



# The Secret Life of Aphra Behn

By Janet Todd

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'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,' said Virginia Woolf. Yet that tomb, in Westminster Abbey, records one of the few uncontested facts about this Restoration playwright, poet, novelist and spy: the date of her death, 16 April 1689. For the rest secrecy and duplicity are almost the key to her life. She loved codes, making and breaking them; writing her life becomes a decoding of a passionate but playful woman.

Janet Todd draws on documents she has rediscovered in the Dutch archives, and on Behn's own writings, to tell a story of court, diplomatic and sexual intrigue, and of the rise from humble origins of the first woman to earn her living as a professional writer.

Aphra Behn's first notable employment was as a Royal spy in Holland; she had probably also spied in Surinam. It was not until she was in her thirties that she published the first of the 19 plays and other works which established her fame (though not riches) among her 'good, sweet, honey-candied readers'. Many of her works were openly erotic, indeed as frank as anything by her friends Wycherley and Rochester. Some also offered an inside view of court and political intrigues, and Todd reveals the historical scandals and legal cases behind some of Behn's most famous 'fictions'.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Because of her sensuous writing in the 17th century, wild and wonderful Aphra Behn has been a notorious figure in history. Janet Todd's new biography elaborates on the mysterious Behn and reveals her to be a complex contradiction. Her politics were High Tory, but her language was considered indecent for a woman of her times. She fought against the restraints of a patriarchal world, yet depended upon male approval. She was a lover of the easy life, but risked her life as a spy for England. Todd brings new documents from Holland and England to light, as well as discussions of Behn's entire works, in order to present this in-depth study of a most remarkable writer.

#### From Library Journal

Aphra Behn, the Restoration poet, playwright, and novelist, is regarded as the first woman in English literature to earn her living as a writer. She may also have engaged in political and sexual intrigue and even acted as a spy for Charles II. Her life is marked by its mystery, masks, and a confusion of fact and fiction. There have been several biographies of this 17th-century figure, including George Woodcock's *Aphra Behn: The English Sappho* (Consortium, 1989), but Todd's is the first to attempt to sort out the mysteries and erotic dimensions of Behn's life. Todd (English, Univ. of East Anglia) has written many books on women and literature and has edited Behn's works. Her treatment is as engrossing and entertaining as it is thorough and well researched. Highly recommended for public and academic collections. Thomas L. Cooksey, Armstrong Atlantic State Univ., Savannah, Ga.

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#### About the Author

Janet Todd is an internationally renowned scholar of early women writers. She has edited the complete works of England's first professional woman writer, Aphra Behn, and the Enlightenment feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as novels by Charlotte Smith, Mary Shelley and Eliza Fenwick and memoirs of the confidence trickster Mary Carleton. Janet Todd is the general editor of the 9-volume Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen and editor of Jane Austen in Context and the Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice. Among her critical works are Women's Friendship in Literature, The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing and Fiction 1660-1800 and the Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen. She has written four biographies: of Aphra Behn and three linked women, Mary Wollstonecraft, her daughter, and her aristocratic Irish pupils. In the 1970s Janet Todd taught in the USA, during which time she began the first journal devoted to women's writing. Back in the UK in the 1990s she co-founded the journal Women's Writing. Janet has had a peripatetic and busy life, working at universities in Ghana, the US, and Puerto Rico, as well as England and Scotland. She is now an emeritus professor at the University of Aberdeen and lives in Cambridge.

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##### Mandy Conway:

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**Marion Driskell:**

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