

# "Too venturous poesy" : subversive desire in english poetry

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Dimiter Daphinoff

## "Too venturous poesy": Subversive Desire in English Poetry

In 1688 was published in London a slim volume of poems entitled *Lycidus, or the Lover in Fashion*. One of the poems in the collection is called "On Desire", and its opening lines run as follows:

What Art thou, oh! thou new-found pain?  
From what infection dost thou spring?  
Tell me – oh! tell me, thou enchanting thing,  
Thy nature, and thy name;  
Inform me by what subtil Art,  
What powerful Influence,  
You got such vast Dominion in a part  
Of my unheeded, and unguarded, heart,  
That fame and Honour cannot drive yee thence.

Oh! mischievous usurper of my Peace;  
Oh! soft Intruder on my solitude,  
Charming disturber of my ease,  
That hast my nobler fate persu'd,  
And all the Glorys of my life subdu'd.

Thou haunt'st my inconvenient hours;  
The business of the Day, nor silence of the night,  
That shou'd to cares and sleep invite,  
Can bid defiance to thy conquering powers.

Where hast thou been this live-long Age  
That from my Birth till now,  
Thou never cou'dst one thought engage,  
Or charm my soul with the uneasy rage  
That made it all its humble feeble know?<sup>1</sup>

The title of the collection suggests commonplace pastoral poetry, and indeed, the stanzas quoted above do not promise more than a repeat

1 Aphra Behn, *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Janet Todd, 7 vols., London, William Pickering, 1992-1996, vol. 1, p. 281.

of the convention. The rhetorical questions, the exclamations and repetitions, the insistent use of apostrophe, antithesis and oxymoron (“soft Intruder”, “Charming disturber”; later on: “welcome plague”), the emphasis on such time-honoured notions as fate, honour, heart and soul as well as the form, the Pindaric Ode, seem to place the poem firmly in the venerable tradition of pastoral verse, which in English literature goes back to Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender*. When we read on, we find, predictably, the typical *locus amoenus* of such poetry (“silent Groves”, “lonely bowrs”) and also the inevitable shepherd whose standard name (“Lysander”) confirms the convention. Not surprisingly, there is also the contrast country vs. court, and the temptation of the virtuous by wordly interest.

So far so good. Except that the “malicious spright” invoked by the speaker in the fifth stanza (l. 24) is not the expected deity of Love, and the “infection” (l. 2) not that caused by Cupid’s arrows. Instead the “new-found pain” (l. 1) is a very concrete, pressing urge (“desire”), which haunts the speaker’s most “inconvenient hours” (l. 15). This desire, moreover, is quite unabashed and demands release. It guides the speaker’s hand to touch the beloved person in an unmistakably intimate invitation.

In 1688, such candidness was not really new. The Restoration wits had extended the limits of poetic expression to include shameless sensuality. The explicitness of Rochester’s verse, for example, can easily compete with many a pop-song of our techno age. For men to avow their sexual desire and claim instant satisfaction had become something of a commonplace. Charles II had set the fashion by his own example<sup>2</sup>, and the libertine was a pampered member of polite society. How permissive the age was can be glimpsed from the Restoration stage, which was notorious for its bawdiness, and from the violent attacks to which it provoked the faithful<sup>3</sup>.

The point of the poem is that the speaker is not male; neither is the author of the text. The irresistible urge described is that of a

2 See Ronald Hutton, *Charles the Second, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989.

3 See Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Prophaneness of the English Stage* (1698).

woman. Female desire, however, could not claim social endorsement, nor could it, in 1688, base itself on a prestigious tradition in English literature. Hence, the poet (Aphra Behn) has to justify her temerity. She does so by questioning the usual behaviour of women. It is not female desire that is unnatural, she finds, but the norm of female virtue. Chastity can be a form of frigidity ("Virgin Ice", l. 94), but mostly it is a habit or a pretense (a "needful fraud", l. 110). By claiming that all women are, by nature, desirous and desiring like herself, Aphra Behn undermines the norms of female upbringing and conduct. When it comes to passionate love, the poem implies, there is no difference between men and women. Desire is natural in both, and it is time to make it the subject matter of female poetry as well.

The bold assertion, however, is qualified by the concluding stanza. The desire all women share is, somewhat disappointingly, seen as a "weekness of my sex" (l. 114), and the allusion to Helen's adultery seems to confirm popular prejudice. How to account for this somewhat surprising back-out?

To make herself heard, a 17th-century woman author had to adopt the literary conventions established by male poets. Thus, Aphra Behn not only entered the role game of the pastoral but she often adopted a male perspective which clashes with the distinctly female concerns she thematizes.

In the poem entitled "To The Unknown Daphnis on his Excellent Translation of Lucretius", Aphra Behn explains the dilemma as a typical female predicament:

Till now, I curst my Sex and Education,  
And more the scantd Customs of the Nation,  
Permitting not the Female Sex to tread  
The Mighty Paths of Learned Heroes Dead.  
The Godlike Virgil and great Homers Muse  
Like Divine Mysteries are conceal'd from us,  
We are forbid all grateful Theams,  
No ravishing Thoughts approach our Ear;  
The Fulsom Gingle of the Times  
Is all we are allow'd to Understand, or Hear<sup>4</sup>.

4 Behn, *Works*, I, pp. 25-26.

It is a tribute to Aphra Behn's integrity of talent that she makes the dilemma between female boldness and vulnerability a central theme of her poetry. More importantly, she often succeeds in turning the tables on men by subverting male erotic strategies and exposing the selfishness – and the limits – of male desire. In her celebrated poem "The Disappointment", for example, Aphra Behn joins a contemporary vogue whose origins can be traced back to Ovid (*Amores* III.vii). In 1661, the French poet Canteuac had published a poem called "Sur une impuissance", which triggered numerous imitations in France and England. Sir George Etherege and the Earl of Rochester, to name only a few, contributed to the fashion with poems called "The Imperfect Enjoyment" (1672; 1680). Like her contemporaries, Aphra Behn describes the encounter of young lovers in a conventional pastoral setting. Like Canteuac and Rochester, Behn gives prominence of place to the man who soon overcomes female resistance. But then a significant shift occurs in Behn's treatment. The narrative continues to describe the various stages of the conquest, but the perspective changes at the climactic moment. Narration and focalization do no longer converge. The shepherd contemplates the female body that yearns to be possessed and realizes that he has already spent his energy (stanza VIII). The crucial action (or rather: lack of action), however, is seen from the woman's point of view. Cloris, "returning from the Trance/ Which Love and soft Desire had bred", gently puts her hand on Lysander's secret parts, but withdraws it immediately,

Finding that God of her Desires  
Disarm'd of all his Awful Fires,  
And Cold as Flow'rs bath'd in the Morning-Dew<sup>5</sup>.

The poem ends, like its predecessors, on the man's anger, but Aphra Behn offers none of the comforts the male poets had in store for the defeated man. Unlike Canteuac, she denies the shepherd a second chance, and unlike Rochester, she does not allow him to blame the woman for his impotence.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

The two poems by Aphra Behn discussed so far have one thing centrally in common: they celebrate female desire that claims its due in a world which questions that desire's legitimacy and puts severe constraints on its expression. Aphra Behn's poems are subversive in that they call into question received gender roles and, in particular, the value of female modesty. The poet saw through the double standard which allowed men what it denied to women. What's more, she understood that one powerful motive for man's infidelity was precisely his inability to cope with female desire. Libertinage was the form misogyny took in polite society. That the victim of such behaviour was ultimately woman – whether coy or passionate – is what Aphra Behn protests against, nowhere more forcefully than in her poem "To Lysander, on some Verses be writ, and asking more for his Heart then 'twas worth":

I

Take back that Heart, you with such Caution give,  
Take the fond valu'd Trifle back;  
I hate Love-Merchants that a Trade wou'd drive;  
And meanly cunning Bargains make.

II

I care not how the busy Market goes,  
And scorn to Chaffer for a price:  
Love does one Staple Rate on all impose,  
Nor leaves it to the Traders Choice.

III

A Heart requires a Heart Unfeign'd and True,  
Though Subt'ly you advance the Price,  
And ask a Rate that Simple Love ne'er knew:  
And the free Trade Monopolize.  
[...]

XI

Whilst like a Glimering Taper still I burn,  
And waste my self in my own flame,  
Adraste takes the welcome rich Return:  
And leaves me all the hopeless Pain.

## XII

Be just, my lovely Swain, and do not take  
 Freedoms you'll not to me allow;  
 Or give Amynta so much Freedom back:  
 That she may Rove as well as you<sup>6</sup>.

From the start the poem establishes a bold terminology of trade reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnet 87. The speaker refuses to accept the rules of the market place which, she realizes to her cost, are one-sided and unfair. Man has monopolized the trade of love and thereby debased the value – and the dignity – of woman. Aphra Behn's poem is a gripping plea for equality in love. It confirms Eric Rothstein's observation that Restoration poetry, whether public or private, has "power at its center"<sup>7</sup>. In matters of the heart, we are given to understand, the same standard should be applied to both sexes. The terms should be either mutual loyalty (the alternative the speaker prefers) or else the same freedom for man and woman to philander at will.

The celebration of female desire in Aphra Behn's poetry ultimately leads to the forceful demand for true partnership and equal rights in love and sexuality. It is not surprising that Aphra Behn was violently attacked and that her critics were, for the most part, men. Realizing the subversive quality of her works, they branded them as immoral and the poet herself as a female rake.

\*

In poetry, subversive desire reappears with a flourish a little over a century later in the poems of Lord Byron. Aphra Behn and Lord Byron share, like Oscar Wilde later on, the same critical fate. Their work has been read in the light of their biography, and the voyeuristic interest has harmed their literary reputation. Inevitably, poetry, being the most intimate of genres, invites biographical speculation, and certainly Byron, of all poets, deliberately encouraged conjecture, especially in his Eastern tales which became spectacular bestsellers. A scandalous life, Byron knew, sells well.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Rothstein, *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Poetry, 1660-1780*, Boston/London/Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 1.



*The Bride of Abydos* is not one of Byron's best poems. Its plot is even more improbable than that of the other Oriental Tales, and its verse is, on the whole, (even) more careless. Nevertheless it contains passages of very fine poetry. *The Bride of Abydos* is a tale of illicit love and desperate rebellion, of exquisite tenderness and fierce revenge, into which are thrown, for good measure, vague intimations of political freedom. It is composed, in other words, according to the successful formula which Byron employed in his other verse narratives of that period, "The Giaour" and "The Corsair".

Old Giaffir, the ruler of Abydos, has two children, a daughter whom he adores, Zuleika, and a son, Selim, whom he holds in contempt. As the narrative opens, the Giaffir announces that he has found a suitable husband for his daughter. Unprepared for the news, Zuleika assures Selim of her affection in words which go beyond the usual fondness of siblings. Zuleika's is a declaration of love rounded up by a vow of eternal loyalty. Ignorant of other men, Zuleika has in her brother all the bliss she knows and needs:

Oh, Selim dear! – Oh, more than dearest!  
 Say, is it I thou hat'st or fearest?  
 Come, lay thy head upon my breast,  
 And I will kiss thee into rest,  
 Since words of mine – and songs must fail,  
 Even from my fabled nightingale.  
 [...]
 Without thy free consent, command –  
 The Sultan should not have my hand!  
 Think'st thou that I could bear to part  
 With thee – and learn to halve my heart?  
 Ah! were I severed from thy side,  
 Where were thy friend – and who my guide?  
 Years have not seen – Time shall not see  
 The hour that tears my soul from thee –  
 Even Azrael from his deadly quiver  
     When flies that shaft – and fly it must –  
 That parts all else – shall doom for ever  
     Our hearts to undivided dust!     (I,11, 299-304; 315-26)<sup>8</sup>

8 Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. III, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981.



Byron's choice of words turns innocent fondness into passionate love. Zuleika's solemn oath triggers an outburst of violent exultation in her brother:

Now thou art mine, for ever mine,  
With life to keep, and scarce with life resign; –  
Now thou art mine, that sacred oath,  
Though sworn by one, hath bound us both. (I,12, 347-50)

And as if to silence any doubts as to the essentially erotic nature of this love, Byron has Zuleika confirm her affection in most tender terms, illustrated by corresponding gestures:

With thee to live, with thee to die,  
I dare not to my hope deny:  
Thy cheek, thine eyes, thy lips to kiss,  
Like this – and this – no more then this,  
For, Alla! sure thy lips are flame,  
What fever in thy veins is flushing? (I,13, 392-97)

At this point the poem suddenly veers away from the dangerous path of incestuous love. In one of the surprising twists in the plot, in which he delighted, Byron makes Selim *not* Zuleika's brother, but more acceptably, her cousin. Selim plans to revenge his father's murder, kill the Giaffir with the help of a band of pirates whose chief he is, and to elope with Zuleika into a life of unrestricted freedom (II,20, 452-57). Thus removed from the centre of incest, Zuleika can be safely loved and enjoyed. Predictably, however, Selim's plot fails, he is shot and Zuleika, at once sister, cousin and bride, commits suicide.

*The Bride of Abydos* makes a last-minute effort to channel subversive desire into lawful love. Incestuous passion is saved by the revelation of true identity, a motif whose origins can be traced back to mythology and folklore. My observation of a taboo which threatens the moral fabric of society, ties in with the evidence of the poems to Augusta Leigh ("Stanzas to Augusta", "Epistle to Augusta") which Byron wrote to his half-sister from his Swiss exile in the summer of 1816. However, a closer analysis of these poems of a delicate, if desperate, love would go beyond the limits of this essay.

Byron's *Bride of Abydos* holds a dialogue with a number of texts, with Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Bk II, Canto xii: "The Bower of Bliss" episode), and especially with Marlowe's version of the ancient tale of *Hero and Leander* (see *Bride*, II.7).

The story of the star-crossed love of Hero and Leander has a privileged place in classical love lore. Leander is a much admired youth from Abydos, Hero a proud beauty from the city of Sestos across the Hellespont. At the annual festival of Venus, Hero and Leander meet and fall in love but Hero has vowed chaste service to Venus, which makes her coy. After a second, more encouraging meeting, the love-sick Leander decides to swim across the Hellespont and take Hero by surprise. Exhausted from the effort, he is finally admitted into Hero's arms and there "in a moment tooke, / That which so long so charily she kept" (ll. 792-93)<sup>9</sup>. At this point, Marlowe's narrative breaks off.

Marlowe's verse narrative is justly celebrated for its melodious, yet sinewy verse, for its rich sensuality and fine sense of comedy. What matters especially in our context, however, is Marlowe's concentration on the male protagonist. Indeed, not only is more space devoted to Leander than to Hero, but in large sections of the narrative, Leander is the focalizer of the events.

The different treatment becomes apparent from the start. Although Hero is introduced first and some fifty lines are devoted to her person (compared to Leander's forty), it is the boy's description that fires the poet's imagination. Hero's portrait is conventional and distanced. The reference to mythology endows her with an ethereal aura, but at the same time Marlowe's insistence on her luxurious attire and on technical aspects of her footwear shed a comic light on the votaress. Albeit shorter, Leander's close-up portrait is more intimately memorable. While Hero's lofty beauty is admired, Leander's physical presence is immediately desired. And while Hero employs art – precious robes, garlands, jewelry and perfume – to heighten her charms, Leander's unadorned body is perfect in itself and sensually suggestive, so much so that men, gods and mortals alike, feel irresistibly attracted. And

9 Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Works*, ed. Roma Gill, vol. I, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987.

whereas Hero is self-conscious about her beauty, Leander is happily unaware of the havoc he creates (ll. 65-84).

Mistaking him for Ganymede, Neptune involves Leander in an amorous game during his swim. The delightfully comic situation offers Marlowe further opportunity to dwell on the physical beauty of the protagonist:

He clapt his plumpe cheekes, and with his tresses playd,  
 And smiling wantonly, his love bewrayd.  
 He watcht his armes, and as they opend wide,  
 At every stroke, betwixt them would he slide,  
 And steale a kisse, and then run out and daunce,  
 And as he turnd, cast many a lustfull glaunce,  
 And threw him gawdie toies to please his eie,  
 And dive into the water, and there prie  
 Upon his brest, his thighs, and everie lim,  
 And up againe, and close beside him swim,  
 And talke of love: Leander made replie,  
 You are deceav'd, I am no woman I.  
 Thereat smilde Neptune, and then told a tale,  
 How that a sheapheard sitting in a vale,  
 Playd with a boy so faire and kind,  
 As for his love, both earth and heaven pyn'd, [...] (ll. 665-80)

Leander reaches the shore just in time to escape the doting god's ultimate snare.

The final scene of Marlowe's fragment links up with the beginning of the narrative. There, as we have seen, Hero's beauty needed ornament to shine above the rest. Here, after a night of carnal knowledge, Leander (and the reader) finally see the girl in the nude (ll. 807-10). Compared to the detailed, sensuous account of Leander's nudity, however, the description of Hero's body is curiously uninspired and brief. The reference to the god of the underworld and his gold quickly diverts attention from the erotic appeal female nakedness might have.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the heterosexual affair served Marlowe as, among other things, a decorous vehicle for the expression of deviant desire. This impression is confirmed by the absence of a valid moral frame to which the poet could refer his protagonists. Marlowe does not judge, he does not accuse. In his

narrative, pleasure is not only permitted but fervently pursued, and love, in whatever form, is ironically punctured.

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"Too venturesome poesy", indeed. The phrase in the title of my essay is not Marlowe's, albeit the obsolete word "poesy" might suggest an Elizabethan author, Sidney perhaps. The reference, however, is to Oscar Wilde, whose long poem "Charmides", from which the quotation is taken, deliberately harks back in theme and tone to Marlowe's great example.

Set in ancient Greece, "Charmides"<sup>10</sup> tells the story of a charming adolescent who falls in love with the statue of the goddess Pallas Athene. In a significant variation of the Pygmalion theme, the boy embraces the marble effigy in a scene of most sensual trespassing:

Ready for death he stood, but lo! the air  
Grew silent, and the horses ceased to neigh,  
And off his brow he tossed the clustering hair,  
And from his limbs he threw the cloak away,  
For whom would not such love make desperate,  
And nigher came, and touched her throat, and with hands violate

Undid the cuirass, and the crocus gown,  
And bared the breasts of polished ivory,  
Till from the waist the peplos falling down  
Left visible the secret mystery  
Which to no lover will Athena show,  
The grand cool flanks, the crescent thighs, the bossy hills of snow.  
[...]

A little space he let his greedy eyes  
Rest on the burnished image, till mere sight  
Half swooned for surfeit of such luxuries,  
And then his lips in hungering delight  
Fed on her lips, and round the towered neck  
He flung his arms, nor cared at all his passion's will to check.

10 The allusion to Plato's dialogue and the opportunity to pun on the boy's name are, of course, no accident.

Never I ween did lover hold such tryst,  
 For all night long he murmured honeyed word,  
 And saw her sweet unravished limbs, and kissed  
 Her pale and argent body undisturbed,  
 And paddled with the polished throat, and pressed  
 His hot and beating heart upon her chill and icy breast<sup>11</sup>.

Unlike the statue Pygmalion had created, the statue of Pallas Athene does not spring to life under the boy's caresses. And, as we know from mythology and classical literature, the presumptuous passion of a mortal for a god seldom goes unpunished. Charmides' transgression is twofold: his desire breaks down the barriers between humans and gods, but it also violates the laws of nature. The union of the heated youth and the "chill and icy breast" of the statue is both a sacrilege and an unnatural sexual act.

Not surprisingly, the insulted deity raises a storm in which the boy is drowned. Yet, as in Marlowe's poem, an enamoured sea-god saves him. Charmides is washed ashore where a nymph discovers the senseless boy and falls in love with him. In a scene which parallels Charmides' own love-play with the unresponsive image of the goddess, the nymph longingly explores the body of the youth. The description of her awakened desire recalls – and at the same intensifies – the woman's frustration in Aphra Behn's poem on unconsummated love. Like Charmides, the nymph violates the norms of her class, and like him, she is punished for it. Finally, Aphrodite takes pity on the unfortunate pair and intercedes with Persephone and Pluto that they may "let Desire pass across dread Charon's icy ford" (p. 769). It is in the underworld, then, that the boy and the nymph can finally perform love's rites. Forbidden desire can only be enjoyed in the ghostly realm of the deceased, and Wilde concludes his description of a love as sensual and free as that of Hero and Leander by exclaiming:

Too venturous poesy, O why essay  
 To pipe again of passion!<sup>12</sup>

11 Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works*, London and Glasgow, Collins, 1948, pp. 755-56.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 769.

Wilde's poem justifies its inclusion in an investigation of subversive desire in poetry for a number of reasons. First, it gives the poet the opportunity to celebrate male beauty. As in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, the focus is primarily on the boy. Like another Narcissus, Charmides contemplates his image in two rivers, one in the upper, the other in the nether world, and like Narcissus, he is the object of both human and divine desire. Second, Charmides' union with the marble statue of the goddess is relevant beyond its obviously blasphemic nature. As the French critic Mireille Dottin-Orsini points out<sup>13</sup>, the love for a woman in the shape of a statue is a recurrent motif in late 19th-century French literature and art. While Théophile Gautier's prose narratives *Arria Marcella* (1852) and *Le Roman de la momie* are among the earliest examples, Henri de Régnier's novel *La femme de marbre* (1900) and Camille Lemonnier's "La Bella Impéria" (1900) date from the last years of the century. Wilde himself had, of course, offered a variant of the theme in his own novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The point is that the projection of male desire into an inanimate female body is profoundly misogynous. Woman can be safely enjoyed in this shape, and man's fear of her sexuality is conveniently displaced. As if to prove this by analogy, Charmides is incapable of responding to the caresses of a woman in the flesh. As with the image of Pallas, he can only find fulfilment outside common human experience. A shadowy creature of the underworld, he enjoys the woman as ghost. In the interval between the sacrilegious assault on the marble goddess and the morbid union with an unsubstantial being, Charmides is shown narcissistically enjoying the envied beauty of his youth.

Wilde's poem seems to sum up not only the ambiguous longings of the author's own tormented life, but, more importantly, a tradition of English verse which dares make erotic transgression and subversive desire the subject of moving poetry.

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13 Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale: Textes et images de la misogynie fin-de-siècle*, Paris, Grasset, 1993, esp. pp. 113-132.



Investigations of transgression and “otherness” have been made possible by recent developments in criticism, notably by cultural and gender theory and by the conceptual and terminological tools which psychoanalytical research from Freud to Foucault has given us. Such studies have made the literary critic aware of, and sensitive to, what John Dollimore calls “the complex, often violent, sometimes murderous dialectic between dominant and subordinate cultures, groups, and identities”<sup>14</sup>. They have also alerted us to the representation which this struggle can take in literature. Dollimore coined the term “sexual dissidence” for that kind of resistance which, “operating in terms of gender, repeatedly unsettles the very opposition between the dominant and the subordinate”<sup>15</sup>. One need not go so far as to claim, as George Steiner did, that homosexuality is crucially formative of modernity<sup>16</sup>, nor does one need to agree with Luce Irigaray that patriarchy is fundamentally homosexual<sup>17</sup>. Such radical views are not necessary to understand – and explain – that the fears of the “other”, which characterize the immediate reception of the works of Aphra Behn, Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde, involve, as Dollimore puts it, “fears of that which is potentially the ‘same as’ – not only in the psychic sense that the other is constructed from projected, internal fears, but also in the social sense that the other is often created from, and disavowed as, the proximate”<sup>18</sup>.

The current critical debate is further enriched and stimulated by the possibilities which intertextual studies have opened up in recent years. As we have seen, the texts under consideration hold a rich dialogue with other texts, a dialogue, which allows us to assess, among other things, the durability of certain thematic concerns, motifs, modes and genres (the pastoral, the epyllion, the epistle, the ode etc.). Cultural and gender theory combine with intertextual concepts and

14 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 21.

15 *Ibid.*

16 George Steiner, “Eros and Idiom”, in *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978, esp. pp. 115-118.

17 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1985.

18 Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 34.



psychoanalytical findings to explain, for instance, the fear of the "other" in such seemingly different works as Aphra Behn's epistle to the rake Lysander and Oscar Wilde's poem about Charmides' love for a statue. Mark Breitenberg argues, for example, that "Freud's understanding of anxiety leads us to a useful way of thinking about the pervasive masculine anxiety toward [...] women's sexuality in general that is so common in early modern texts"<sup>19</sup>.

The purpose of this investigation is not, of course, to "out" the poets discussed but to show that "too venturous poesy" is always a protest against, and a challenge to, received norms and values. Such poetry is, therefore, a form of emancipation and a call for the liberty to fashion one's own self. In so far as daring desire in poetry undermines the established moral and social structures, it is perceived as outrageous, unsettling and subversive. It is no accident that each of the poets under consideration painfully experienced the consequences of his or her defiance. Aphra Behn was stigmatized as a dissolute bawd, Marlowe was suspected of atheism and killed under obscure circumstances; Byron was forced into exile, and Wilde suffered imprisonment when his sexual dissidence was publicly known.

One of the defensive strategies the poets employ to make their claims acceptable to the dominant culture is the recurrent use they make of pagan mythology and ancient or pseudo-classical models in theme, setting and genre – or at least their recourse, as with Byron, to an exotic, non-Christian environment.

Subversive desire tends to appear in poetry at times of notable social and cultural transition. Marlowe, the first of our moderns, had just left behind the coherent moral and social system of the Middle Ages; Aphra Behn had emerged from the turmoils of the Civil War and the Commonwealth, that "untun'd World" hostile to pleasure and the arts, "Producing nothing that was Great and Gay", as she says in her elegy "On the Death of E. Waller, Esq;"<sup>20</sup>. Byron had translated the liberating energies of the French Revolution into a crusade for individual freedom and a romantic commitment to the liberation of

19 Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 5.

20 Behn, *Works*, I, p. 290.

oppressed nations. Oscar Wilde, finally, was ostracized when the sexual ambiguity of his dandies, a side-effect of the disappearance of God and a protest against the ugliness of industrial progress, was found to correspond to the author's own reality, when, in other words, the unsettling proximity of the same as other was fully realized by his contemporaries.

In the light of what precedes, the poetry of subversive desire can be defined as both a result and a promoter of profound cultural changes. As such, it deserves our attention and respect.

## Zusammenfassung

In der englischen Poesie von der Renaissance bis zum Fin-de-siècle werden Formen "subversiven Begehrens" (*subversive desire*), d. h. sexuellen Verlangens und Verhaltens, das sich in bewusster Auflehnung gegen Norm, Gesetz und Gebot konstituiert, untersucht. Am Beispiel von Aphra Behn wird gezeigt, wie eine Frau sich traditionell männlich geprägter Themen und Gattungen bedient, um spezifisch weibliche Anliegen zur Sprache zu bringen. Behns freimütiger Anspruch auf Gleichberechtigung in Liebe und Sexualität lief herkömmlichen Rollenmodellen und literarischer Praxis zuwider und hatte zur Folge, dass ihr Werk als obszön und verwerflich abgestempelt wurde. Lord Byron setzt in seiner Verserzählung *The Bride of Abydos* Inzestphantasien frei, die er nur mühevoll zu steuern vermag, und Oscar Wilde versucht in "Charmides" – wie vor ihm Marlowe in *Hero and Leander* – deviantes Verlangen durch mythologische Entrückung und intertextuelle Anspielung abzusichern. "Subversive desire" manifestiert sich in der englischen Poesie in Zeiten gesellschaftlichen Umbruchs und ist zugleich Wegbereiter und Resultat tiefgreifender kultureller Veränderungen.