

Aphra Behn and Bishop Burnet

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Aphra Behn and Bishop Burnet

A PINDARIC POEM TO THE Reverend Doctor Burnet, ON THE Honour he did me of Enquiring after me and my MUSE (1689) is well known to Aphra Behn scholars as one of her last and most outspokenly pro-Stuart works. As a standalone poem addressed to a key public figure, the *Pindaric to Burnet* physically resembles the separates on such royal events as the death of Charles II and the coronation of James II that Behn had been publishing since 1685, but differs markedly from these predecessors in circumstances, import and tone. Though external evidence surrounding its composition is lacking, the poem appears to respond to an invitation from Gilbert Burnet – William of Orange’s chaplain and propagandist – for Behn to change sides and lend her support to William’s cause. Behn’s reply, apparently written after William and Mary had been offered and had accepted the monarchy, acknowledges the triumph of her political enemies, which she attributes more to Burnet’s literary skill than to his Dutch master’s military prowess. She also, however, firmly rejects his invitation, declaring herself unable to break with a lifetime of loyalty to the Stuarts, despite the material advantage to be gained from endorsing the new regime. A *terminus ad quem* for the composition of the poem is provided by Behn’s death, which occurred on 16 April 1689, just five days after the coronation of William and Mary.¹ It is not

I am grateful to Claire Bowditch, Elaine Hobby, Mary Ann O’Donnell, Kathleen Taylor, and especially Jim McLaverty for their generous help with earlier drafts of this note.

¹ For Behn’s biography, see Janet Todd, ‘Behn, Aphra [Aphara] (1640?–1689), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (oxforddnb.com, accessed April 2019).

known to have been republished until the twentieth century, when it was included in Montague Summers' complete edition of Behn's works in 1915.²

Cambridge University Library's holdings of early Behn editions include an annotated copy of the *Pindaric to Burnet*. This copy, now Cambridge UL 6000.d.80, was probably acquired in the early 1980s but remained uncatalogued until 1995; it was therefore not available to either Mary Ann O'Donnell, whose indispensable bibliography of Behn's works was first published in 1986, or Janet Todd, whose collected edition of Behn's poetry (based largely on Cambridge copy-texts) appeared in 1992.³ Cambridge 6000.d.80 (henceforward 'the Cambridge copy') lacks its title leaf, sig. A1 (pp. 1-2), though a fragmentary strip now attached to a guard may derive from this lost folio. The remaining leaves, sigs A2-A4 (pp. 3-8), each preserve one or more annotations. The least annotated page, p. 3, preserves only one mark: a horizontal stroke extending from the gutter to beneath the first word in line 6 ('And'). Similar horizontal marks can be found on p. 4 (after line 19), 5 (after line 33), 6 (above line 49 and after line 62), 7 (after line 76) and 8 (after lines 91 and 103), though due to the differing line lengths of the pindaric some of these marks do not extend beneath the text itself.⁴ All stanza numbers apart from the first ('I', p. 3) are corrected from arabic to roman;

² Montague Summers, ed., *The Works of Aphra Behn*, 6 vols (London: Heineman; Stratford: A. Bullen, 1915), vol. 6, pp. 407-10.

³ Mary Ann O'Donnell, *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (New York: Garland, 1986); Janet Todd, ed., *The Works of Aphra Behn*, vol. 1: Poetry (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992). Todd's copy-text for the *Pindaric* was the Bodleian copy (*Works*, vol. 1, p. li). A stamp on 6000.d.80's wrappers indicates that it was acquired by Cambridge University Library in 1981; however, as the acquisition is not listed in the Library's records, and the volume itself carries no other readily identifiable ownership marks, further specificity about its provenance is not possible. I am grateful to Liam Sims of the Munby Room, Cambridge University Library, for information on these points.

⁴ Line numbers have been provided for ease of reference; compare Todd (*Works*, vol. 1, pp. 307-10).

in the case of stanzas 3-6, the original arabic numbers are struck through. Further annotations comprise the following:

p. 4, line 14. 'Theam' changed to 'Theme': 'am' struck through; marginal addition 'me' with insertion mark

p. 4, line 15. 'Writ Divine' underlined, as if for italicisation

p. 4, line 16. 'Sence' changed to 'Sense': 'c' struck through; marginal addition 's' with insertion mark

p. 4, line 26. 'Grieve and Pain' changed to 'Grieve, and Pain,': in-line insertions

p. 4, line 27. 'Recompense' changed to 'Recompence': long 's' struck through; marginal addition 'c' with insertion mark

p. 5, line 37. '*Cowly*' changed to '*COWLEY*': double-underlined, as if for capitalisation; 'y' struck through; marginal addition 'ey'

p. 5, line 38. 'Heroes' and 'Kings' underlined, as if for italicisation

p. 5, line 41. 'Coyn' changed to 'Coin': 'y' struck through; marginal addition 'i'

p. 6, line 53. 'Brieze' changed to 'Breeze': 'i' struck through; marginal addition 'e'

p. 6, line 56. 'Echo' changed to 'Eccho': in-text insertion mark; marginal addition 'c' with insertion mark

p. 6, line 57. 'the Inviting' changed to 'th Inviting': 'e' struck through; marginal addition '' with insertion mark

p. 7, line 76. '*Bravest*' underlined, as if for romanisation

p. 8, line 95. 'Owns' changed to 'Owns,': in-line insertion

p. 8, line 96. 'Sir' double-underlined, as if for capitalisation

These alterations do not amount to substantive changes, but instead involve accidentals such as font, spelling, and punctuation. Further inkstains on some of the versos – affecting, for example, lines 17 and 24 (p. 4) – are probably smudges resulting from annotations to the opposite rectos.

Collectively, the annotations to the Cambridge copy look like mark-up for a projected second edition of the *Pindaric*. The horizontal marks, which fall at roughly 14/15-line intervals (allowing for inter-stanza gaps and numeration), seem likely to relate to page layout, probably indicating proposed page divisions; they may thus indicate plans for either a small-format or a large-paper edition of the poem. Questions arise, however, as to who may have been responsible for the annotations, and thus for planning a revised edition, and why no such edition seems to have been published.⁵ Given that none of the proposed changes to the text involves clear instances of error (such as patent mis-settings of text), there is no obvious reason why a book trade professional – e.g. Behn’s publisher, Richard Bentley, or his printer – should have felt the need to introduce change into what is, by seventeenth-century standards, an accurate and well-presented text.⁶ Comparably, while the annotator’s textual alterations might be attributable to a reader with a fine eye for details of spelling, punctuation and textual presentation, it seems rather less likely that any such reader would have engaged with the issue of page division. A further possibility is that the changes were due to the author herself.

Evidence for Behn’s responsibility for the annotations to the Cambridge copy is necessarily speculative. Because the annotations are so sparse (consisting mainly of strokes,

⁵ I stress ‘seems’, as it is possible a second edition was published but has not survived.

⁶ Bentley’s printer is not named on the title page of the *Pindaric* and has not been identified. ‘R. Etheringham’, identified by Wing as the likely printer of Behn’s *Congratulatory to Queen Mary* (1689), also published by Bentley, is a candidate.

cancellations, and at most one or two decontextualised letters), matching them to attested examples of Behn's joined-up handwriting is problematic. Furthermore, as Mary Ann O'Donnell points out, most of these (relatively few) attested examples date from the 1660s, and so may differ considerably from Behn's handwriting in the 1680s, when she is thought to have suffered from medical problems that affected her ability to write.⁷ An autograph letter to Abigail Waller, written at some point after October 1687 and including an apology for 'a Lame hand scarce able to hold a pen', shows considerable variation in the formation of individual letters, even in similar positions within the word: witness the postscript, which includes different forms of the letter 'd' in 'Pardon' and 'Madam', and of 'y' in 'humbly' and 'my'.⁸ The most that can be said for sure is that the annotations in the Cambridge copy of the *Pindaric* may be in Aphra Behn's hand; neither definitive identification nor non-identification is feasible. An amanuensis working under Behn's direction is another possibility.

Circumstantial reasons for attributing the annotations to Cambridge 6000.d.80 to Aphra Behn include the annotator's clear preference for roman over arabic numerals. All Behn's previous pindaric separates – including her elegy for Charles II and her coronation poem for James II – had employed roman stanza numbers, as had her *Poems upon Several Occasions* (1684), over which she is thought to have had some degree of editorial influence.⁹ The annotator's care to correct the spelling of Abraham Cowley's name is consistent with Behn's documented admiration for his poetry: he is named in the *Pindaric* as an exemplar of

⁷ Mary Ann O'Donnell, 'A Verse Miscellany of Aphra Behn: Bodleian Library MS Firth c. 16', *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700*, 2 (1990), 189-227 (p. 195).

⁸ Behn's postscript is reproduced by O'Donnell, 'Verse Miscellany', p. 202.

⁹ Examples of roman numerals in *Poems upon Several Occasions* include sigs B1r-C1v. Evidence for Behn's editorial involvement in *Poems* is summarised and evaluated in Jordan M. Howell, 'Aphra Behn, Editor', *The Review of English Studies*, 68.285 (2017), 549-63.

heroic verse and is complimented in ‘*To Mr. Creech*’ and her translation ‘*A Voyage to the Island of Love*’; she had also translated ‘*Sylva*’, from his *Sex Libri Plantarum*, for publication in 1689.¹⁰ Attention to page division is also consistent with (though not proof of) authorial engagement, given that some early modern authors are known to have cared greatly about their texts’ division and organisation.¹¹ Finally, if the annotator of the Cambridge copy were Behn herself, this would compellingly explain the apparent non-production of a second edition of the *Pindaric*. Behn’s own death, following so soon after the composition and publication of the poem, would have removed any pressure for the poem to be republished. Amid the momentous and fast-moving events of early 1689, such issues as Aphra Behn’s political allegiance and her relationship with Burnet are likely to have become quickly obsolete once the poet herself was dead.

No other printed copies of any of Behn’s works corrected by the poet herself are currently known to survive. Should the annotations to the Cambridge copy of the *Pindaric to Burnet* be attributable to Behn, they would provide fascinating evidence for her care and attention to detail in the publication of her works – at least in the case of texts that meant much to her, as the *Pindaric* is likely to have done. This evidence would in turn have important implications for Behn’s modern editors, strengthening the case for a new scholarly edition to be based on revised, rather than first-lifetime, copies of her works. There would also be a strong rationale for taking the annotations to the Cambridge copy – which, on this

¹⁰ ‘*To Mr. Creech*’, line 80; ‘*Voyage*’, line 487; *The Third Part of the Works of M^r Abraham Cowley* (1689), sigs R2r-X3v.

¹¹ Pope, unsurprisingly, is an especially well-documented example; see David Foxon, *Pope and the Early Eighteenth-Century Book*, revised and edited by James McLaverty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 163-7. On the wider phenomenon of authorial mark-up of printer’s copy, see J. K. Moore, *Primary Materials Relating to Copy and Print in English Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1992), p. 31.

reading, would represent Behn's own preferred version of the poem's accidentals – as the copy-text for the *Pindaric to Burnet*.¹² It is just such a rationale which Behn's current editors propose to follow in the forthcoming Cambridge edition of her works.¹³

¹² On the significance of accidentals in the choice of copy-text, albeit in rather different textual circumstances, see W. W. Greg, 'The Rationale of Copy-Text', *Studies in Bibliography*, 3 (1950/51), 19-36.

¹³ The General Editors of the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Aphra Behn* are Claire Bowditch, Mel Evans, Elaine Hobby and Gillian Wright.