that they could help their future husbands in household affairs. Beyond such a scope, however, they were barred. As evidence of such systematic deprivation, only one in three women were able to sign their name to marriage registers in 1753, and that was a little less than a century after Behn came on the literary scene (Goreau 29). With the exception of one or two schools in London that taught women logic, math, and languages, women mostly attended schools that taught skills such as dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments, all deemed necessary for the attraction and securement of reputable husbands. Behn herself was educated in this manner, describing herself as being “mistress of all sorts of pretty work” (Goreau 29). For women, this was the extent of the education that they could expect. It was considered improper to move beyond the feminine sphere that had been delineated for them.

Frustrated with this injustice, Behn used her pen to denounce men’s miserly hold over academic learning. In a scathing critique of a theater-goer who announced to the audience of one of her plays that they were to expect a mediocre production Behn wrote: “I’ll only say as I have touched before, that plays have no great room for that which is men’s great advantage over
women, that is learning” (Goreau 135). She continues to vilify the unfortunate critic calling him an “ill-favour’d, wretched fop.” Behn, consequently, was constantly made aware of her intrusion into the male sphere. Further criticisms with crude innuendos, referring to her public display of her parts, or another term for her genitalia, made her out as an unnatural creature and even sorceress (Goreau 232). It is no wonder, then, that Behn who educated herself in the knowledge of the classics since she was barred from attending a university, probably knew of and felt a kinship with Medusa. Both had strayed out of their spheres, and in The Rover Behn emphasizes how such an intrusion comes at great personal cost.

Although the Medusa myth does not figure in Behn’s work down to every jot and tittle, several of its themes manifest themselves in the life and choices of one of the play’s female protagonists, Angellica Bianca. Like Medusa, Angellica makes a vow of chastity; unlike Medusa, this vow is metaphorical rather than literal. Rather than promise the Virgin Goddess that she will preserve her physical chastity, Angellica makes a promise to herself that she will preserve her emotional innocence. This commitment allows her to continue to run her business as a prostitute and for a while keep herself in a relative position of power. In a conversation Angellica has with her servant Moretta, in fact, she makes a subtle allusion to her awareness of the level of authority she has over the men in her life because of this rule she has kept: “I’m resolved that nothing but gold shall charm my heart” (187). For Angellica, money has become the means of successfully navigating her patriarchal society. Although the play’s women, including herself, are objectified by the men who surround them, Angellica has found a way, at least economically, of beating the system. To this end, Angellica knows that to lose her heart in love will mean financial ruin. She literally cannot afford to become emotionally attached to someone (enter Willmore) like Florinda or Hellena can. She refuses to let herself fall in love
because she knows that to do so would mean the loss of her economic security and consequently the small measure of power she is able to wield over her lovers.

Through the course of the play, however, Angellica’s vow is broken. She breaks her cardinal rule of staying out of love and instead of maintaining her cool detachment from men, reluctantly succumbs to the sugar-coated and brazen wit of Willmore. Against her previous commitment to withhold her love from any suitor, she gives her heart to Willmore, who, instead of loving her back, uses her submission to satisfy his own physical desires and trample on her emotional defenselessness.

Once Angellica breaks her vow, Behn emphasizes the tragic loss of power that haunts Angellica for the remainder of the play. As was mentioned previously, Medusa was cursed for breaking her vow of chastity even though Poseidon forced her to with his violent act of rape. In *The Rover* Angellica is similarly punished through her interactions with Willmore. By making her believe that he loves her, Willmore takes Angellica’s emotional innocence. One could argue that his forceful and manipulative stealing of her heart amounts to emotional rape. In a moment of recollection of Willmore’s emotional act of violence, Angellica sorrowfully declares to her servant Moretta that he left her destitute: “But I have given him my eternal rest,/ My whole repose, my future joys, my heart!/ My virgin heart, Moretta! Oh, ‘tis gone!” (Behn 218). In this frank discussion of her emotional vulnerability, Angellica evidences that Willmore’s actions, while not physically abusive, evoke the same destructive violence emotionally that could be considered similar to a person committing a physical act of rape. Through his seduction, in fact, Willmore takes from Angellica one of her most valuable assets (apart from her obvious beauty and intelligence): her ability to be emotionally detached in a business that financially relies on her ability to do so.
In the play’s final act, Angellica is able to recognize the full extent of this metaphorical rape. When she accuses Willmore of being unfaithful to the vows of love he swore to her, he retorts that they were merely words to him. With this response, Willmore like Perseus in the Medusa myth holds up a metaphorical mirror that allows Angellica to see her reflection and therefore her ultimate destruction: “All this thou’st made me know, for which I hate thee./ Had I remained in innocent security,/ I should have thought all men were born my slaves,/ And worn my power like lightning in my eyes,/ To have destroyed at pleasure when offended./ But when love held the mirror, the undeceiving glass/ Reflected all the weakness of my soul...Oh, how I fell/ like a long-worshiped idol,/ Discovering all the cheat” (239). Angellica was innocent to emotional love. She never knew it or conceived of it until Willmore seduced her and brought about the end of her emotional innocence. When she looks in the mirror, in fact, she sees how she was cheated by him of the power she used to wield over her lovers as well as her own heart and this knowledge emotionally destroys her.

Through Angellica, it is possible that Behn found an avenue of expressing the struggle she endured as a woman attempting to make her stand in a male-dominated literary world. She wrote about women like Angellica, who like herself, were socially considered indecent and immodest. Behn, in fact, did what Helene Cixous advised women to do: “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. . . . Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement” (875). Although Cixous published this text in 1976, its comment on the exclusion women have experienced at the hands of men is pertinent to Aphra Behn’s experience. Not only was she considered unwelcome, but unnatural. The imagery Ciroux portrays of being driven violently away from their own bodies also stands in
parallel to Behn’s experience as a playwright. To the men of her day, such a profession entitled them to call Behn a whore (Goreau 231).

Despite these objections and societal pressures, however, Behn persevered and became one of the first female professional writers in England. In an extended essay titled A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf paid homage to the seventeenth century authoress: “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (48). While some might wonder whether such an honor is merited considering many women wrote and published their works before Behn, it is possible to see how she merits such accolades when one considers the manner in which she wrote and published her work. Although women writers existed before and after Behn’s emergence on the theatrical scene, none of them claimed title to their works with such open rebellion against the traditional patriarchal codes of her society. As Angeline Goreau notes in her biography on Behn’s life, Behn’s status as the first professional female author is founded more on the way she flouted the conventions of her society than her place in the world of literary women: “Aphra’s demand to be considered a literary professional alongside her male peers [was] unprecedented, as [was] her determination to create a financial basis for her independence” (296). Unlike the female writers before her who shared a tradition of anonymity and silence, Aphra decided to speak out (Goreau 7). In this knowledge, one cannot help but indulge in a modicum of optimism: her role as a creature, a Medusa sprung to life to destroy the literary dreams of men, opened the door for future women writers. Through Behn’s life, one can hope that she ultimately wrote her own version of the Medusa myth, one in which the woman temporarily becomes a monster in order to break the social constraints that have her bound. And through her works – her poems, novels, and plays – she did.
Works Cited


Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. Edited by David Bradshaw and Stuart N. Clarke, John Wiley and Sons, 2015.