Parents, Dowries, and Incomes: Dealing With Marriage in Aphra Behn's Novels.

Jorge Figueroa Dorrego.
Universidade de Vigo.

El presente artículo pretende analizar cómo la escritora inglesa de finales del siglo XVII, Aphra Behn, trata el tema del matrimonio en su obra narrativa. Behn se centra principalmente en dos cuestiones: el casamiento convenido debido a la interferencia paterna, y los aspectos económicos que entran en juego a la hora de concertar un matrimonio. El estudio tiene en cuenta el contexto literario y social de la Inglaterra de la Restauración. No parece que Behn esté en contra de la institución del matrimonio como tal, pero sí presenta las malas consecuencias que puede ocasionar una unión impuesta y sin ninguna base en el afecto de los cónyuges, así como la importancia de la cuestión económica. Anticipa, pues, temas y actitudes de las novelistas inglesas posteriores.

Although there was no need for parental consent in the English marriage system except for the period 1754-1853 (see Macfarlane 1986: 124-28), parents often had the economic and social power to influence their children's decisions. However, there was much public opinion against parental abuse on marriage choice, as it used to lead to unhappiness[1]. This was obviously reflected in the literature of the time as will be shown below.

But no author before Behn had insisted so much on the inconvenience of forced marriage and parental interference in matters of love. This paper attempts to analyze how she presents this topic in her novels as well as the financial deals involved in matrimony.

It is true that some prose fiction works such as Emanuel Forde's *Ornatus and Artesia* (1598) had presented lovers who were separated due to family feuds, but their treatment of the topic cannot be compared to Behn's. In these kind of texts, parental intrusion was often simply a narrative device to hinder the lovers' union. Jacobean drama had taken up the protest against arranged matrimony which started in Elizabethan

times, a good example being George Wilkins's *The Miseries of Enforc'd Marriage* (1607). However, the concern for this topic was relatively occasional compared with the prominence given it in the Restoration, and particularly in Behn's works.

It was more uncommon to find unhappy marriages in previous romances. Curiously enough, they were unions of young wives married to old men, most likely due to parental decision or to financial reasons, as is often seen in Behn. John Dickenson's *Valeria of London* (1598) was one of such cases, but it actually contrasted with the romances of its time. Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621) also showed unhappy marriage as a consequence of lack of love, unjustified jealousy, violence, or adultery. And few novels by the contemporary Spanish writer Maria de Zayas ended with a happy marriage, since most of her heroines preferred to find retreat in a convent after a profoundly disappointing love affair[2].

Realistic fiction like *The Cobler of Canterbury* (1590) and *The Art of Cuckoldom* (1697) presents the aforementioned kind of couple in order to make a misogynous attack on women's supposed lust and inconstancy, and to make fun of the cuckolded old man. The anonymous author of the latter book sees marriage as a source of money with nothing to do with love[3]. Behn criticizes this social fact and prefers a union based on true affection. The link between marriage and money, so recurrent in her works, is much more common in later novels, in Austen's for instance, although it is already present in earlier fiction[4].

Let us see first how Behn deals with arranged marriage and parental pressure on love matters. A good example is *Agnes de Castro, or The Force of Generous Love* (1688). Don Pedro's marriages to Bianca first and then to Constantia were actually determined by his father. Moreover, the King wants Agnes to marry the fierce and ambitious Don Alvaro, in an attempt not only to satisfy the wishes of his favourite, but also to prevent the possibility of future matrimony between her and Don Pedro. But Agnes refuses to marry Don Alvaro claiming that she does not have «a Soul that is tender» and that «nothing is dearer to me than my liberty» (Todd ed. 1995: 143). This comparison of an arranged marriage without love to slavery is further clarified when she faces the King again later, and she decides to leave, «and remain no longer a Slave in a Place, to which I came free» (p. 157)[5].

In The History of the Nun, or The Fair Vow-Breaker (1689), Behn compares accepting a loveless matrimony to entering a religious order without real devotion. At the beginning of the story, she argues that vow-breaking is the reason for many unhappy marriages and that it is done both by men and women alike. She believes that taking marital or religious vows is something very serious, and therefore women should not enter nunneries or marriages till they are mature enough to make their own choices, and parents should not impose their authority in these cases[6]. But in *The History of the Nun,* Behn focuses on the pernicious effects of forcing a young lady to take religious vows when she is not suited to a life of privations entirely devoted to God.

An example of a heroine's dependence on her parents is found in *The Lucky Mistake* (1689). Atlante does not want «to enter into an Intreague of Love, or Friendship, with a Man, whose Parents will be averse to my Happiness» (Todd ed. 1995: 176). She reminds Rinaldo her fortune is not suitable for him. However, they meet again and «when he nam'd Marriage, she trembled, with fear of doing something that she fancy'd she ought not to do without the Consent of her Father» (p. 182). But she promises not to marry any other. The lovers are separated and, in spite of parental pressure, they are true to their vows of fidelity. Atlante's father reacts violently when he finds out the truth. De Pais wounds Rinaldo and offers him Charlot instead. The young girl, who is staying at a convent, accepts the match delightedly, and later she confesses: «I was not so much in love with Rinaldo, as I was out of Love with a Nunnery; and took any Opportunity to quit a Life absolutely contrary to my Humour» (p. 201). That is why she also accepts Vernole's proposal: for her, marriage is an attractive alternative to convent life[7]. Finally, Atlante and Rinaldo are allowed to get married too.

The problem of arranged marriage is also present in «The Adventure of the Black Lady» (1698). Though Bellamora was courted by Mr Fondlove, a gentleman of true worth who really loved her, her mother preferred another, much wealthier gentleman, «but one whose Person and Humour did by no means hit with (her) Inclinations» (Todd ed. 1995: 317). One night Mr Fondlove's passion was kindled, and promised her marriage[8]. According to Bellamora, she accepted him «partly with my Aversion to the other, and partly with my Inclinations to pity him» (p.

318), but later she doubted his love and escaped. So, to a large extent, her mother's pressure was responsible for the situation she was in at the beginning of the story: she was pregnant and alone in London trying to look for the help and privacy she could not get in Hampshire[9]. Finally, Fondlove, as his name reflects, proved a true lover, went to meet her in London, and convinced her to marry him even if it was just for the child's benefit.

In «The Wandring Beauty» (1698), Arabella also decides to escape from parental imposition concerning a husband. At the age of 16, she is courted by Sir Robert Richland, who is «hardly 60»[10] and does not attract her. Arabella leaves her parents' house to avoid their pressure on the subject. While she is staying with the Kindlys, she is courted by the pompous Mr Prayfast, who wants to marry her. But his is not a true love, as proves the fact that when he hears that Arabella may be from a humble family, he decides «she is no Wife for (him)» (Todd ed. 1995: 400). Fortunately, the wealthy and worthy Sir Lucius Lovewell falls truly in love with her, and does not care about her obscure origins. So, Arabella's disobedience to her parents is not only left unpunished but it is even rewarded with a more «profitable» marriage both sentimentally and economically speaking.

In «The Unhappy Mistake» (1698), Miles's problem is that Diana is not rich enough to be accepted by his father. For Sir Henry Hardyman, «Money is Beauty, Virtue, good Humour, Education, Reputation, and High Birth», and he warns his son: «no Love without my Leave» (Todd ed. 1995: 417-8). Behn is again criticizing the abuse of parental authority in amorous matters, and the financial aspect of marriage. Miles, however, promises he will not love any woman other than Diana however rich and noble she may be.

The two lovers of «The Court of the King of Bantam» (1698), Philibella and Valentine, also have problems in getting married because of the difference in their families' fortunes. Sir George Goodland, Valentine's father, knew of his son's passion for Philibella, but he did not think it convenient, as she just had 500 pounds that her uncle Sir Philip Friendly had given her as a present. It was this old man who helped the lovers. He knew that Sir George would disinherit Valentine if he married

Philibella, so Sir Philip offered to add 3,000 pounds to her fortune[11]. When he managed to get that sum of money from the haughty and extravagant Would-be King, the lovers got married privately. Sir Philip used his discarded mistress, Lucy Queen, to trick Mr King. He had to pay for her services and pregnancy. Behn specifies the fortune of many characters, how much Sir Philip adds to Philibella's dowry, and how much he gives to Lucy. It is not difficult to notice a relationship between the financial aspect of marriage and prostitution.

Behn makes these kinds of specifications as well in other stories. In «The Wandring Beauty», Sir Christian offers 300 pounds as a dowry for Peregrina, but it is not enough for the chaplain. However, Sir Lucius Lovewell, who had more than 3,000 a year, accepts the offer. We also know that he gives 200 pounds to Sir Christian's servants on his wedding day, and that at the end he gets 10,000 pounds in ready money from Arabella's father. In «The Unhappy Mistake», Sir Henry gives 10,000 pounds for Lucretia's marriage, whereas Diana only has a fortune of 2,000 pounds, and Lewis's is not above 1,200 a year. The narrator comments: «*O the unkind Distance that Money makes, even between Friends!*» (p. 416). For Sir Henry, money makes all the difference, and therefore he does not approve of his son's love for Diana. Miles values beauty, virtue and education instead. However, when he escapes from home, he takes all of his mother's jewels and 1,200 pounds, which he uses to live on after the war in Germany. Miles eventually gets his father's estate and 10,000 pounds as his revenue over the last five years[12].

Behn also makes many references to money in «The Unfortunate Happy Lady» (1698), mainly concerning the characters' wealth and various payments and debts. William Wilding inherited an estate of almost 4,000 pounds a year, and was obliged to give his sister Philadelphia the sum of 6,000 pounds. He spent a lot of money and used to gamble, so he had many debts which the narrator specifies. He intended to avoid his obligations to his sister by sending her to a brothel and paying 40 or 50 guineas to the old lady who ran it. There Gracelove offered Philadelphia 100 guineas, and as much yearly, and 200 more for every child she might have if she became his mistress[13]. He told her that Old Beldam «is a rank Procuress, to whom I am to give two hundred Guinea's for your Maiden head» (Todd ed. 1995: 374). Later, Counsellor Fairlaw offered her 30,000

pounds in ready money and 1,000 a year if she married him. Thanks to that money she could pay off her brother's debts, free him from jail, and give him Eugenia as a wife with 20,000 pounds. Once again in Behn's narrative, money appears as a basic aspect of prostitution and marriage.

References to the characters' estates are also given in «The Unfortunate Bride» (1698). Frankwit inherits 1,700 pounds a year, whereas Celesia receives 50,000 in cash and some estate in land, and Moorea 6,000 a year from her husband. But there are more interesting points to comment on in this novel. One is the ideas about marriage that the heroines defend. When Frankwit and Belvira start thinking of marriage, she appears reluctant as she distrusts men's constancy and fidelity and believes that consummation destroys the charm of love:

> *«»Frankwit, I am afraid to venture the Matrimonial bondage, it may make you think your self too much confined, in being only free to one»(...) «we are all like perfumes, and too continual smelling makes us seem to have lost our Sweets, I'll be judged by my Cousin Celesia here, if it be not better to live still in mutual love, without the last Enjoyment»»(Todd ed. 1995: 327).*

Celesia advises them not to marry and live *«without the least Enjoyment»* (p. 328). Frankwit reminds her that «love is no Camelion, it cannot feed on Air alone». Belvira thinks «Marriage enjoyment does but wake you from your sweet golden Dreams: pleasure is but a Dream, (...), and to be waken'd». And she adds:

> «(...) Women enjoy'd, are like Romances read, or Raree-shows, once seen, meer tricks of the slight of hand, which, when found out, you only wonder at your selves for wondering so before at them. 'Tis expectation endears the blessing; heaven would not be heaven, could we tell what 'tis. When the Plot's out you have done with the Play, and when the last Act's done, you see the Curtain drawn with great indifferency» (pp. 328-9).

Later, the narrator makes another comment quite critical of marriage. She tells us a «whimsical Knight» passionately desired Moorea, so he married her, «as if there were not hell enough in Matrimony, but he must wed the Devil too» (p. 331)[14].

I do not believe Behn is against marriage as such, but rather against some of its manifestations. She criticizes it when it is not based on love, and when this leads to infidelity. As has been said above, matrimony can become a form of slavery, and it can often resemble prostitution because it depends on money[15]. What Behn is undoubtedly and radically against is forced marriage, which is a recurrent theme in her works. She deals with it in her narrative, as has been shown before, but also in her plays, for instance in *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670), *The Town Fop* (1676), *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678), *The False Count* (1681), and *The Lucky Chance* (1686). In the latter, Lady Fulbank says: «Oh, how fatal are forced marriages! How many ruins one such match pulls on! Had I but kept my sacred vows to Gayman, How happy had I been, how prosperous he!» (Act I, Sc. ii). She, like many other heroines, was forced to marry an old man she did not love, and this was the cause of infidelity. Adulterous love is here a liberating force.

According to Ballaster (1992b: 91), «*The Unfortunate Bride* is a short romantic fiction that is dominated by tropes of vision and economic exchanges». This is so because of the emphasis Behn places on the visual aspect of love scenes, as well as on the financial aspect of marriage and how she makes reference to the characters' wealth when describing them. It happens in other novels by Behn too, as I have pointed out above. She believes in true love, and censures everything that has nothing to do with it: not only lust and inconstancy, but also arranged marriage and the socio-economic aspects of the institution. Hence the comparisons she makes between matrimony and both slavery and prostitution.

In Behn's narrative *comedies,* i.e. her stories with a happy ending, marriage is provided to reward the virtue and true love of the protagonists, and sometimes even those who do not deserve such a prize (like Wilding in «The Unfortunate Happy Lady»). So she is no misogamist whenever marriage means love. Sometimes she advocates for a freer relationship, but she is aware of the social vulnerability of unmarried women. In seventeenth-century society, to remain single would mean social and economic disaster for a woman. It would lead her to monastic life or else to prostitution or a similar sexual liaison. Either as a wife or as a kept mistress, a woman always depended on the financial support of a man. Behn presents the situation of courtesans in many of her plays, but in few

of her novels (mainly in *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-7), «The Court of the King of Bantam», and «The Unfortunate Happy Lady»). *In Love-Letters*, Silvia is left in constant need of «new Prey» not only due to her vanity and egoism, but also because she has few other possibilities in the world she lives in. Calista, instead and rather meaningfully, ends up in conventual retreat, like most of Zayas's heroines, after being abandoned by Philander. But the other protagonists of Behn's novels who do not die are provided with a happy marriage, and this proves that she is not entirely critical of the institution as such, only with parental interference and the financial questions involved. Moreover, she seems aware of the social vulnerability of contemporary women outside marriage. Behn's treatment of matrimony certainly contrasts with that of previous and coeval male writers, and establishes her as a forerunner of the female novelists of the following centuries.

NOTES

1. Macfarlane (1986: 133ff) includes plenty of records from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Stone (1979: 181ff) relates it to the development of individualism and of the conception of marriage as a union based on the compatibility and affection of the spouses, which precisely started during the Restoration.

2. However, Zayas's ideas about arranged marriage are not very clear (see Yllera's introduction 1983: 50-1, and Montesa Peydro 1981: 114-21).

3. The young lovers of this narrative are poor, so she «would not Marry him, out of a principle of pure Affection; as well remembering an old Proverb, That *when Poverty comes in at the Door, Love creeps out at the Window*» (Mish ed. 1970: 188). They decided that she would marry a rich old man, but they would continue to be lovers. The financial aspect was considered as very important for both the upper and the lower class (see Stone 1979).

4. Like Cervantes's «El casamiento engañoso», in *Novelas ejemplares,* for example. And in «El celoso extremeño», rich old Carrizales thinks: «»De que tenga dote o no no hay para qué hacer caso, pues el cielo me dio para todos y los ricos no han de buscar en sus matrimonios hacienda, sino gusto: que el gusto alarga la vida y los disgustos entre los casados la acortan» (Sieber ed. 1981: 102). Young Leonora's dowry was 20,000

ducados. Zayas deals with the financial aspects of marriage too; and Kirkman also specifies the amounts of money offered in matrimonial dealings in The *Counterfeit Lady Unveiled.*

5. Images of slavery applied to women were common in Behn's drama (e.g.: in *Sir Patient Fancy, The False Count, The Feign'd Curtezans, and The Emperor of the Moon)*, and in contemporary feminist writings like Drake's *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (1696) and Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) (Uphaus & Foster eds. 1991: 30, 39 & 48). In Scudéry's *Grand Cyrus,* Sapho had already compared marriage to slavery due to men's tyranny. This imagery continued to be used by Victorian women novelists, see Moers (1977: 14-18).

6. Convents were the destination of many young women in many European countries, as is the case in this novel, but in England they had been abolished in the sixteenth century, and 95% of the female population ended up in marriage (see Stone 1979: 38). The comparison between religious reclusive life and matrimony is meaningful. For Pearson (1993: 246), «In Behn's fiction, the nun (...) becomes a metaphor for the female condition. Nuns and wives are openly identified as parallel instances of society's limitation of women's lives».

7. This is just Charlot's personal choice, because religious life could actually be a career for a young woman of the time much better than an arranged or loveless marriage. It could provide her with education and could prevent her from the infidelity, disdain, and even violence of a husband, as well as venereal diseases. As Stone (1979: 38) puts it, «the life of an abbess was clearly preferable to that of an aristocratic wife».

8. Betrothal was totally binding and allowed pre-marital sex, but only if it was public (see Stone 1979: 30 & 386, and Macfarlane 1986: 299 & 305).

9. The number of pre-marital pregnancies in seventeenth-century England was surprisingly low (below 20%) for a society without any means of contraception other than *coitus interruptus*. However, it increased in the mid-eighteenth century to over 40% (see Stone 1979: 386-8).

10. For sexual, financial, and social reasons, early marriage was considered inappropriate for both men and women in seventeenth-century England. The common marrying ages were the 20s for women and between 25 and 30 for men. But there were late marriages and remarriages too (Macfarlane 1986: 211-6). Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that 60 was precisely the highest life expectancy for the contemporary rural elite (Stone 1979: 57). We also know that at the end of the seventeenth century,

«parent-child relations on the issue of control of marriage were becoming more and more strained, and more and more children were defying their parents and running away» (Stone 1979: 31). Therefore, Behn is showing a frequent situation at the time and not a simple literary cliché.

11. According to Macfarlane (1986: 264), the common dowries in the aristocracy and the upper gentry were of 3,000 or 4,000 pounds, and of 300 or 400 in the middle class, i.e. something equivalent to about three years' income from the man's estate.

12. According to Trevelyan (1967: 293), in 1688, the yearly income of temporal lords was 3,200 pounds, that of knights 650, that of merchants 400, and that of lesser clergymen 72 pounds.

13. Having kept *mistresses* became very common in upper-class circles during the Restoration and the eighteenth century as a provisional alternative or a complement of marriage. These girls used to have a middle-class origin and difficulties to marry satisfactorily due to financial problems or personal dishonour. Becoming kept mistresses allowed them to maintain the standard of living they were accustomed to, since the man provided them with a lodging, a fixed annuity, and a certain extra amount for each child they might have. It was, therefore, the most sophisticated kind of prostitution.

14. There was extensive literature warning people of the dangers and disadvantages of marriage in the early (see Maclean 1977: 97 ff) and the late seventeenth century. *The Pleasures of Marriage* (1682) denounced the «tortures», «vexations» and «torments» of matrimony. Margaret Cavendish spoke of the «cares and troubles that accompany a married life» (quoted by Macfarlane (1986: 170-1). And Mary Astell thought it an institution of male tyranny (Uphaus & Foster eds. 1991: 33-49).

15. Later, other writers continued using this comparison, such as Defoe in *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Roxana (1724).

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