Politics of Disguise and Deception : Aphra Behn's The Amorous Prince; or The Curious Husband

Politics of Disguise and Deception: Aphra Behn's *The Amorous Prince; or The Curious Husband*

Naoki Kondo

1

We cannot help looking at Aphra Behn's life with deep emotion when we remember the fact that she died soon after the coronation of William and Mary.[1] She died as if to protest against the Glorious Revolution, showing loyalty to the Stuart kings to finish her social activities that had begun after the Interregnum. It seemed to her that the Revolution was a kind of challenge to legitimacy that she esteemed. Though the conception of legitimacy and the support of the authoritarian monarchy appear to be incompatible with Aphra Behn, the first professional woman writer and the feminist writer, it was the Stuarts and loyalty to the Stuarts that made up the identity of the author Aphra Behn. It is indeed dangerous that we associate a writer with his or her political principle too emphatically, but it is true that we cannot discuss Aphra Behn without considering her political principle. She was involved with secret political activities before she launched her literary career as a dramatist. It is recorded in the Public Record Office that she acted as courier for Charles II in the Low Countries, using the code name "Astrea." Her most famous novel *Oroonoko* suggests strongly she went to Surinam with a political end. After all, apart from a matter of degree, she lived without detaching herself from politics to the last. The politics in which she was involved was that of the Stuarts, and her loyalty to the monarch was necessary and natural because there were only two licensed theatres in England when she began to write a play. Of course, I do not intend to say that she supported the authoritarian monarchy only for her own interests. But authority is her concern as a matter of principle. I only intend to say that her support for legitimate authority has something to do with the authority within a literary work: that is the authority of author. She was conscious of being an author who had such authority in her writings. That consciousness made her an epoch-making writer, which can be seen explicitly in her second staged play.

Her second staged play, *The Amorous Prince; or The Curious Husband* (1671), is a comedy, which unfolds under the authority of the Prince of Florence, Frederick. Behn informs the audience of this fact by making Frederick cry in a scene where he cannot

[1] She died on April 16, 1689.

help throwing himself upon authority when he was in peril of life, "I am the Prince of Florence" (5. 3. 113).[2] To be sure, Behn illustrates that he must cry it out because his authority is attenuated. Mention to authority means its becoming weak. Anyway, we should first remember the fact that the play is based on the prince's authority without which the comedy cannot sustain itself and result in a happy ending. But any authority at Court is to be burdened with disguise and deception, which Behn learned through her spying mission. Disguise and deception seen in *The Amorous Prince* are contrived for love affairs at Court, but they are parallel with those in politics. There is no difference between love affairs at Court and politics at Court in those days. How did Behn see such a world? How did she handle such a masquerade with her authority as an author? Behn understands well that such a topic is more suitable to be represented in a stage than to be delineated in words. Disguise should be acted and be seen. Making an analysis of the play will illustrate her view of literature and her principle as a playwright or as an author.

The play consists of two plots: that of the amorous prince Frederick and that of the curious husband Antonio, a nobleman of Florence. It is not deniable that the latter is founded upon *El Curioso Impertinente* of Cervantes.[3] But the adaptation itself is not very significant since it was common in the then literature. Though she is later to aim for a faithful translation rather than an adaptation in *Agnes de Castro* (1688), Behn alters the story of Cervantes in some critical points in the play. While Cervantes's is a tragedy, Behn's is a comedy having a happy ending, even not a tragi-comedy like her first staged play *The Forc'd Marriage; or The Jealous Bridegroom.* Comedy differs utterly from tragedy. A story of a curious husband was more suitable for comedy than tragedy from her point of view. In the play we can recognize explicitly her opinion on the topic. Behn supposes such a husband is qualified for having a happy ending in spite of his fault. We should notice much more her management of the topic than the mere fact of the adaptation. What's more, we should consider why Behn combines the plot of *The Amorous Prince* with that of *The Curious Husband.* First I will treat the former.

2

The play opens with a sexual scene in the chamber of Cloris where she is dressed

---

[2] *The Amorous Prince; or The Curious Husband,* Vol. 5 of *The Works of Aphra Behn,* ed. Janet Todd (London: William Pickering, 1995). Citations from the play belong to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text with the act, scene and line number.

[3] Dolors Altaba-Artal, *Aphra Behn's English Feminism* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), 48-49.

in her night attire and Frederick is dressing for leaving her chamber while it is dark in order not to be seen. The stage direction about their clothing is noteworthy. Their clothing tells eloquently of what they have just finished and of their situation. The scene also suggests that clothing is a matter of such a great significance for the following drama that the audience has to notice it. Behn intends the audience to realize the significance of clothing.

Clothing has the function both of revealing oneself and of disguising or concealing oneself. In the opening scene Frederick reveals his amorousness by dressing for leaving the chamber of his beloved. His dressing with all haste because of the coming of the daybreak undermines his sincerity of the vow to marry Cloris. His dressing betrays his apparent constant words as following:

> For thee, Alas! I could do anything;
> A Sheep-hook I could prize above a Sword;
> An Army I would quit to lead a Flock,
> And more esteem that Chaplet wreath'd by thee,
> Than the Victorious Bays: (1. 1. 39-43)

These sweet words seem to be expected to underline his frivolousness rather than his truthfulness. Cloris's doubt about his constancy is soon increased by the advice of her waiting maid Lucia that "men would lie as often as they swore" (1. 1. 93). Cloris, on the other hand, reveals her helplessness by remaining dressed in the night attire, only complaining of his leaving. Her night attire is a symbol of her incapability to persuade him out of leaving. It seems to mean that she is welcome only at night. The helpless Cloris must change to her advantage in order to cope with the prince. She is yet to show herself before Frederick in disguise to assess his constancy.

After leaving Cloris's chamber, Frederick meets his friend Curtius in a grove who was expecting him momentarily. Curtius is the brother of Cloris and worries about her virtue tempted by him, but Frederick does not know the fact. Frederick confides in him so much that he tells openly his love affair with Cloris. In spite of his amorousness, we are prepossessed by the openness and the candor of Frederick, who says, "*Curtius*, I will not hide my Soul from thee" (1. 2. 29). We have to realize Behn does not intend that the audience look upon Prince Frederick as despicable. Amorousness is common with sovereigns, and the first of the list is Charles II to whom Behn showed loyalty. Though Behn does not overlook immorality, she does not reject sovereigns only because of the defect if they are amiable.[4] In contrast to the straightforward Frederick, Curtius is so calculating, so as to say in an aside, "My Soul learn now the Art of being disguis'd" (1.

2. 31). Curtius determines not to tell him the fact that he is Cloris's brother. Disguising the fact from him, Curtius manages to elicit from him what has passed between him and Cloris and what he thinks of. He has another reason not to preach against his frivolousness, in spite of his anger. He begs of the Prince to exert his influence on Salvator, the father of his beloved Laura, to allow them to marry. They have long asked for Salvator's consent to it in vain, and he believes that Prince's interest might prevail on him to allow his address. But, knowing well his amorousness, Curtius manages to evade his request to see her. He goes as far as to say, "Oh that it were permitted me to kill this Prince, / This false perfidious Prince" (1. 2. 121-22). Though he is a faithful subject and a faithful lover, he uses tactics cunningly. Though he is an honorable character to be respected, he is one of them who disguise themselves to deceive Frederick. Many characters disguises themselves, but Frederick never disguises himself and only to be exposed to disguise and deception. By being so, Frederick keeps the order of the play and allows it to bring forth a happy ending from the much ado resulting from disguise and deception. Frederick is not a fool to be reformed by disguise and deception, but a lord to rule over the complicated world of the comedy with authority. We notice the message of the author that a sovereign should be foreign to disguise and deception. It is really a political message.

The amorous prince happens to know that his favorite Lorenzo is Laura's brother. He never wastes the chance and makes him a kind of pander. Lorenzo is happy to undertake the role because he is a debauchee and the last man to treasure women's virtue around which the theme of the play revolves. He is, therefore, rightly said to be the "most notorious Pimp, and Rascal in *Italy*" (1. 3. 120) by Alberto, an altogether trustworthy person. Lorenzo is expected to be despised, but Frederick, who takes advantage of his status to seduce ladies, is not expected to be despised as long as he is a prince preserving his dignity. Being impatient to see Laura, Frederick sends his servant Galliard to Cloris for making some excuse for not coming. Galliard explains the circumstances that the prince's amorousness is permitted in his monologue to the audience:

> But his youth and quality will excuse him;
> And 'twill be called gallantry in him,
> When in one of us, 'tis ill nature and inconstancy. (2. 1. 82-83)

---

[4] To be amiable is the crucial requirement for being loved and having a happy ending in Behn's works.

Status determines right and wrong. Is this an accusation against the prince by Behn? There is such an implication to a degree, but Behn acknowledges gallantry of the prince, I suppose. We can recognize her strategy in it because she acknowledges also the right of women to resist it. Women, then, become independent, not obedient to men of position. Even the prince cannot get his way to women by force. Behn proposes the gallantry of the prince so that it is resisted by women. This is why Behn concedes gallantry and why she can be said to be a feminist-writer. It is no exaggeration to say that gallantry plays second string to spirited women. By inveighing against the prince and drawing a dagger upon him, Laura shows spirit. By disguising herself as a boy, Cloris dominates the prince.

Women do not shrink from the status of the prince, and nor do they freeze to it. When Frederick forbids unreasonably her to marry Curtius to make assertive advances to her, Laura refuses his offer strong-mindedly by saying, "I'l forget you are my Prince" (3. 1. 70). She is faithful to her love, not to the status of the prince. She cannot be corrupted with the status. Cloris is also faithful to Frederick himself, not to his status:

> I know not what it is to dwell in Courts,
> But sure it must be fine, since you are there;
> Yet I could wish you were an humble Shepard,
> And knew no other Pallace than this Cottage;
> Where I would weave you Crowns, of Pinks and Daizies,
> And you should be a Monarch every *May*. (1. 1. 30-35)

We should not mock at her innocence. It is so genuine and artless as to attract the prince. The pastoral atmosphere produced by her innocence is a condition for happiness in which the play results. We can say that in a sense the characters of the play "move on the margins of the pastoral world."[5] It is intended that her innocence, which is essential in a pastoral world, is the very virtue to be respected and is enough to resist the gallantry of the prince. It entitles her to disguise herself as a fine boy to challenge him.[6] Cloris enters as a dejected lover and tells Frederick an invented love story with sighs in order to see his response. She needs no art to play naturally the role of a dejected lover and to arouse his pity because her performance represents nothing but her own sorrowful heart. In this sense she is true to her heart, and her heart is far from

---

[5] Derek Hughes, *The Theatre of Aphra Behn* (Hampshire: Palgrave Publishers Ltd, 2001), 44.
[6] Behn makes use of Charles II's license that enabled playwrights to use women actors. Women's disguise as a boy sexualizes the theatre to strengthen a visual effect

deception in spite of her disguise. Taking her for a real boy and being sympathetic to this supposed boy, Frederick manages to console 'him' with his experience as a libertine, saying innocently, "I doat upon each new and beauteous object" (4. 3. 58). But his kindness has the contrary effect in spite of himself. It serves only to convince Cloris of his inconstancy. By calling him/Cloris 'Phillibert' playfully, he reminds humorously the audience that it is he himself that is 'Phillibert.' Her disguise reveals his inconstancy and his nature to her. But the audience knows already Frederick is a philander. Then, does her disguise help only to assure Cloris of her doubt about his inconstancy and to increase her grief? It is true that the scene ends with her grief, but it does not carry so tragic mood. Cross-dressing is intrinsically a long way from seriousness. Music and dances that she introduces keep the scene away from tragedy. Conducted by Lorenzo, Frederick goes to see "some fresher beauties" as if he proves the said amorousness, and furthermore he even asks Cloris/Phillibert to come with him to the supposed whorehouse. Here again Lorenzo appropriately becomes a pander. But the audience has been told that the supposed whorehouse was the strategy of Curtius to chasten Prince Frederick. Frederick is going to be entrapped. The frivolousness of Frederick and Lorenzo makes the scene a sort of comedy. Frederick's kindheartedness to a supposed boy of humble birth suggests homosexuality, and Lorenzo, gazing on Cloris/Phillibert, says in an aside:

> 'Tis a fine lad, how plump and white he is;
> Would I could meet him some where i'th dark,
> I'de have a fling at him, and try whether I
> Were right *Florentine.* (4. 3. 85-88)

First Lorenzo appeared on the stage as such a despicable person as to bribe Isabella, Clarina's waiting maid, into arranging for him to seduce Clarina. We witnessed him bargaining with her for bribes and checking every little item.[7] What is more, his foolishness is all the more emphasized because Isaballa appropriates his present for Clarina. As such a character he changes the situation from tragedy to comedy. It is comical that Lorenzo, Laura's brother, has such a perverted sexual appetite for Cloris/Phillibert, sister of Laura's lover. Her performance as a boy proves humorously her compelling beauty and irresistible enticement at the price of her heart and serves to make Frederick cry in the happy ending, "Oh how you raise my love and shame" (5. 3. 331). Her disguise is aimed at shaming the frivolous prince in the denouement, for which

[7] The bargain illustrates the despicability not only of Lorenzo who gives bribes but also of Isabella who takes bribes.

all disguises and deceptions in the play drive. But we must remember that Prince Frederick is generous enough to forgive disguises and deceptions. It is generousness that can bring a happy ending on the stage, and also in life.

3

While the amorous prince Frederick is merely exposed to disguises and deceptions on account of his inconstancy, the plot of the curious husband Antonio is more complicated. The curious husband of the title, Antonio, is curious to know whether his wife is constant though he has no reason to doubt about her. The curiosity might not be uncommon, but he carries it too far. His groundless suspicion of his wife's constancy and exceeding jealousy drive him to test her constancy. He gets his friend Alberto to pay court to his wife Clarina. Though Alberto is reluctant to carry out the task for friendship's sake, Antonio stubbornly forces him into doing it even many times. He is obstinate in testing her as if to want to identify her as a "Whore." He proposes that Alberto should present Clarina with a set of jewels. Though Alberto declines the proposal and attempts to bring them back to him, Antonio will not hear of the counsel of his friend and has his way: "Rally a fresh, and charge her with this Present" (1. 4. 60).

Presents, especially jewels, have a significant meaning in the play. They mean financial power that is exclusively in the hands of men as well as authority. In the opening scene Frederick presents Cloris with a box of jewels, but it exercises no influence on her as he supposes to do. Antonio persuades Alberto to present Clarina with a set of jewels because he believes that "Women naturally are incline'd / To Avarice than Men" (1. 4. 32-33), which naturally incurs the lament of Clarina who is eavesdropping on Antonio and Alberto with Ismena. Lorenzo's present for Clarina could not have achieved the desired effect even if Isabella had not appropriated it. The play strives prudently to prove that men's financial power has no power over women, except vicious ones like Isabella.[8] Men's financial power cannot prevail over women's virtue, which is to be the sole weapon of women to contend against men in the forthcoming works of Aphra Behn. Money cannot purchase virtue, which is priceless in the context of Behn's works. And moreover, men's financial power is closely connected with men's authority, whether in a nation or in a household. It is not too much to say that the latter originates from the former. This means the helplessness of men's financial power

[8] Here we remember the play opens with the innocence of Cloris who prefers a cottage to a palace. The former is more suited to be inhabited by virtue.

prefigures that of men's authority. We remember that in her first play, *The Forc'd Marriage*, Behn illustrates the helplessness of men's power by showing that of sword, a symbol of men's authority. And men's power is the very object that Behn manages to resist as a women writer throughout her literary career in various genres.

Antonio's obstinacy to test his wife reveals nothing but his foolishness, which Behn means to exaggerate. We can say he is obsessed with delusion and can reasonably lament his imprudence with Alberto: "Fool *Antonio.*" Afterwards Antonio himself comes to repent the "idle fault" and to own "the Crime." Antonio's ridiculous design on his wife might have made him wear the horns because Alberto loves her inwardly. Antonio tells Alberto to dissemble love for her, but Alberto really has difficulty hiding his secret love. The circumstances might have caused tragedy as in *El Curioso Impertinente* of Cervantes though Alberto is so faithful to friendship as to say, "I will my Honour to my love prefer" (1. 4. 171) in spite of his divided soul between his "Adoration" and his "Amity." But Behn cannot allow her drama to result in the grievous conclusion. She never allows determinedly the amorousness of the prince or the foolishness of the husband to bring about tragedy. It is the counterplot of women to outwit men that could prevent tragedy from occurring. Isabella overhears the plot of Antonio and Alberto, and her intelligence decides Clarina and her husband's sister Ismena to counterplot them. They dress like one another in every thing, and Ismena being disguised as Clarina appears to Antonio to be courted. Although she says, "I have no other design / Than doing my Sister a service" (1. 3. 178-79) in her disguise, it is not the sole motive for the counterplot. Ismena secretly loves Alberto as he secretly does Clarina. In the final scene of the play Ismena is to tell Alberto how she came to love him, but Isabella already knows her love:

> So, so, disguise it how you [Ismena] will,
> I know you are a real Lover;
> And that secret shall advance my Love-design;
> Yes Madam, now I will be serv'd by you,
> Or you shall fail to find a friend of mine. (2. 2. 186-190)

Isabella also secretly loves Lorenzo, which is the reason why she prudently reports the plot of Antonio to Clarina and Ismena. The plot of the curious husband develops toward completing the inner loves of Ismena and Alberto, which are "one disease" in Isabella's word, accompanying that of Isabella.

The role of Ismena in the counterplot disagrees with her feeling. Ismena as Clarina has to refuse the court of Alberto, but she inwardly desires him to court herself. While

she assumes to forbid him to name his passion, she feels that his silence kills her. Meanwhile, Antonio is similarly situated. Taking Ismena in disguise for Clarina, he carries out puzzlingly the task imposed on him by Antonio with his heart divided between love and friendship. He sees to it that he does not stray from the moral principles. They, therefore, reciprocate asides to express their true feelings, in which the dramatic effect is calculatedly strengthened. But we should notice that Ismena and Alberto are not placed in the same awkward position, for she is the deceiver and he is the deceived. She realizes what is taking place while he is not told the situation until the final scene of the play and continues to be controlled by her. Similarly Antonio is deceived by women's disguises and is directed by Clarina to make introductions of Alberto and Ismena to each other, for which Ismena participated in the counterplot. As Prince Frederick does not recognize Cloris in disguise until the last and believes the false news that she killed herself as well as Curtius, noblemen are deceived and controlled by women in the play. The stratagem of disguise allows women to gain ascendancy, if temporarily, over men, and it allows the play to end in happiness.

4

The plot of the amorous prince and that of the curious husband have developed separately, but the disguised characters gather around Frederick, who comes to the lodgings of Curtius believing them to be a whorehouse, to integrate the two plots in the final scene. Women, all dressed in masquerades with visors, lure Prince Frederick. He is lastly allowed to indulge himself in the amorous pleasure just before he is reformed. The masquerade, or masquerade of deception, presents the audience with the scenic climax with music for the dance. Behn's dramaturgical skill brings forth the visual effects on the audience, which she thinks should be the first object in the performance, though the scene may overflow with excessive theatricality. The appeal to vision makes a fantasy world in which everything is expected to settle down happily. It is time when much ado in the play is to give way to virtue and honor. Order is now to be restored under the authority of Prince Frederick.

Deprived of his sister Cloris and his love Laura, Curtius decoys Prince Frederick into coming the supposed whorehouse where he plots to avenge them on him with bravos. Frederick is deceived into being in peril of his life, but Curtius the deceiver is also deceived because the bravos he employs are not real ones but Antonio and Alberto in disguise. They thought it their duty as Frederick's subjects "To put this cheat on *Curtius*" (5. 3. 198) in order to help the prince. We have been already told of the confession of Curtius himself who is bowed down with grief:

Something within me pleads so kindly for him [Frederick],
As would perswade me that he could not erre.
– Ah, what is this? where lies this power divine,
That can so easily make a slave of mine? (4. 2. 159-62)

It is the divine authority, which Behn herself feels. Behn illustrates that Frederick, though being decadent, is deserving of loyalty. It is because Frederick, on being told of the fact that Cloris is Curtius's brother, is reformed to marry Cloris and exercises his right authority. The play that revolves around women's virtue and honor is based on the prince's authority, which makes possible the working of disguise and deception. The amorous prince is deceived by his love and the curious husband is deceived by his wife. Frederick and Antonio are akin in being deceived by women whom they love. And the honor of the women brings forth a happy ending. Here the two plots links together. We would call it politics of disguise and deception, or the reciprocal relationship between men and women.

The final scene is to organize the complicated deceptions by disguises into a happy ending. The comedy is aimed at culminating deceptions and disguises in marriages, dismissing extramarital relations as immoral. But there is no telling whether the marriages are to continue happily as the case of the curious husband Antonio suggests. In particular, the couple of Lorenzo and Isabella are less likely to lead a happy married life. The happy ending of the play is a dream of youth, or a temporary dream. In order to reveal it the play ends by the following Frederick's words:

. . . all the sallies of my flattering youth,
Shall be no more remembr'd, but as past;
Since 'tis a race that must by Men be run,
I'me happy in my youth it was begun;
It serves my future Manhood to improve,
Which shall be sacrific'd to War and Love. (5. 3. 369-74)

Frederick comes to realize the truth of life through deception. The truth is what the comedy means to show and what Behn wants to express as a playwright. After all, the play is a disguise of the reality to deceive the audience. In this sense, *The Amorous Prince; or The Curious Husband* is disguise within disguise and deception within deception, maintaining decorum. Behn demonstrates the nature of the play through disguise and deception.

Behn presents the audience with a fantasy world where as the authority of Prince

Frederick makes the much ado possible, that of Behn as playwright makes the characterization in her manner possible. It is Frederick's authority that the play results in a happy ending, but it is Behn's authority that gives him such authority. Behn manipulates the characters as she pleases. In the epilogue, Cloris expresses such a freedom of the author to the audience:

> She [Behn] might have made the Women pitiless,
> But that had harder been to me than this:
> She might have made our Lovers constant too,
> A work which Heaven itself can scarcely do;

Here Behn is making much play with her free power as an author. But Behn thinks that the freedom of an author is not unrestricted. She makes Cloris continue:

> But Ladies, 'tis your hands alone,
> And not his power can raise me to a Throne;

Then, it is the audience that has the supreme authority. The author needs to be approved by the audience or the reader. That is the principle of Behn as an author. For Behn, the politics of the author and the audience (reader) is literature. Before going into the reality, people are pleased to play with her politics in her works and Behn is also happy to play with them within her created world.