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‘A WOMAN’S REASON’:
APHRA BEHN READS LUCRETIVS

Sophie Tomlinson

In this essay, I explore Behn’s engagement with seventeenth-century libertinism and its relationship with reason. Since the relationship of women to libertinism, both as historical subjects and as writers, has generated much debate, I begin by surveying the recent literature on this subject, then come at my larger theme by addressing Behn’s response to the poem most strongly associated with Restoration libertinism, Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), first published in a full English translation in 1682 by the young Oxford scholar, Thomas Creech. Lucretius’s work enabled a radical critique of religion, because his notion of a material soul celebrated the generative power of a fecund Nature and fore-grounded the compatibility of natural law with ‘right reason’. Behn engages substantively with *De Rerum Natura* in her commendatory poem praising Creech’s translation, a poem which appeared with other tributes in the second edition of 1683. I am particularly interested in the paradoxical enthusiasm with which Behn greets the concept of reason as she perceives it operating in Creech’s Lucretius. Within this new intellectual and philosophical context, she rehearses in her poem to Creech those arguments for sexual equality that she had used as gambits in the embattled arena of the play-house.

The concept of a gendered ‘woman’s reason’ formed part of the broader current of sexual ideology that Behn both reproduces and scrutinizes in her work. To investigate that current, I analyze both versions of her lyric poem, published in *Covent Garden Drolery* (1672) as ‘Damon being asked a reason for Loveing’ and again in a monthly

miscellany (1707) as ‘For Damon, being asked a Reason for his Love’, where she toys with the proverbial idea that ‘*Because* is woman’s reason’.¹ The complex textual history of Behn’s published work suggests that while she embraced the potentially feminist idea that the soul and mind have no sex,² she was equally liable to ventriloquize a view of women’s humoral, histrionic nature that held that women’s ‘Passions are [their] Reasons Edge’.³ Instead of articulating a fixed position on the question of women’s reason, Behn demonstrates the enabling impact upon her of Lucretian philosophy. At the same time, her strengthening of a libertine voice in the later version of the ‘Damon’ poem shows her stabilizing the persona of the woman poet, consistent with the consolidation of her own reputation in the early eighteenth century.

THE RESTORATION PLAYHOUSE AS TESTING-GROUND FOR THE WOMAN AUTHOR

¹ M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), B179.

² See K. Philips, in ‘A Friend’: ‘If no soules no sexes have, for men t’exclude / Women from friendship’s vast capacity, / Is a design injurious and rude, / Onely maintain’d by partiall tyranny’, in *The Collected Works of Katherine Philips*, edited by P. Thomas (Stump Cross, Essex: Stump Cross Books, 1990), vol. 1, no. 64, ll. 19–22. I. Maclean cites Saint Jerome and Saint Thomas Aquinas as authorities for the views, respectively, that ‘sex is not of the mind’ and ‘sex is not of the soul’, in *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 43. See also L. Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex?: Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1, 168–70.

³ W. Cartwright, *The Lady-Errant* (1651) in *The Plays and Poems of William Cartwright*, edited by G. B. Evans (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), line 1228. On the relationship between the humours, the uterus and women’s psychology as seen by medieval and Renaissance doctors, see Maclean, *Renaissance Notion*, 40–3.

Behn demonstrates her combative attitude in the epilogue to her comedy *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678), in which the actress Anne Quin, agitating on behalf of the woman playwright, laments the low estimation of women's potential as expressed in the playhouse by the obstreperous coxcomb and 'Pitt-Buffoone'.⁴ Behn points up the difference between those legendary women who expressed their *virtù* in poetry, government and on the battlefield, and the commercial arena of the Restoration theatre, where women aiming to succeed as writers depend on the vagaries of the fashionable male audience for approval:

We once were fam'd in Story, and cou'd write
Equall to men; cou'd Govern, nay cou'd Fight.
We still have passive Valour, and can show
Wou'd Custom give us leave the Active too,
Since we no provocations want from you [. . .]
And yet to these fine things we must submit
Our Reason, Arms, our Lawrells and our Wit. (ll. 9–14, 24–5)

Notably, Behn represents reason as the prized trophy whose usurpation by men most hurts women. She alludes to the popular belief that women were endowed with weaker reason, contested in her own day by advocates for women's education such as Bathsua Makin and the Frenchman François Poulain de la Barre,⁵ but in a move

⁴ *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. J. Todd, 7 vols (London: Pickering, 1992–96), vol. 6 (1996), 79, line 19, italics reversed. Further line references appear in the text. This edition is referred to hereafter as *Works*.

⁵ B. Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), introduced by P. L. Barbour, Augustan Reprint Society 202 (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 1980); F. Poulain de la Barre, *The Woman as Good as the Man, or, The Equallity of both Sexes*,

typical of her writing, her strong defence of the woman author ‘is seductively interwoven with the suggestion of women’s erotic prowess’, as Hero Chalmers says:⁶

That we have Nobler Souls than you, we prove,
By how much more we’re sensible of Love;
Quickest in finding all the subtlest waies
To make your Joys: why not to make you Plays? [. . .]
And if you’re drawn to th’ life, pray tell me then
Why Women should not write as well as Men? (ll.28–31, 43–4)

The actress’s challenging of a social order in which women are ‘[d]ebar’d from Sense’ (6) hinges paradoxically on her assertion of women’s amorous sensibility: ‘Quickest in finding [. . .] Joys’. Critics of Behn account in various ways for the apparent conundrum here. Catherine Gallagher argues that in her writing Behn strategically associates the female playwright with the actress and the prostitute, each of whom must market her skills, while for Chalmers, Behn’s linking of the ‘heroic eroticism’ of the actress and the female playwright ‘forms part of the politicized devaluation of moral criticism of Restoration theatre’. Warren Chernaik suggests that *pace* Gallagher, ‘it is equally possible to find [in the lines cited above] an unresolvable ambivalence toward the libertine values of an audience, on whom, as professional dramatist, Behn is dependent, not only for a “Third day”, but for a more

trans. A.L. (London, 1677). On Makin, see H. L. Smith, *Reason’s Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 102–5. For an account of Poulain as a committed Cartesian, see M.A. Seidel, ‘Poulain de la Barre’s *The Woman As Good As The Man*’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35:3 (1974), 499–508; see also J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94.

⁶ H. Chalmers, *Royalist Women Writers 1650–1689* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 160.

lasting prize, “Fame”⁷. What, then, were some of these ‘libertine values’?

APHRA BEHN AND LIBERTINISM IN EARLY MODERN LONDON

James Turner, in his study of libertine culture in early modern London, observes that ‘libertinism was not so much a philosophy as a set of performances, and its defining “properties” [. . .] are better understood as theatrical props than as precise attributes’.⁸ In an earlier influential essay about libertinism, Turner nevertheless identifies ‘three distinct movements of thought’ implied by the word: first, religious or ‘spiritual’ libertinism, originating with sixteenth-century radical Protestant sects such as the Anabaptists or the Family of Love; second, philosophical libertinism, combining ‘antireligious skepticism and scientific materialism’ and overlapping with ‘*le libertinage érudit*’; and third, sexual libertinism, associated in England with the literary and actual milieu of King Charles II and his courtiers, most famously John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester.⁹ Under the definition of ‘libertine’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘one who leads a dissolute, licentious life’, we find noted, ‘[r]arely applied to a woman’ (‘libertine’, A.n.3). This judgement is borne out by a letter of Dryden’s written to an aspiring female poet in November 1699, in which he cautions

⁷ C. Gallagher, ‘Who Was That Masked Woman?: The Prostitute and the Playwright in the Works of Aphra Behn’, in *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670–1820* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), ch.1; Chalmers, ‘Female Authorship as Heroic Eroticism’, in *Royalist Women Writers*, 153–63 (161); W. Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 165.

⁸ J. G. Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), x.

⁹ J. G. Turner, ‘The Properties of Libertinism’, *’Tis Nature’s Fault’: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment*, ed. R. P. Maccubbin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 75–87 (79); R. Pintard, *Le Libertinage Érudit dans La Première Moitié du XVIIe Siècle* (Paris: Boivin, 1943). An important study of sexual libertinism is Chernaik’s *Sexual Freedom*, cited in note 7.

the young gentlewoman to avoid

The Licenses which Mrs. Behn allowed herself, of writing loosely, and giving (if I may have leave to say so) some Scandal to the Modesty of her Sex. I confess, I am last [*sic*] Man who ought, in Justice to arraign her, who have been myself too much a Libertine in most of my Poems.¹⁰

Here Dryden decorously accuses Behn of licentious writing, while reserving the term ‘libertine’ for himself. To a certain extent, his genteel manoeuvre bears out Katherine Romack’s claim that ‘libertinism in Restoration England was a specifically masculine and aristocratic identity category to which Englishwomen simply did not have access – except as the objects against which it was defined’.¹¹ But as M.L. Stapleton observes, ‘For a woman in Carolean culture to write *The Rover* or “The Disappointment” [a poem about premature ejaculation] was the act of a libertine’.¹² Romack’s restriction of libertinism to the sexual realm is problematic, for it fails to recognize the slippery concept of libertinism in later seventeenth-century England, when, as Alvin Snider says, it ‘occupies a space half-way between the study and the brothel’.¹³

Libertinism had its philosophical roots in the writings of the Greek Epicurus and his Roman expositor Lucretius. It blossomed on the continent in such works as the

¹⁰ Dryden, Letter to Elizabeth Thomas in *The Letters of John Dryden*, ed. C. E. Ward (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1942), 127.

¹¹ K. Romack, “‘I wonder she should be so infamous for a whore?’: Cleopatra Restored’, in *Cavendish and Shakespeare: Interconnections*, edited by K. Romack and J. Fitzmaurice (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 193–211 (209–10).

¹² M. L. Stapleton, ‘Aphra Behn, Libertine’, *Restoration* 24 (2000), 75–97 (87). In his article and monograph, *Admired and Understood: The Poetry of Aphra Behn* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), Stapleton views Behn as providing a corrective to libertinism in its Rochesterian mode.

¹³ A. Snider, ‘Atoms and Seeds: Aphra Behn’s Lucretius’, *Clio* 33 (2003), 1–25 (1).

Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla's fifteenth-century dialogue *De Voluptate* (On Pleasure) and drew indirectly from the atomistic writings of the French Catholic priest, Pierre Gassendi.¹⁴ Both Gassendi and his rival Descartes echoed Lucretius in their mechanical accounts of natural phenomena.¹⁵ As a 'committed European, drawing her intellectual life-blood from Catholic Europe', Behn found her intellectual and cultural inheritance in these traditions.¹⁶ Sarah Ellenzweig newly situates Behn in this historical context, stressing the need to join 'the libertine traditions of Rochester and Behn to the larger initiative of English freethinking'. She notes further that in Restoration England, libertinism 'denoted a challenge to orthodox religion'.¹⁷ Behn manifested her interest in religious heterodoxy towards the end of her career when she published translations of two works by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, *A Discovery of New Worlds* (1688) and *The History of Oracles* (1688).¹⁸ As Line Cottagnies argues convincingly, in these texts 'Behn not only proves a first-class translator but also a scholar in her own right'.¹⁹

¹⁴ On Gassendi, see H. Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 166–85; M.J. Osler, 'Baptizing Epicurean Atomism: Pierre Gassendi on the Immortality of the Soul', in M. J. Osler and P. L. Farber (eds.), *Religion, Science, and World View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 163–83.

¹⁵ M. Johnson and C. Wilson, 'Lucretius and the History of Science', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. S. Gillespie and P. Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131–48 (137).

¹⁶ *The Uncollected Verse of Aphra Behn*, ed. G. Greer (Stump Cross, Essex: Stump Cross Press, 1989), 10.

¹⁷ S. Ellenzweig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660–1760* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 15.

¹⁸ G. Duchovnay argues that Behn was a Roman Catholic, in 'Aphra Behn's Religion', *Notes and Queries* 221 (1976), 234–37.

¹⁹ L. Cottagnies, 'Aphra Behn's French Translations', in *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, ed. D. Hughes and J. Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 221–34 (227). See also E. Spearing, 'Aphra Behn: The Politics of Translation', in *Aphra Behn Studies*, edited by J. Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 154–77; M. Ferguson, "'With All Due Reverence and Respect to the Word of God": Aphra Behn as Skeptical Reader of the Bible and Critical Translator of Fontenelle', in *Reading Women: Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic*

Thus a growing body of criticism represents Behn as one of a handful of women writers in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries for whom libertinism is a vital if problematic current of thought and cultural force.²⁰ In her personal life, Behn had a troubled relationship with the lawyer John Hoyle, a bisexual atheist and reputed republican whom she immortalized as ‘A Wit uncommon, and Facetious,/ A great admirer of *Lucretius*’.²¹ She also passionately admired the Earl of Rochester, writing in an elegy composed in 1680, ‘Large was his Fame, but short his Glorious Race,/ Like young *Lucretius* and dy’d apace’.²²

A keen interest in neo-Epicurean ideas among English authors in the 1650s and 1660s prepared the ground for Restoration responsiveness to *De Rerum Natura*.²³ As I shall argue, Behn may have known John Evelyn’s translation of Book One of Lucretius’s poem, published in 1656. It is fascinating to speculate whether she might have seen or known of an earlier manuscript translation of all six books by the Puritan

World, 1500–1800, ed. H. B. Hackel and C. E. Kelly (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 199–216.

²⁰ For a discussion of women and libertinism focused on Queen Christina of Sweden and Margaret Cavendish, see S. Wiseman, ‘Rule and Representation: The ‘Libertine’ Case of Queen Christina’, in *Conspiracy and Virtue: Women, Writing, and Politics in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 6. Stephen Clucas proposes that ‘In her witty defenses of the ‘honest liberty’ of philosophical discourse Cavendish is not only perhaps seventeenth-century England’s first significant woman natural philosopher, but also its first woman libertine philosopher’, ‘Variation, Irregularity and Probabilism: Margaret Cavendish and Natural Philosophy as Rhetoric’ in *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle*, edited by S. Clucas (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 199–209 (207).

²¹ Behn, ‘A Letter to Mr. Creech at Oxford, Written in the last great Frost’, *Works*, vol. 1 (1992), no. 55, lines 47–8. Further references to this volume will give the poem number, followed by line reference.

²² Behn, ‘On the Death of the late Earl of Rochester’, *Works*, vol. 1, 53, lines 68–9; J. Spencer, *Aphra Behn’s Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 28–9.

²³ Jones, *Epicurean Tradition*, 186–213; S. Clucas, ‘The Atomism of the Cavendish Circle: A Reappraisal’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 9:2 (1994), 247–73. E. Rees devotes a chapter of her study of Margaret Cavendish to the ‘suggestive’ influence of Lucretius on Cavendish’s *Poems and Fancies* (1653), in *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 55.

Lucy Hutchinson.²⁴ Passages of *De Rerum Natura* were also translated by Rochester and Dryden.²⁵ Whereas Epicurean philosophy comprised a physical theory of matter and a discussion of ethics, the philosophy of libertinism represented above all ‘a theory of the senses and the body’.²⁶ Stapleton claims that Lucretius’s poem ‘informs [Behn’s] stress on the sensual as well as the sensuous, and influences her conception of libertinism’.²⁷ In what follows I shall show that Behn’s libertinism is hard to pin down, because she herself defines it differently every time she revises her work.

BEHN’S LITERARY FAME

Before turning to Behn’s poem to Creech, I shall first view her situation as a professional writer in 1682, when she encountered Lucretius’ poem. In the course of the 1670s, Behn established herself as a playwright for the Duke’s Company, leading Dryden to note in 1681, ‘[a] Woman Wit has often grac’d the Stage’.²⁸ In the previous year, either Dryden as compiler or Jacob Tonson as printer had invited her to contribute a poem to the collection of *Ovids Epistles translated by severall hands*.²⁹ Dryden paid Behn a muted compliment in his preface, informing the reader, ‘I was

²⁴ In 1675, Hutchinson presented her translation, composed during the 1650s, to Arthur Annesley, first Earl of Anglesey. See *Lucy Hutchinson’s Translation of Lucretius: De rerum natura*, edited by H. de Quehen (London: Duckworth, 1996), 10–11. See also Rees, “‘A horrible precipice’: Lucy Hutchinson’s Lucretius”, Appendix to *Margaret Cavendish*, 190–6; and R. Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 264–8.

²⁵ For a comprehensive survey of Lucretius in English literature see W.B. Fleischmann, *Lucretius and English Literature 1680–1740* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1964), and more recently, D. Hopkins, ‘The English voices of Lucretius from Lucy Hutchinson to John Mason Good’, in *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ch. 16.

²⁶ Snider, ‘Atoms and Seeds’, 2.

²⁷ Stapleton, *Admired and Understood*, 87.

²⁸ Dryden, ‘Epilogue to *Tamerlane the Great*’, in *The Works of John Dryden*, general editors H. T. Swedenborg and E. N. Hooker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956–1989), vol. 2 (1972), 179, line 3.

²⁹ *Ovids Epistles translated by severall hands* (London, 1680).

desir'd to say that the Author who is of the *Fair Sex*, understood not *Latine*. But if she does not, I am afraid she has given us occasion to be asham'd who do'.³⁰ In 1681, Behn saw performed the second part of her successful comedy *The Rover*, dedicated in published form to James, Duke of York. The next year proved 'the turning point in her career'.³¹ In the wake of the political turmoil generated by the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis, play-going proved less popular with English audiences, and the two rival theatre companies merged to become the United Company. Behn became embroiled in controversy when she supplied a prologue to an anonymous play *Romulus and Hersilia* (1682), criticizing the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion against his father, Charles II. At the time of this scandal 'it is likely that Behn left the country [. . .] not returning until late 1683', says Mary Ann O'Donnell.³² Behn poignantly conveys the fall-off in the demand for plays in a letter to Tonson composed that same year, where she writes that 'a body has no credit at the playhouse for money as we used to have'.³³ In the following years, Behn turned to poetry, fiction and translation as more hopeful means of generating income.

Behn's verses to Creech reflect several significant factors in her career: her need for cash, the growing recognition of the marketability of women's writing and her increasing acceptance by the literary profession.³⁴ Todd speculates that Tonson the

³⁰ *Ibid*, sig. a4r.

³¹ M. A. O'Donnell, 'Aphra Behn: Tory Wit and Unconventional Woman', in *Women Writers of the Seventeenth Century*, edited by K. M. Wilson and F. J. Warnke (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 341–74 (347).

³² *Ibid*, 347.

³³ 'Letter of Mrs. Aphra Behn, the Poetess, to Tonson, the Bookseller', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 159 (1836), 481–2.

³⁴ See M. Bell, 'Restoration culture can be argued to have fed, rather than damped down, the marketability of "woman" as saleable commodity – in playhouse and brothel as well as in print', in 'Women Writing and Women Written', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. 4, edited by J. Barnard, D. F. McKenzie and M. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 431–51 (439).

printer and bookseller may have sent Creech's translation to Behn, and commissioned her commendatory poem for the second edition.³⁵ Perhaps, following Dryden's public commendation of her paraphrase in *Ovids Epistles*, Tonson realized that a woman poet penning commendatory verses to a scholarly translation was attractively novel. If so, he published Behn's *Poems on Several Occasions* one year later to capitalize further on the phenomenon of the woman writer.

Dryden's half-apologetic marking of Behn in *Ovids Epistles* as not understanding Latin explains the excitement she must have felt when Creech published his translation of Lucretius's long philosophical poem. The title page to the first edition of 1682 conveys the magnitude of the enterprise: *T. Lucretius Carus, The Epicurean Philosopher, His Six Books De Natura Rerum. Done into English Verse, with Notes*. Although Creech's name is absent from the title page, he signed the dedication. Behn appears in the 'corrected and enlarged' second edition published in 1683, where she acknowledges herself a stranger to the Oxford don by addressing her poem, 'TO the Unknown DAPHNIS on his Excellent Translation of *Lucretius*'.³⁶ Her use of the pseudonym 'Daphnis' suggests, however, that she had read Creech's translation of the idylls of Theocritus, in which Daphnis features as a bisexual shepherd.³⁷ Between the printing of the second edition of Creech's translation in 1683 and Behn's *Poems on Several Occasions* the following year, the two writers seem to have met, for in *Poems*

³⁵ J. Todd, *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 291. Tonson confirms his commissioning of a tribute from Behn, alongside tributes from Richard Duke, a Cambridge man and the playwright Thomas Otway, in a letter to his nephew and business partner, written over thirty years after the first publication of Creech's translation. See *Jacob Tonson in Ten Letters by and about him*, ed. S. L. C. Clapp (n. p. [Austin:] University of Texas Press, 1948), 9–12.

³⁶ Behn, *Works*, vol. 1, no. 11. Todd, who uses the 1683 second edition of *T. Lucretius Carus* as her copy-text in *Works*, prints the variants from the version of the poem published in Behn's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1684) immediately following.

³⁷ Stapleton, *Admired and Understood*, 92–3.

on *Several Occasions* she entitles the poem ‘To Mr. Creech (under the Name of Daphnis) on his Excellent Translation of *Lucretius*’.³⁸ Behn’s sprightly verse epistle to Creech, also published in her miscellany *Poems*, indicates that she spent time socializing with him at Tonson’s bookshop.³⁹

IN PRAISE OF THOMAS CREECH

Critics of Behn’s tribute to Creech fail to note that her poem is modelled on the tripartite form of a Pindaric ode, falling into three divisions of strophe, antistrophe and epode.⁴⁰ In the first fifty-eight lines she addresses the ‘Unknown Daphnis’ and extols the power of his translation, then shifts the focus of acclaim for the next fifty-five lines (fifty-six lines in *PSO*) to Wadham College, Oxford, which Behn hails as the nursery of the talents of the churchman Thomas Sprat (‘The Learned *Thirsis*’, line 77), and John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (‘*Strephon* the Great’, line 89), as well as the fledgling Daphnis (the twenty-four-year-old Creech, line 109), whom she sees as inheriting the mantle of the recently deceased Rochester. In her final twenty-nine lines, she urges Daphnis on in his ‘mighty Race’ of poetic achievement, envisioning

³⁸ *Poems on Several Occasions*, 50. In the following discussion, quotations from ‘To the Unknown Daphnis’ derive from Todd’s edition of Behn’s *Works*, and are cited by line number in the text. Quotations from ‘To Mr. Creech’ derive from Behn’s *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1684) and are referenced by page number. Quotations from Creech’s translation of *De rerum natura* derive from *T. Lucretius Carus, The Epicurean Philosopher* (Oxford, 1683), hereafter ‘Creech’, and are cited by page number. I use the following abbreviations: *PSO* (*Poems on Several Occasions*, 1684) and *CGD* (*Covent Garden Drolery*, 1672).

³⁹ See above, n. 20.

⁴⁰ S. Revard discusses Behn’s use of the Pindaric in her ode to Creech, but does not comment on the poem’s tripartite form. See S.P. Revard, ‘Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, and the Female Pindaric’, in *Representing Women in Renaissance England*, ed. C.J. Summers and T. Peabworth (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 227 – 41 (236 – 41). The poem is discussed in detail by Todd, *Secret Life*, 290–94; Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, 166–9; and Snider, ‘Atoms and Seeds’, 3–4, 13–24.

him together with his muse and mistress in happy pastoral bliss. Behn therefore pays homage not just to Creech but also to the institution closely associated with the precursor group to the Royal Society, of which Sprat was a member. He would publish his *History of the Royal Society* in 1667. Thus her protest at the ‘scanted Customes of the Nation’ (line 26) that inhibit women’s educational advance clashes with her reverence towards one of the cultural pillars of Restoration England. This contradiction, one source of the poem’s interest, reveals the tension between Behn’s pro-woman stance and her Tory politics.

In Tonson’s letter to which I refer above, Behn holds a rightful place in a fellowship of Restoration wits and writers. In her poem to Creech, she exploits the fictions of gender to both assert and deny this common identity:

Thou Great Young Man permit amongst the Croud
Of those that sing thy mighty Praises Loud,
My humbler Muse to bring her Tribute too;
Inspir’d by thy vast Flights of Verse
Methinks I should some wonderous thing Reherse
Worthy *Divine Lucretius*, and *Diviner You!* [. . .]
In Gentle Numbers all my Songs are drest:
And when I would Thy Glories sing,
What in Strong Manly Verse should be exprest
Turns all to Womanish Tenderness within;
Whilst that which Admiration does Inspire,
In other Souls, kindles in Mine a Fire.
Let them Admire thee on–whilst I this newer way

Pay thee yet more than They [. . .] (ll. 1–6, 11–18)

At the outset, Behn addresses the question of identity and belonging. She distinguishes her ‘humbler Muse’ (line 3) from the ‘Croud’ (line 1) of writers who eulogize Creech, and, inspired to creativity by his ‘vast Flights of Verse’ (line 4), appeals to Daphnis for permission ‘to bring her Tribute’ (line 3). Yet her ability to ‘Reherse’ (note the playwright’s verb) ‘some wonderous thing’ (line 5) is undermined by her intellectual constitution, her sense of unfitness as a woman ‘unlearn’d in Schools’ (line 23), and therefore lacking Latin and Greek. Even while she registers this lack, Behn marks herself out as unique both in terms of what she writes and her entitlement to feast at Creech’s table. At first she represents her difference as physiological:

But I of feebler Seeds design’d,
While the slow moveing Atoms strove
With Careless Heed to Form my Mind,
Compos’d it all of softer Love. (ll. 7–10)

These lines pull in several directions at once. We may read Behn as having fun with biologically determined ideas of gender difference, or, less palatably, as Chernaik says, as ‘suggesting a hierarchical view by which women fall short of a masculine ideal of perfection’.⁴¹ Whether read literally or ironically or somewhere in between, this gesture resembles women’s traditional apologies for inferior writing. In 1678, for

⁴¹ Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom* 168. Todd reads the lines as comic, whereas Stapleton reads them as drolly disingenuous. See Todd, *Secret Life*, 293, and Stapleton, *Admired and Understood*, 114–15.

instance, Anne Bradstreet addressed her book of poems, first published in 1650, as ‘thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain’, while in the preamble to *The World’s Olio* (1655) Margaret Cavendish claimed that women’s brains were softer than men’s, even as she protested that ‘in Nature we have as clear an understanding as Men, if we were bred in Schools to mature our Brains, and to manure our Understandings’.⁴²

What is striking about Behn’s version of the gesture is that she assimilates the Aristotelian notion of woman as being defective to two related ideas which she would have found in Creech’s *Lucretius: the Epicurean theory* (derived from Democritus) of a universe composed of atoms and the theory of seeds or seminal principles.⁴³ The language of ‘seeds’ pervades *De Rerum Natura*, where Lucretius depicts the ‘proper Seeds’ to which ‘All things owe their life’ as composed of an infinite number of imperceptible atoms (Creech, 8). Lucretius follows his invocation of Venus with a majestic vision of an artful, generating Nature:

I treat of things abstruse, the *Deity*,
The vast and stedly motions of the Sky;
The rise of Things, how curious *Nature* joyns
The various Seed, and in one Mass combines
The jarring Principles: what new supplies
Bring nourishment and strength: how she unties
The *Gordian* knot, and the *poor* Compound dies:

⁴² A. Bradstreet, ‘The Author to her Book’, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, edited by J. Hensley (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 221; M. Cavendish, ‘The Preface to the Reader’, in *The World’s Olio* (1655), sig. A4r–v. My thanks to Claudia Marquis and Liam Semler for these references.

⁴³ For a different approach to these lines, see Snider, ‘Atoms and Seeds’, 19–21, and C. Barash, *English Women’s Poetry, 1649–1714: Politics, Community, and Linguistic Authority* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 104–5.

Of what she makes, to what she breaks the frame,
Call'd *Seeds* or *Principles*; tho either name
We use promiscuously, the Thing's the same. (Creech, 3)

Both English and French natural philosophers of the mid-seventeenth century drew upon Epicurean atomism and the idea of seminal principles to develop their different theories of matter.⁴⁴ The four lines I cited from Behn's poem conflate several strands of this discourse to encompass the formation of her body ('of feebler Seeds design'd'), her 'Mind' (line 9) and her psyche, composed 'all of softer Love' (line 10). While the agent of the verb 'design'd' is unspecified, the word hints at a divine creator as the source of the confluence of seeds and atoms whose motions generate the poet's being.⁴⁵ Behn's atoms, which paradoxically strive 'With *Careless* Heed' (my emphasis), suggest the mechanical version of atomism in which matter is formed by the chance collision of particles. But the suspended syntax, which in line 10 makes the subject of the verb 'Compos'd' the poetic 'I' of line 7, unsettles the image of woman as the passive partner in physical/poetic generation. Emotion dominates in this poet's sensibility, giving rise to 'Womanish Tenderness' (14) instead of the wished-for 'Strong Manly Verse' (13). Like the feelings of Eumela in Cartwright's tragi-comedy, *The Lady-Errant*, Behn's 'Passions are [her] Reasons Edge', because Behn depicts her receptiveness to Creech as kindling in her a 'Fire' (16) that gives rise to a 'newer way' of writing (17), that is, to energized, tendentious verse.⁴⁶ Behn reasons that less is more, because her educational deprivation means she has more to learn from

⁴⁴ See Clucas, 'The Atomism of the Cavendish Circle', and P. Anstey, 'Boyle on Seminal Principles', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 33 (2002), 597–630.

⁴⁵ A theological framework buttressed the mechanical philosophy of Descartes and his successors. For Robert Boyle, seeds and their behaviour 'can only be satisfactorily explained by appeal to God' (Anstey, 'Boyle', 606).

⁴⁶ See above, note 3.

Creech's English than readers whose delight in poetry has been 'pauld' [satisfied, or cloyed] by 'Duller *Greek* and *Latine*' (21–2). She boldly 'disdain[s]' that her appetite for poetry and knowledge '[s]hould treated be at any feast but Thine' (23–4).

Thus Behn begins her ode in praise of Creech by conspicuously situating herself as a 'counter-public' of one.⁴⁷ In the version of the poem she published in the 1683 edition of *De Rerum Natura*, her intimate, second-person address particularly creates a privileged relationship between herself and 'the Unknown Daphnis'. In the following year, variants in the text of her poem published in *Poems on Several Occasions* lessen the stress on her feminine difference, for in 1684, instead of appealing for her '*humbler* Muse to bring *her* Tribute', she asks permission for 'My humble *Muse* to bring *its* Tribute' (*PSO*, 50, my emphasis). Also, while the earlier published text has Behn cursing 'my *Sex* and *Education*' (line 25), what she curses in the 1684 version is 'my Birth, my Education' (*PSO*, 51). In 1683, Behn's posture of singularity could be read as implicitly affiliating the female poet with the figure of 'Kind Venus', the motive-force of nature and poetry that Lucretius hymns at the start of his poem (Creech, 10), but the version published in Behn's first miscellany of 1684 more strongly asserts what Todd identifies as 'the assurance of her poetry', which confers 'a kind of status independent of gender'.⁴⁸ As the poem to Creech develops, however, Behn's frame of reference expands in both versions as her persona's uniqueness is superseded by more polemically stated identifications, that is, between the poet and 'the Female Sex' (line 27), and between 'Tory Wit' and the loyalist faction in the Exclusion Crisis.

In an audible shift of tone, Behn claims that Creech's translation is revelatory for

⁴⁷ For the idea of certain seventeenth-century female authors as forming a 'counter-public', see the Introduction to C. Gray, *Women Writers and Public Debate in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁴⁸ Todd, *Secret Life*, 293.

women as a group, because it gives them access to controversial philosophical thought. Like her contemporary Bathsua Makin, Behn disparages ‘the scanted Customs of the [English] Nation’ (line 26) which limit the education available to women. Her analogy with the Greek poet Amphion, whose civilizing eloquence brought about the building of Thebes, represents Creech as liberating women from intellectual bondage:

But as of old, when Men unthinking lay,
Ere Gods were worship’t, or e’re Laws were fram’d
The wiser *Bard* that taught ’em first t’obey,
Was next to what he taught Ador’d and Fam’d [. . .]
So Thou by this *Translation* dost advance
Our Knowledge from the state of Ignorance;
And Equallst Us to Man! Oh how shall We
Enough Adore, or Sacrifice Enough to Thee!⁴⁹ (ll. 35–44)

Her excitement derives partly from a keenly-felt sense of expanded intellectual horizons and possibilities, anticipating those of John Keats in ‘On first looking into Chapman’s Homer’.⁵⁰ By ‘Equallst Us to Man!’, Behn defies the popular assumption that women were endowed with weaker reason. The keen sense of injury obvious in

⁴⁹ Ferguson interprets the last four lines of this stanza as alluding to Milton’s portrayal of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, in ‘Aphra Behn as Skeptical Reader of the Bible’, 203. Barash reads the lines as containing a ‘deft echo of both *Paradise Lost* and Dryden’s *State of Innocence*’, in *English Women’s Poetry*, 105. To the onlooking Satan, Milton’s Adam and Eve appear ‘lords of all . . . though both/ Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;/ For contemplation he and valour formed,/ For softness she and sweet attractive grace’, John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, edited by A. Fowler (London: Longman, 1971), Book IV, ll. 290–98.

⁵⁰ I am grateful to Jane Spencer for suggesting the analogy with Keats’s poem.

her epilogue to *Sir Patient Fancy* is absent from her tribute to Creech, where she is free to extol the *seductive* power of reason in his translation. Her extended personification of reason forms a climax to the first movement of the poem, or what Pindar called the strophe:

And Reason over all unfetter'd Plays,
Wanton and undisturb'd as Summers Breeze
That gliding Murmurs o're the Trees,
And no hard Notion meets, or stops its way;
It Peirces, Conquers, and Compells
As strong as Faiths resistless Oracles,
Faith the Religious Souls content,
Faith the secure Retreat of Routed Argument. (ll. 51–8)⁵¹

The mingled enjambed and end-stopped lines of this octet mirror the fluency and forcefulness that Behn's eroticized pastoral vision ascribes to reason. Her innovative image depicts reason, that sovereign human faculty, as *playing*. What is equally arresting about the passage is its combination of soft and sharp focus. At first, Behn represents reason as a figure of Eros, whose wanton actions of playing, murmuring and gliding accord with her description of Creech's poetic discourse as 'soft and Gay' (line 47) in the first half of the stanza. Then the line, 'And no hard Notion [. . .] stops its way', effects a transition from reason imagined as softly insinuating to reason imagined as a potent, ravishing lover, whose actions of 'piercing' and 'compelling'

⁵¹ An unrecorded variant in a copy of the third edition of *T. Lucretius Carus, The Epicurean Philosopher*, held in the Auckland City Library, New Zealand, reads, 'Wanton and disturb'd as Summers Breeze' (sig. C2r, line 53).

evoke sexual force or rape.

One way of viewing Behn's exultant image of an unfettered reason is that it brings together the lubricious and learned aspects of the libertine tradition. The triplet of triumphalist verbs, 'Peirces, Conquers, and Compells' was possibly inspired both by Lucretius's portrait of the penetrating intellect of Epicurus and by a line in Rochester's satire 'Against Reason and Mankind', remembered in its turn from Evelyn's translation of Book I of *De Rerum Natura*. Creech's description of Epicurus runs as follows:

His vigorous and active Mind was hurl'd
Beyond the flaming limits of *this* World
Into the mighty Space, and there did see
How Things begin, what can, what cannot be;
How All must dye, All yield to fatal force,
What stedy limits bound their natural course;
He saw all this, and brought it back to us. (Creech, 4)

In Rochester's poem, a 'formal band and beard', or Restoration clergyman, extravagantly lauds 'Reason, by whose aspiring Influence/ We take a flight beyond Material sense;/ Dive into Mysteries, then soaring *pierce/ The flaming limits of the Universe*'.⁵² Harold Love glosses these lines with Book I, lines 72–4 of Lucretius's Latin text:

ergo vivida vis animi pervicit, et extra

⁵² *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, edited by H. Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), lines 46, 66–9. My emphasis.

processit longe flammantia moenia mundi
atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque.⁵³

Love notes that Rochester's line 69, 'The flaming limits of the universe', corresponding to the Latin 'flammantia moenia mundi', is a quotation from Evelyn's translation of Book I, published in 1656. In the passage already cited above, Creech again echoes Evelyn's translation in the line 'Beyond the flaming limits of *this* World'. Behn's image of reason 'peircing' may then echo Rochester's image of the reason-borne man piercing the limits of the known world, an apparent echo of Lucretius's text as translated by Evelyn. What strengthens the likelihood that Behn's paean to reason contains echoes of Creech's, Rochester's and possibly Evelyn's text is the alteration of the words 'as strong as' to the more emphatic 'beyond'. That word corresponds to the Latin 'extra' in line 72 of Lucretius, in the version of the poem published in her *Poems on Several Occasions* in 1684, where the last lines of the stanza read,

[Reason] Pierces, Conquers and Compels,
Beyond poor Feeble Faith's dull Oracles.
Faith the despairing Souls content,
Faith the Last Shift of Routed Argument. (PSO, 53)

Although in 1683 Behn arguably pits reason and faith as equals, in 1684 she makes reason transcendent, for within the twin contexts of religious doubt and rhetorical

⁵³ *Ibid*, 389. Compare 'And so it was that the lively force of his mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless whole', *Lucretius on the Nature of Things*, trans. C. Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 29.

dispute, her vigorous lines disdain faith.

In her discussion of the poem to Creech, Todd accounts for Behn's critique of faith partly in stylistic terms, stating that reason 'in [Behn's] baroque vision has a libidinal, liberating quality'.⁵⁴ Her remark is valid if by 'baroque' we understand with Richard Kroll 'an internally competitive mode'.⁵⁵ A different way of reading the revised passage might realize the Pindaric impulse driving the poem, because the extra potency Behn attributes to reason makes the poem more authentically a poem about contest and victory, thus achieving in this stanza her ideal of 'strong manly verse'. Behn's revisions include the representation of faith as 'poor [and] Feeble', faith's oracles as 'dull' rather than 'resistless', faith as contenting the 'despairing' rather than the 'religious' soul, and faith imaged as the 'Last Shift of Routed Argument' rather than its 'secure Retreat'. In 1684, Behn reinforces her skepticism about the claims of religion by a further variant in the antistrophe, where she hails 'Sacred *Wadham*' as a nursery of 'wondrous Poets' (*PSO*, 53):

To Gods for fear, Devotion was design'd,
And Safety made us bow to Majesty;
Poets by Nature Aw and Charm the Mind,
Are born not made by dull Religion or Necessity. (*PSO*, 54)

Here Behn changes her text of 1683, which reads, with much weaker rhythm, 'Are born, not made or by Religion, or Necessity' (line 76).

It is difficult to judge whether these changes represent Behn's revisions to the text

⁵⁴ Todd, *Secret Life*, 291–2.

⁵⁵ R. Kroll, *Restoration Drama and "The Circle of Commerce": Tragicomedy, Politics and Trade in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.

as published in the second edition of Creech's translation, or whether they restore parts of her text altered either by Creech or his printer, that is, whether they are revisions of revisions. Todd suggests that either Behn herself wrote the first published version or Creech altered it: 'Behn seems to have provided one version for Creech's translation and another for use in *PSO*, or Creech may have changed it because of fear of its effects'.⁵⁶ Behn's reference to Creech in a letter to Tonson (c. 1683) supports the view that Creech was nervous about publishing a poem that vehemently undermined religion: 'As for Mr. Creech, I would not have you afflict him with a thing can not now be help'd, so never let him know my resentment'.⁵⁷ Critics and editors of Behn assume that the later published version is closer to Behn's original intention.⁵⁸

Behn's text of 1683, when read in light of the extensive seventeenth-century debate about the authority and scope of reason versus the mysteries of revealed religion, is hardly safe or orthodox,⁵⁹ for in 'To the Unknown Daphnis', she represents reason as equally '[a]s strong as faith's resistless Oracles'. Behn's last line, imaging faith as merely 'the secure Retreat of Routed Argument', can be interpreted as suggesting that, *pace* those with a more Calvinist inclination, reason is *more powerful* than faith, the last resort of those confounded by reason. Yet in 'To Mr Creech', as Paul Salzman

⁵⁶ *Works*, vol. 1, 383.

⁵⁷ 'Letter of Mrs. Aphra Behn', 48.

⁵⁸ Greer, *Uncollected Verse*, 171; Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, 167; Barash, *English Women's Poetry*, 104, n. 13. When discussing the poem in *Secret Life*, Todd quotes from the version of 1684.

⁵⁹ For a general background to the debate and more particularly Robert Boyle's engagement in the theological debate about the limits of reason in texts such as *The Reconcilableness of Reason and Religion* (1675) and *Advices in Judging of Things said to Transcend Reason* (1681), see for example J. Wojick, *Robert Boyle and the Limits of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). See also T. Holden, 'Robert Boyle On Things Above Reason', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15:2 (2007), 283–312. For the Restoration debate on 'rational religion,' see J. Spurr, "'Rational Religion" in Restoration England', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988), 563–85.

argues, Behn ‘was able to express a more dramatic questioning of “poor Feeble Faith’s dull Oracles”’ (53).⁶⁰

Behn’s poem to Creech is arguably libertine because it grasps and celebrates the logical force of Lucretius’s belief in reason’s power. This is not to concur with Todd that Behn saw *De Rerum Natura* ‘as a powerful and triumphant assertion of rationalism and materialism’,⁶¹ for Todd’s reading of Behn’s poem and of her wider attitude belies the edginess of the poem’s print history, Behn’s ambiguous mobilization of the play of reason, and her playing *with* reason.

As I suggested, the poem is fuelled by contradictory impulses. Having disparaged faith as the poor cousin to reason, Behn proceeds to laud Thomas Sprat as ‘that loyal champion for the Church and Crown’ (line 86), and ‘That Noble Ornament of the Sacred Gown’ in an additional line for 1684 (*PSO*, 54). In so doing, Behn pins her political colours to the mast, since Sprat, Bishop of Rochester and Dean of Westminster, supported Charles II against the Oxford Parliament in the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–80 and proved himself ‘above the Thanks of the mad Senate-House’ (line 88). Addressing Wadham, Behn writes,

The learned Thirsis did to thee belong,
Who *Athens plague* has so divinely sung.

Thirsis to wit, as sacred friendship true,
Paid mighty Cowley’s memory its due.

Thirsis, who while a greater Plague did reign

Than that which Athens did depopulate

⁶⁰ P. Salzman, ‘Aphra Behn: Poetry and Masquerade’, in *Aphra Behn Studies*, 109–29 (121).

⁶¹ Todd, *Secret Life*, 292.

Scattering Rebellious Fury or 'e the Plain

Unmov'd He stood and fear'd no Threats of Fate. (ll. 77–85)

Behn foregrounds her poetic affiliations by alluding to Sprat's Pindaric ode about 'The Plague of Athens' (1659), an epiphenomenon recounted by both Thucydides the historian and Lucretius in the last book of *De Rerum Natura*. Behn registers her admiration of Sprat as a man who shared her reverence of the poet Abraham Cowley, and paid tribute to him by emulating the form made new by Cowley. Sprat's long Pindaric was first published in 1659 as '*The Plague of Athens* [. . .] now attempted in English after Dr. Cowley's Pindarick way'. Sprat also included a *Life of Cowley* in his edited *Works of Cowley* (1668). Within her own Pindaric, Behn accords Olympian status to 'mighty Cowley', from whom she gained inspiration for her own attempts at the Pindaric ode.

In her commendatory poem to Creech on his translation of *De Rerum Natura*, Behn pays grateful tribute for his elucidation of what she calls 'the Mystick Terms of Rough *Philosophy*' (line 45). Creech made Lucretius's philosophy 'easy' for Behn, not in our restricted modern sense of the word, but in the sense of attractive or graceful. Excited at the idea that women could use their minds to explore the world, she shows her keen engagement with the controversy over reason and faith, newly portraying reason as ascendant and playful. Indeed, the concepts of reason and faith, or its secular equivalent constancy, formed part of the discourse of love poetry that was Behn's stock-in-trade. I shall now explore how Behn handles the idea of reason in a lighter poetic vein that yields equally multiple possibilities of interpretation.

'A WOMAN'S REASON'

Behn's 'Damon *being asked a reason for Loveing*' is one of five poems that appeared in *Covent Garden Drolery* [sic], a theatrical miscellany of popular songs, prologues and epilogues published as two issues in 1672. While the first is described on the title-page as 'Collected by R. B. Servant to his Majesty', the second is described simply as 'Collected by A.B.'.⁶² These initials lead some Behn scholars to view *Covent Garden Drolery* as compiled and edited by Behn herself.⁶³ That conjecture is plausible, because Behn, after returning from her royalist spying mission to Antwerp in the late 1660s, may have worked as a scribe and adapter of old plays for Thomas Killigrew's King's Company, where she could have gained valuable knowledge of stagecraft and dramatic composition from the playwrights Edward Howard and possibly John Dryden.⁶⁴ Paul Hammond, however, disputes the attribution of *Covent Garden Drolery* to Behn on bibliographical grounds, arguing that the initials 'A.B.' could be 'an evasive formula'.⁶⁵

Like all the pieces published in the miscellany, Behn's five poems are unattributed, the title page claiming only that the contents are 'written by the refined'st witts of the age'. A large number of the pieces are by Dryden, including the witty, sexually graphic song 'Whilst Alexis lay prest' from his comedy *Marriage à la Mode* (1672).

⁶² M. A. O'Donnell, *Aphra Behn: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), BA1.1a.

⁶³ This argument was first made by G. Thorn-Drury (ed.), in *Covent Garden Drollery: A Miscellany of 1672* (London: P. J. and A. E. Dobell, 1928), xvii–xviii. The case for Behn's editorship of the collection is accepted by S. Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), 126–7; Todd, *Secret Life*, 156–8; and M. A. O'Donnell, 'Aphra Behn: The Documentary Record', in *Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, 1–11 (5).

⁶⁴ O'Donnell, 'Aphra Behn: The Documentary Record', 5.

⁶⁵ P. Hammond, *The Making of Restoration Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 66. See also Hammond's essay, 'The Prologue and Epilogue to Dryden's *Marriage A-la-Mode* and the Problem of *Covent Garden Drolery*', *PBSA* 81 (1987), 155–72 (159, n. 8).

Behn re-used one of her four lyrics in her comedy *The Dutch Lover* (1673), and re-published all except the poem addressed to Damon in her *Poems on Several Occasions* of 1684.

Behn's later version of 'Damon', entitled 'For Damon, being asked a Reason for his Love', appeared in the November issue of *The Muses Mercury* for 1707, a monthly miscellany forming part of an increasingly prolific literary journalism initiated in the 1690s by publications such as John Dunton's *The Athenian Mercury* and *The Ladies' Mercury*. Twelve Behn poems appeared in *The Muses Mercury* between March 1707 and January 1708 alongside work by Dryden, Nahum Tate, John Dennis and Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon.⁶⁶ The journal's editors supplement Behn's poems with notes testifying to their authentic provenance, and encouraging readers to read the work in light of her personal relationships, such as that with John Hoyle. They also claim for Behn an unmistakable style, writing for instance in a note preceding 'The Disoblig'd Love', a melancholy pastoral lyric, that 'There's no Man who knows any thing of Mrs. Behn's way of Writing, but will presently see, that this Poem was written by her self'.⁶⁷ This framing of Behn's work as distinctively personal is in keeping with the growth of what Jane Spencer calls 'the biographical tradition', following upon the publication of a 'Memoir' attached to an edition of Behn's *Histories and Novels* in 1696. Such a circumscribed mode of reading helped consolidate Behn's reputation as an amorous woman writer in the early eighteenth century.⁶⁸

One way to interpret Behn's lyric poem in its two incarnations is that it underwent a stabilizing process between its first appearance in *Covent Garden Drolery* and its re-

⁶⁶ O'Donnell, *Aphra Behn Bibliography*, BB21.

⁶⁷ Cited in O'Donnell, *ibid*, 253.

⁶⁸ Spencer, *Aphra Behn's Afterlife*, 32–43.

publication thirty-five years later. The two different titles, ‘*Damon* being asked a reason for Loveing’ and ‘For Damon, being asked a Reason for his Love’, reflect this process. The earlier title is overtly performative, with no gap between the poet and the persona of the male lover whose voice the poem apparently expresses. Dramatic immediacy characterizes the first stanza, which plunges us into a scenario of question and reply through Damon’s address to his beloved:

Phillis, you ask me why I do persue,
And Court no other Nymph but you;
And why with eyes, sighes, I do betray,
A passion which I dare not say:
[’Tis] cause I love, and if you ask me why,
With womens answers, I must reply.⁶⁹

The title of ‘For Damon, being asked a Reason for his Love’, the posthumously published version ascribed to ‘Mrs. A. Behn’, situates the poem as a gift, for here the woman poet responds to Damon’s predicament by offering the poem as empathetic gesture and imagined reply. The capitalized nouns ‘Reason’ and ‘Love’ anchor the emotional and mental experience described by Damon, dulling the spontaneous compulsiveness of ‘loveing’. In this later version, the first stanza of the poem is noticeably more regular in metre and syntax:

⁶⁹ Behn, *Works*, vol.1, no. 5, ll. 1–6. Further line references are cited in the body of the text. Todd prints line 5 as it appears in the first issue of *CGD*, where it reads erroneously ‘His cause I love’. The second issue attributed to ‘A.B.’ corrects the line to ‘’Tis cause I love’. Yet Todd states in her Textual Introduction and Notes that she takes the second issue of *CGD* as her copy-text (xli, 376).

You ask me, Phillis, why I still pursue,
 And court no other nymph but you;
 And why with looks and sighs I still betray
 A passion which I dare not say.
 'Tis all, because I do; you ask me why,
 And with a woman's reason, I reply.⁷⁰

Behn's poetic assurance imparts a careful irony to the phrase 'a woman's reason', supplanting the earlier text's potentially infinite 'womens answers'. The revised line five, 'Tis all, because I do', echoes more clearly than the earlier version the proverbial wisdom, '*Because is woman's reason*'.⁷¹ Yet Behn posits the idea of reason as an entity peculiar to women as intrinsically absurd, if not mad, a point she drives home in both versions through the antitheses of the second stanza:

You'l not believe my passion till I show
 A better reason why 'tis so;
 Then *Phillis* let this reason serve for one,
 I know I love, because my reasons gon. (II. 9–12)

As the argument proceeds, Damon withholds his reasons for loving because his mistress withholds herself sexually from him: '*Phillis*, let them give such that have returnes' (line 11). The fourth stanza of six gives Damon the upper hand in the dispute:

⁷⁰ For ease of reference I quote the modernized version of Behn's poem in *Aphra Behn: Selected Poems*, edited by M. Hicks, Fyfield Books (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1993), 79–80, lines 1–6. Further references are given in the text.

⁷¹ See above, note 1.

For by the self same reason, which you use
 Damon might justly, you accuse:
Why do you scorn and with a proud disdain,
 Receive the Vowes, but slight the Swain;
You say you cannot love, yet know no cause,
May I not prove my love, by your own Lawes. (ll. 19–24)

Phillis's claim that Damon's love is groundless, therefore unreasonable, is here inverted, because Phillis knows no cause for not loving, just as Damon knows no cause for his love. Therefore Phillis has no cause *not* to love Damon. The male lover turns the laws of woman's reason back on her in a deft sleight of hand.

In his important essay 'Aphra Behn: Poetry and Masquerade', Paul Salzman comments that in the posthumously published version '[t]he equation of woman with the absence of reason, made by Damon in this poem, becomes rather more paradoxical', citing the line 'And with a woman's Reason, I reply', as printed in Todd's Variants.⁷² Salzman suggests that by the end of the poem Damon has come to represent passion, whereas Phillis represents

coldness/reason withheld, which is, in a sense, reason itself. As Behn assumes the mask of the male lover in this poem, she inserts the woman's answer into his lips, and asks, in a particularly unsettling form, a woman's question about passion.⁷³

⁷² Salzman, 'Aphra Behn', 115; Behn, *Works*, vol. 1, 462.

⁷³ Salzman, *ibid*, 115.

Salzman bases this sympathetic reading of the poem's conclusion, problematically, on the earlier of the two texts, where, according to his argument, 'the equation of woman with the absence of reason' is in fact *less* paradoxical. But arguably 'the self same reason', a phrase unique to the *Covent Garden Drolery* version of the poem, foregrounds the contradictoriness of any faculty that lays claim to consistent meaning, because Damon uses the 'self same reason' wielded by Phillis to prove the very opposite of what she argues.

Also, although in both versions Damon refers to his 'passion' in stanza two, only in the text published in *Covent Garden Drolery* does the last stanza reiterate that word, following on from the previous line's reference to Damon's 'heart': 'Be kind to that, return my passion too, / And I'll give reason why I love you so' (ll. 35–6). While this version of the stanza suggests a mutual conversation, the *Muses Mercury* stanza iterates a demand: 'Be kind to that, my hearty vows return / And then I'll tell you why, for what I burn' (ll. 35–6). These final couplets make different rhetorical impacts, for the first reiterates Damon's request for his passion to be reciprocated. Then he will satisfy the request of the poem's title and give the answer 'why I love you so' – so much *and* so distinctively, so like this. The half-rhyme of 'too' and 'so' embodies the emotional uncertainty mapped by the poem, which enunciates the present condition of Damon's loving. In contrast, the last couplet of the poem in the *Muses Mercury* stealthily drives home a lover's bargain: 'Be kind', return 'my hearty vows', says Damon, 'and then' he will divulge the true cause of his love for which he burns, not just a 'why' but a 'what', the longed-for act of sex.

In these readings, it is possible to conclude that the earlier, more formally unsteady text offers the more labile, interesting meaning, whereas the revised poem asserts a suave masculine persona, part of whose rhetorical armoury is the manipulation of a

specifically gendered ‘woman’s reason’. Indeed we might say that in the later version, as in Behn’s poem to Creech, the lubricious attitudes of the libertine converge with the learned ones. A rhetorical discourse of proofs and arguments, dispute and answer, cause and law, underpins each text, and yet the mobilization of reason as part of this discourse is more predictably gendered in the later poem. The revisions may perhaps be Behn’s own, for the *Muses Mercury* editors claim on several occasions that they possess her authorial manuscripts. Todd certainly believes that ‘the nature of at least some of the variants suggests they may well be from a manuscript or some source other than the earlier printed one’.⁷⁴ Yet no certainty is possible on this matter, for the editors assumed the liberty of altering Behn’s text at least once, commenting before ‘A SONG for J.H.’ that ‘As Amorous as these Verses may be thought, they have been reduc’d to bring them within the rules of Decency, which all Writers ought to observe’.⁷⁵ It would be unwise to set up a hierarchy in which the text of the poem for Damon as published in *Covent Garden Drolery* is seen as closer to Behn’s authorial intention than the later version, for (remembering Hammond’s caution), *Covent Garden Drolery* may not be a reliable guide to Behn’s editorial decisions. Reading the two poems alongside one another rather than favouring one version, we may decide with Salzman that Behn ‘is able to counteract some of the centrifugal force of [a] masculine [literary] economy by the *excessive* production of gendered positions’.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

The paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the play of reason within the several

⁷⁴ Behn, *Works*, vol.1, xliii–xliv.

⁷⁵ Cited in O’Donnell, *Aphra Behn Bibliography*, 254.

⁷⁶ Salzman, ‘Aphra Behn’, 119.

versions of Aphra Behn's poems undoubtedly form part of a larger epistemological shift in which women, once viewed as mentally inferior to men, came to be seen as 'reasonable creatures', in the phrase of Mary Wollstonecraft.⁷⁷ Behn voices the traditional view of women's intellect in the very same work where, as Ellenzeig says, she 'enter[s] the freethinking conversation as an *intellectual* libertine in her own right': as Behn remarks of Fontenelle's exposition of Copernican astronomy in 'Translator's Preface' to *A Discovery of New Worlds*, 'As to this, I cannot but take his part as far as a Woman's Reasoning can go'.⁷⁸ In her poem to Creech, Behn represents reason as fluidly gendered, partaking both of 'womanish tenderness' and masculine force. This eroticized reason is for Behn at once more enticing and more compelling than faith. The celebratory charge of her poem manifests what Chernaik terms her 'androgynous imagination' and demonstrates the enabling impact upon her of libertine philosophy.⁷⁹ One key to Behn's intellectual transformation was Thomas Creech's 'Englishing' of Lucretius.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ M. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by M. Butler and J. Todd (London: Pickering, 1989), vol. 5, 146 n. See Wiseman, *Conspiracy and Virtue*, 1–2.

⁷⁸ Ellenzeig, *Fringes of Belief*, 54; Behn, *Works*, vol. 4 (1993), 78.

⁷⁹ See Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom*, ch. 5, 'My masculine part: Aphra Behn and the androgynous imagination'.

⁸⁰ Cf. Snider, 'Atoms and Seeds', 14, n. 12 and Stapleton: 'Most current studies of Behn do not discuss her libertinism in a sustained fashion. None to my knowledge analyze her Lucretian influence' (*Admired and Understood*, 216, n. 10). Snider's article and Stapleton's monograph are significant steps in this direction, although Stapleton focuses chiefly on Behn's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1684) rather than on her drama, fiction or translations.

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